

Why it Matters

Exposing youth to the true positive norms that most youth **do NOT** engage in substance use decreases misperceptions and the likelihood they will engage in substance use. At the same time, these positive norm messages increase the likelihood youth will engage in these positive behaviors.

Actual Norms vs Perceived Norms

Actual Norms: What most people in a group actually do, think, or support

Example:

- 84% of students reported NEVER trying alcohol or marijuana.

*Minnesota Positive Community Norms (PCN) Student Survey 2013 (grades 6-12); MN PCN Parent Survey 2013, MN PCN School Survey 2012. Conducted by The Montana Institute, LLC. Funded by Minnesota Department of Human Services.

Perceived Norms: What people *believe* most others in a group do, think, or support

Examples:

- 65% of students thought MOST students had tried alcohol or marijuana.
- 77% of parents and 74% of school staff/teachers thought MOST students had tried alcohol or marijuana.



In other words, substance use was **NOT** the norm. Refraining from substance use **WAS** the norm. Yet students, parents, and school staff/teachers **misperceived** the actual norm.

The Value of Positive Norms

Positive norms represent what most people in a group do and support that is healthy, positive, and protective. When communicating, we can protect youth from inaccurate beliefs that exaggerate peer substance use by bringing to their attention the true positive norms within their group.

Challenge

Identify existing messaging communicating to youth about substance use (it could be your own or public messaging) and consider the answers to the following questions:

1. Are any actual or perceived norms shared? Is a data source cited in the message?
2. What positive norms (i.e., positive behaviors or attitudes), if any, can you identify?
3. Is the overall message content, tone, and/or imagery positive?
4. How do you think this message will be understood by, or impact, a youth audience?

An effective communication plan uncovers and promotes positive norms as a protective strategy.



The following 3-step social norms framework balances the sharing of important substance information alongside true positive norms.



This framework can be applied to any substance use communication with youth, ranging from general health education to social media messaging to school-wide or public service announcements.



STEP
1

The Opening

Bring attention to true positive norms, such as the actual norms that most youth do not use substances and/or view substances favorably.

STEP
2

The Middle

Share substance-related information while keeping the focus on the positive. Avoid amplifying negative/risk behaviors and scare tactics.

STEP
3

The Closing

Conclude with a final positive norms message.



Challenge

Order the statements below according to the 3 steps above. Disregard any statements inconsistent with the framework. Highlight any positive norms.

1. Fentanyl deaths have spiked among U.S. children and teens.
2. Fentanyl-related overdose deaths in teens tripled from 2019 to 2021, and many of those deaths were due to counterfeit pills.
3. Life-saving overdose reversal medication is easy to learn to administer. Contact us for free training and resources to support you and your loved ones.
4. Unintentional exposure to fentanyl by taking a pill that was believed to be some other medicine such as Vicodin, Xanax, etc. is the most common cause of fentanyl overdose among the youth who take pills not prescribed to them.
5. Most youth do not intentionally take pills not prescribed to them.
6. Most caregivers have rules that prohibit taking pills in ways not prescribed by a doctor.
7. Most youth do not approve of friends taking pills in ways that a doctor has not prescribed.

Sharing the positive norms representing your intended youth audience will strengthen the protective potential of your substance-related communications.



How to identify positive norms in your community.

Find one or more datasets representing your intended audience that contains substance-related data.

Positive norm messages tend to be more effective when they present data that closely match your intended audience. The more local the statistics are, the better the chances the youth will find the data relatable and believable.

Look for credible data.

Local sources

- Substance use coalitions, school district offices

State and regional sources

- State-based surveys (e.g., Healthy Kids, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System) and community health assessments

National sources

- National databases (e.g., Monitoring the Future survey)



Gather multiple data points.

- Find substance non-use statistics (e.g., percent of youth who do not use marijuana).
- Then look for data about positive and protective behaviors and attitudes (e.g., healthy values, importance of intervening to protect others, parental rules against substance use).
- Try to find data reported from multiple perspectives, such as youth, parents and teachers.

Statistics may need to be “flipped” to reframe it into a positive statement.

Statistics, especially about youth substance use rates, are most often presented in the negative (i.e., how many kids are using substances).

You will need to “flip” these statistics to frame them as a positive norm. For example,

- Negative frame: 15% of students reported using alcohol in the past year.
- Positive frame: 85% of students reported no alcohol use in the past year.

Challenge

Step-by-step guidance on how to find norms through Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System and Monitoring the Future surveys can be found in the [Substance Use Prevention Communications Toolkit](#).

1. Find 3 statistics that represent your intended audience. Start local and check to see what data sources or summary reports are available. If local data sources are not available, find the next closest source, and so on.
2. Once you have your 3 statistics, reframe them (if needed) in the direction of the positive.

CREATING POSITIVE NORM COMMUNICATIONS

Frame messages effectively to:

1. Counter misunderstandings and misconceptions.
2. Increase understanding of the message.
3. Shift attitudes and beliefs.
4. Shape thoughts and behaviors.

Follow this guidance when developing your positive norms messages and media communications.

- **Bring out the positive.** The message content and overall design look and feel should be positive.
- **Make the true positive norm message(s) prominent and focal** while avoiding distracting text and imagery that takes away from the main message or are in opposition.
- **Use language and imagery that reflect the culture of your intended audience.**
- **Avoid shock and fear-based messaging and imagery** or images that undermine the positive.
- **State statistics as facts**, without judgment or potentially stigmatizing language.
- **Avoid prescriptive messages** telling the audience what “to do” or “not to do”. This undermines the power of the positive norms message.
- **Cite a credible source.** Youth are more responsive to messages they see as credible. Ex: “Information from Fairview Middle School Anonymous Spring 2023 Survey”.
- **Use survey data correctly.** Accurately portray data in a way that will resonate and appeal to the audience. Round to whole numbers (e.g., round 79.7% to 80% or 8/10).
- **Prepare multiple versions of the same norm topic (e.g., substance non-use) to present the true positive norm in different ways.** Combine local and national data in some versions.

STUDENTS AT FAIRVIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL TOOK A SURVEY LAST SPRING HERE'S WHAT THEY SAID:

THEY CHOOSE MUSIC WHEN FEELING STRESSED OR DOWN TO HELP THEM GET THROUGH IT (80%)

IT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE SCHOOL-WORK SERIOUSLY (95%)

THEY TELL AN ADULT IF SOMEONE IS SHARING PILLS (70%)

THEY CHOOSE NOT TO USE ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, OR OTHER DRUGS (OVER 90%)

INFORMATION FROM FMS ANONYMOUS SPRING 2023 SURVEY

WHAT DO YOU CHOOSE TO DO?

Sample Media

Challenge

Develop a media product (e.g., social media post, flyer, etc.) that highlights positive norms. Include the 3 statistics you found last week that represent your intended audience. Design the message using the guidance above.

USING THE 3-STEP INFORMATION SHARING FRAMEWORK

The 3-step social norms framework for sharing substance-related information reduces the risk of unintentionally increasing misperceptions that substance use is common in youth and promotes positive youth norms that represent the more common, healthy, and protective behaviors and attitudes in youth.

STEP
1

The Opening

Bring attention to true positive norms, such as the actual norms that most youth do not use substances and/or view substances favorably.

STEP
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The Middle

Share substance-related information while keeping the focus on the positive. Avoid amplifying negative/risk behaviors and scare tactics.

STEP
3

The Closing

Conclude with a final positive norms message.

This approach “flips” the conversation by highlighting protective peer norms (e.g., most youth do not use or support substance use), instead of focusing on risk behavior and associated harmful outcomes.

Reorienting in this way reduces the likelihood of youth developing or strengthening misperceptions about youth substance use norms. It also helps to ensure the audience is not left with a sense of doom (e.g., overdoses being a terrible problem, youth using in greater and greater numbers, etc.).

This reorientation also promotes the development of positive and accurate perceptions about how youth typically think and behave.

Apply the 3-step framework to your messaging!

Develop a substance related communication that shares important information about a substance (e.g., effect of substance use on the adolescent brain, potential dangers of fentanyl, etc.) that is stated in a way that neutrally conveys the information (the middle) and frames that message within a positive opening and closing message.



Challenge

PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF POSITIVE NORMS

The Issue:

Youth (and adults) may initially reject a message about the positive norm or describe it as not true or not believable. This reaction is to be expected because public media often depicts substance use as the norm and push the misperception that most youth are using substances.

Solutions for Promoting Understanding of True Positive Norms & Minimizing Skepticism

- **Emphasize the positive in your messaging.** Ensure the data being presented is framed toward the positive and a credible source is cited.
- **Understand skepticism is a typical reaction** to true positive norms about youth substance use. This means the message was heard and the receiver is grappling with how to make sense of it.
- **Encourage ongoing exposure to positive norm messages.** Deliver variations of positive norm messages frequently using many communication channels to multiple audiences (e.g., youth, caregivers, school staff, community members).
- **Educate** adults on the social norms framework and ways they can reinforce and promote the positive norms in their community.
- **Hold small group discussion.** Engage your intended audience in conversations about their (mis)perceptions, the actual positive norms, their own behavior, and the links between them.
- **Demonstrate the presence of misperceptions with your intended audience.** Deliver a quick survey on perceptions of substance use and provide immediate feedback about the data collected showing misperceived and true norms. Discuss why this is and generate ideas for getting the true positive norms shared with others.

Challenge

Share either the positive norm data or message you have generated through these challenge exercises and elicit their response. When that response contains skepticism or pushback, practice applying some of the strategies listed above. Reflect and jot down what that experience was like for you.