

The Social Norms Approach to Parent Education

With the best of intentions, parents may inadvertently increase the likelihood that their children will use alcohol or other drugs.

How Is This Possible?

Have you ever heard parents say:

- “I’m not naive; I know most kids drink.”
- “Drinking is out of control at this school.”
- “All kids are going to experiment with alcohol.”
- “Most kids start to drink in middle school.”
- “Pretty much everyone drinks in high school.”
- “I tell my child, if he’s going to drink, I want him to do it at home.”
- “Alcohol and other drug use is an epidemic among teenagers.”

Data from FCD surveys and other prevention studies consistently demonstrate that young people overestimate use, and underestimate abstinence, on the part of their peers and older teens. Many parents share these misperceptions, believing that “experimentation” and/or use are inevitable rites of passage for adolescents. In fact, the large majority of middle and high school students are not using alcohol or other drugs.

In conveying, directly or indirectly, their own incorrect beliefs, parents unintentionally reinforce their children’s misperceptions, which research shows can ultimately increase adolescent alcohol and other drug use. Therefore, a social norms approach to prevention is a powerful and effective parent education tool for protecting and strengthening the health of students.

What Is the Social Norms Approach?

Social norms theory states that young people tend to do what they think the norm is. The more use of alcohol and other drugs they think there is among their peers, the more there will be.

Recognizing young people's tendency to exaggerate use and underestimate the health of their peers, a social norms approach to prevention is one that works to correct false normative beliefs, to bring awareness of healthy student attitudes and behavior, and to reinforce the majority of students consistently making healthy choices.

While schools can engage in prevention using a variety of strategies specifically tailored to their unique community, defining actual levels of student use goes a long way toward building a prevention effort based on the social norms approach. The *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey* measures students' actual attitudes and behavior with regard to alcohol and other drugs, as well as their perceptions of the behavior and attitudes of their schoolmates. Data showing actual behavior and attitudes can then be used to enlighten and guide the school's prevention strategies, including those that involve parents. Data revealing student misperceptions of their schoolmates' behavior and attitudes can be disseminated to a school's parent community via normative belief interventions naturally occurring within, or as a complement to, the school's already existing parent initiatives.

Including parents in a social norms approach to prevention, schools can work to clarify parent misconceptions of use, to share relevant student use and attitudes data, and to provide parenting support for dealing with alcohol and other drug issues where that support is most needed.

There is no question that alcohol and other drug use by teenagers (and even younger kids) is a serious problem. However, the more we exaggerate use - the more we focus on the 15% of students who are using rather than the 85% who are not - the more use there will be and the more our own actions may contribute to the problem.

Social Norms Data Gives Parents Strength

The social norms approach to prevention is simple in concept, but it is profound in impact. Quantifying the gap between actual and perceived behavior and attitudes, and then using that data to reveal and validate how healthy most students and school climates are, has been shown by research to reduce student use.

Strong parent networking and direction is essential to the effective spread of a social norms message throughout a school's parent community, but many schools host parent education events that are poorly attended and where presenters end up "preaching to the choir." Only a handful of school-based parent education programs are data-driven, consistently integrating social norms theory into their overall prevention message.

The difference between a typical approach to parent education and one based on social norms can be enormous. Social norms data provides parents with accurate information they can use in communicating with their kids. By knowing what is really going on in their child's social world - that most of their child's peers don't use alcohol or other drugs, don't smoke marijuana, don't have parents who allow them to drink, don't think it's cool to get drunk - parents can speak to their children about these issues from a position of confidence and strength, rather than fear and speculation. And if their children are hesitant to readily accept the health revealed by survey data, the door has been opened to engage in a discussion about their skepticism.

Parents with a social norms perspective on adolescent substance use will be best equipped to support their children's efforts to make healthy, responsible decisions. They are able to recognize the influence of false normative beliefs in their children's social lives and in the media so that they can intervene upon such misperceptions. For example, if a student tells her parents, "Everyone at the party was drunk," a parent familiar with the social norms approach will know how unlikely such a scenario is. That parent can point out how it is likely that everyone was not drunk, but that those who were stood out more than the others; or similarly, that likely not everyone was drinking, but that those who were not were hardly noticed. Parents who understand social norms theory will be able to question and challenge, in a supportive manner, their children's generalizations and overestimations of their peers' higher-risk behavior and attitudes. In turn, children of parents educated using a social norms approach can become critical thinkers, who are highly reflective of their personal choices and reassured that they are not alone in their healthy decisions.

Parents play a significant role in their children's lives and in preventing their use and abuse of substances. This is especially so as children grow into adolescence and face new risks, pressures and challenges. The foundation for prevention is strengthened when parents help their children develop accurate normative beliefs about their peers' behaviors. Therefore, one of a school's most important prevention tasks may be to consider how to integrate social norms into the community's prevention efforts, and how to optimally engage parents in this process.

