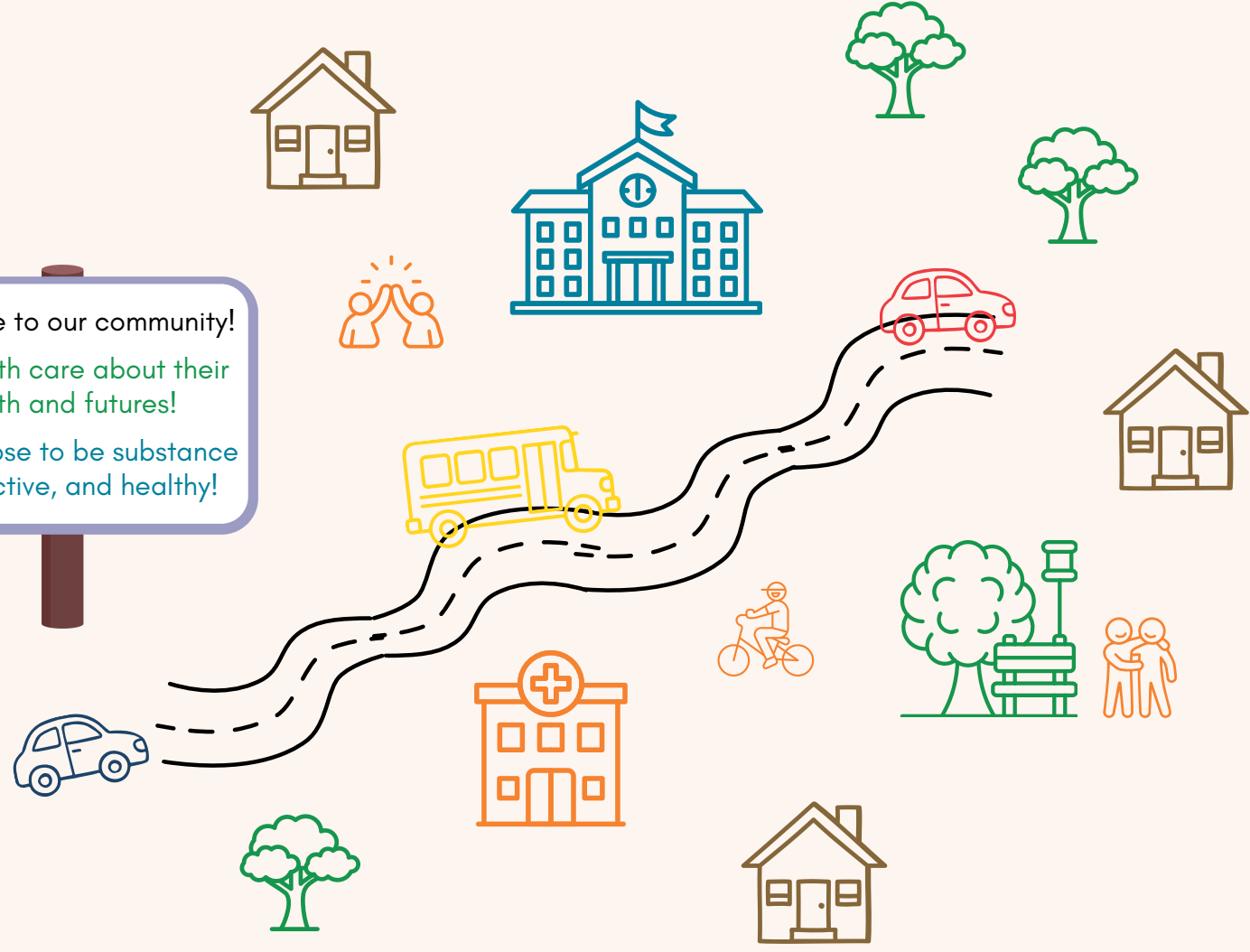


SHARING POSITIVE YOUTH NORMS in the **BROADER COMMUNITY**

A COMMUNITY ACTIVATION GUIDE



Welcome to our community!
Our youth care about their health and futures!
81% choose to be substance free, active, and healthy!

ABOUT

PURPOSE

The purpose of this guide is to describe activation of the social norms approach at the broader community level to share positive youth norms in support of preventing youth substance use by correcting misperceptions of youth substance use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DISCLAIMER

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DEFINITIONS

- **Social norms approach:** Aims to increase positive attitudes and behaviors by correcting the overestimation of negative attitudes and behaviors and the underestimation of positive attitudes and behaviors.
- **Social norms:** The most common beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a social group that determine what is considered acceptable or appropriate actions of individuals within the group.
- **Descriptive norms:** Behavioral norms that represent how people in a group actually behave.
- **Injunctive norms:** Attitudinal norms that represent the most common attitudes and beliefs held within a group.
- **Protective norms:** What most people within a group believe and do that is healthy, positive, or protective.
- **Actual norms:** What most people within a reference group actually believe and do, typically based on aggregated self-reports or observations.
- **Perceived norms:** Individuals' perceptions about what most people in a given group believe and do.
- **Misperceived norms:** Incorrectly held beliefs about the most prevalent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others (i.e., a gap between actual and perceived norms).

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Social norms theory tells us that people, especially young people, are heavily influenced by what they believe others are doing.¹ Current data show that the vast majority of American youth are choosing not to use any substances.^{2,3} Yet both youth and adults overwhelmingly overestimate the number of 12–18-year-olds who use substances (especially alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana).^{4–6} They believe substance use is more common than it actually is (e.g., everyone drinks, most caregivers let their kids drink). The truth is that most youth make the healthy choice to not use substances.

When people think substance use is the norm, they are more likely to make choices that align with that misperception (i.e., acceptance or promotion of substance use). They also tend to hide or diminish their own healthy behaviors.^{7,8}

When youth are exposed to messages that highlight the positive, true norms that most young people make healthy choices and engage in prosocial activities, they are more likely to take part in those positive behaviors.^{4,9,10}

The social norms approach aims to increase positive attitudes and behaviors by correcting the 1) overestimation of negative attitudes and behaviors and 2) the under-estimation of positive attitudes and behaviors. This approach has been effective both in preventing initiation of use and stopping use in those who have already started using substances.^{7–9}

The social norms approach is a population-based strategy that can be implemented 1) through structured social norms interventions conducted in specific settings such as schools and 2) more broadly throughout the community. Addressing misperceptions in both ways has benefit, and **synergy between the two (when multiple sources are sharing the positive youth norms) helps increase the overall exposure to the social norms message**, which strengthens the impact of the overall approach.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this guide is to describe activation of the social norms approach at the broader community level to share positive youth norms in support of preventing youth substance use by correcting misperceptions of youth substance use.

Visit the [Resources](#) section of this guide for additional information on the social norms approach and implementing structured social norms interventions.

When youth overestimate how much their peers are using substances, this misperception itself becomes a risk factor.

The antidote is simple but powerful:

Elevate the truth that most youth hold positive attitudes and are not using substances, share these messages widely, and let these accurate positive youth norms do the work of correcting misperceptions and changing behavior.



1, 2, 3 ... ACTIVATE!

DESCRIPTION

The goal of activating the social norms approach at the broader community level is to bring positive youth norms to life in conversations, the environment, and other forms of messaging to youth and adults. Youth attitudes and behaviors are shaped by the people around them and the world they experience, and all of these opportunities can be leveraged to spread and reinforce positive youth norms. Weaving these norms meaningfully into every influence on youth helps transform a community into one where those norms are known, talked about, celebrated, and experienced by every youth.

HOW TO ACTIVATE A SOCIAL NORMS APPROACH AT THE BROADER COMMUNITY LEVEL

Community activation of a social norms approach mobilizes direct and supportive mechanisms for activating sharing of positive youth norms within a community.

1

DIRECT MECHANISMS

Direct mechanisms represent methods for sharing positive norms messages. Direct mechanisms for spreading positive youth norms include conversations between community members and youth, exposing youth to messages in the environment, and other ways of messaging to youth (social media, emails, texts, etc.). A wide range of individuals such as parents, teachers, healthcare providers, coaches, mentors, peers, as well as settings (e.g., homes, schools, recreation centers, places of worship) can play a role in carrying out these direct communication methods.

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SUPPORTIVE MECHANISMS

Supportive mechanisms are the activities that support the sharing of positive norms messages. Supportive mechanisms that can activate the sharing of positive youth norms in the community include developing policy, collecting and sharing/publicizing data, training on the social norms approach, advocating for positive norms messaging across media channels, or other types of assistance. Examples of organizations commonly involved in supportive mechanisms include community coalitions and other youth-serving organizations, school districts and boards, health systems, local government agencies and law enforcement, and local media outlets.

=

ACTIVATION!



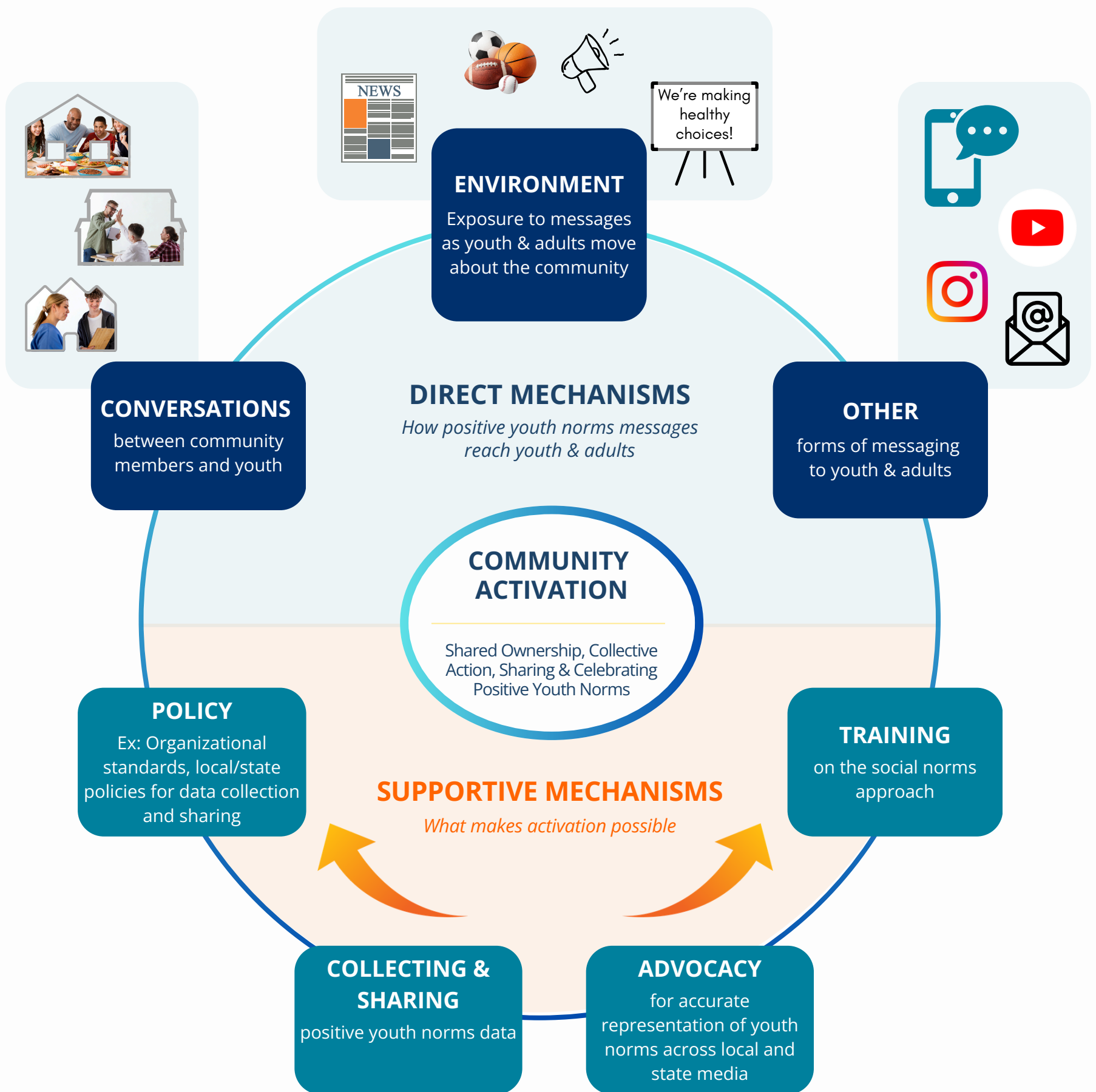
Together these mechanisms activate the social norms approach in the broader community through shared ownership of the approach, collective action grounded in local knowledge, and normalization of the sharing and celebration of positive youth norms by community members.

Individuals and organizations within a community may play a role in direct and/or supportive mechanisms for spreading positive youth norms. For example, prevention professionals are uniquely positioned to do both, to 1) bring positive youth norms into their conversations and environments involving youth and 2) lead community activation of the social norms approach by raising awareness of positive youth norms related to substance use, equipping community members and organizations with norms messaging to share, supporting message dissemination through training, providing tailored guidance, and other supportive resources.

The **Community Activation Diagram** on the next page illustrates how direct and supportive mechanisms can work together to spread positive youth norms throughout a community.



COMMUNITY ACTIVATION DIAGRAM



COMMUNITY ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

The following examples show how direct and supportive mechanisms can be put into practice to spread positive youth norms across individuals, settings, and organizations within a community.

EXAMPLES OF DIRECT MECHANISMS

Direct mechanisms for communicating positive youth norms include conversations, sharing messages in the environment, and other forms of messaging. Many of the individuals involved in direct communication serve as trusted voices in young people's daily lives. However, these individuals may be unaware that misperceptions about youth substance use exist and may even hold those misperceptions themselves, overestimating how common and accepted use actually is. These individuals may also underestimate the influence they hold in shaping youth perceptions and behaviors. For this reason, it is essential that these individuals be introduced to social norms theory and the true, positive youth norms of their community. Adults must believe these positive norms to effectively share, model, and reinforce them.

When preparing to have conversations, think about what may be important to share or explore as greater context for the positive norm that most youth do not use substances. For example, share data or be curious about **why** most youth do not use substances, **what** they do instead to protect themselves and their friends from use, and **other healthy choices** they are making to prepare for their futures. Make the message authentic and meaningful.

Below are examples for how different roles can share positive youth norms.

Note: Youth can also serve as powerful messengers. As youth are exposed to and begin to believe the positive norms of the youth in their community, they can share those norms within their networks by celebrating their healthy choices, correcting misperceptions, and encouraging their peers to make safe choices that reflect the true positive norms of their community.

CONVERSATIONS	YOUTH	ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING
CONVERSATIONS	YOUTH	ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING
<p>Scenario 1: A group of friends are hanging out and someone makes an offhand comment like "everyone drinks at parties" or "all the kids at school vape." A peer who knows the data might say: "That's what I thought too until the survey we did at school. It was something like 86% of kids who said they don't drink or vape or use drugs. I was kind of surprised."</p> <p>Scenario 2: A friend is worrying that they won't fit in if they go to a social event because they believe everyone will be drinking. The peer responds: "Hmm... Remember that survey we did at school asking about alcohol and drugs? Like 83% of kids said they don't drink. If someone told you there will be alcohol there, are you sure you want to go? I mean, think about it. Most of us don't even go to get together where there are alcohol and drugs to make sure we aren't pressured into anything. I think most of us are focused on doing well. Hey, how about we do something else instead?"</p> <p>Scenario 3: A couple of kids you know, who have been drinking, are headed to a car to go grab some food. A peer might intervene by saying: "I don't want you to drink and drive and I know most of the other people here wouldn't want you to either. Seriously, none of us think that's okay, and it's not worth the risk. You can use my app to have something delivered, or I can drive you myself."</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decorate a locker, notebook, or other visible item with positive norm messages or stickers saying things like, "We are in the 90%! Most Fairview Students do not use alcohol, nicotine, or other drugs." Make a social media post about their own healthy choices and activities such as, "This is how we have fun." alongside a photo showcasing a healthy, fun activity. Ask friends what their favorite drug-free activities are, sparking conversation around healthy choices.
CONVERSATIONS	PARENT/CAREGIVER	ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING
<p>Scenario 1: A parent received an email from their school with the results of the annual youth survey along with talking points for how to share the positive norm that most youth do not use substances. The parent opens a conversation with their child by saying:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Hey, I saw something interesting today. Your school sent out the results from the student survey. Do you remember taking that? Something that struck me is that they asked students whether they'd used alcohol, marijuana, or other substances in the past month. What do you think most kids said?" Let the child guess. Most will overestimate the rate of use. "Actually 78% said no, which is almost 8 out of every 10 kids. I was kind of surprised. Does that match what you see?" Discuss why people tend to overestimate youth substance use (e.g., media depicts use as a norm, stories about risk behavior and negative outcomes get more attention). Explore why most youth avoid using substances and what they do to avoid using substances. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share positive norms in the home on a whiteboard or piece of paper posted visibly. Create a catchy heading like, "Did you know?" and rotate out positive norm messages beneath it, such as, "Two-thirds of kids at your school chose not to drink or use drugs."

COMMUNITY ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

CONVERSATIONS

PARENT/CAREGIVER (cont.)

ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING

Scenario 2: A parent and their teen are driving home after seeing a movie that depicted teenagers at a party with alcohol. The parent uses the moment to open a conversation.

- "That party scene got me thinking. What is it actually like at parties kids your age go to? Like, do you think most kids there would be drinking?" Let them respond. If they overestimate, offer accurate information: "You might be surprised. Last year's school survey actually showed around 9 out of 10 kids don't use any kind of substance. Movies kind of make it look like everyone's doing it, but that's not really what the data show. Why do you think movies and TV always show it that way?"
- Discuss how media shapes our perception of what the norm is, then follow up: "If you were ever at a party and someone offered you something, what would you do? Have you ever thought about what you'd say?" Use this as an opportunity to practice a response together so the child feels confident and prepared to assertively refuse any offers of substances.

Scenario 3: A parent overhears their child telling a friend that "everyone vapes" at their school. After the friend leaves, casually bring it up. "Hey, I caught a little of your conversation earlier. I heard you mention that everyone vapes at school. I'm curious where that impression comes from." Listen without judgment. Then share: "I can see that. I was actually surprised when your school sent out the results from that youth survey you all took. Something like 8 out of 10 kids said they don't use any substances. It made me think about how easy it is to assume something is happening everywhere just because substance use stands out and tends to get talked about a lot." Use this as an opportunity to talk about why most kids don't use substances and what they do instead.

- Send occasional texts that celebrate positive youth choices, like "Hey! I was just thinking about you and wanted to say how proud I am. I know there's a lot of pressure out there, and I see the choices you're making. Most other kids at your school are making the same healthy choices you are. You're in great company. Love you!"

CONVERSATIONS

TEACHER/SCHOOL STAFF

ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING

Scenario 1: A teacher notices a student seems surprised after a health class lesson on substance use statistics. After class, the teacher checks in:

- "Hey, I noticed your reaction when we talked about the survey results today. What were you thinking about?" Let the student respond. "A lot of people are surprised to learn that 83% of students here said they have never used alcohol, marijuana, or other substances. It's pretty common to overestimate how many people use substances. We tend to notice and remember the times it comes up, and it can make it feel more common than it actually is."
- Use the conversation to reinforce that healthy, substance-free choices are the norm, not the exception. "Knowing that most of your peers are making substance-free choices, does that change anything for you? What are some things you and your friends actually do for fun?"

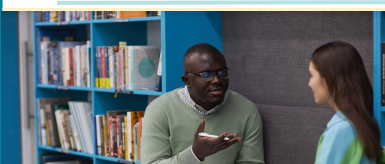
Scenario 2: A teacher is delivering a lesson in math or statistics. "Okay class, we've been talking about how to read data and what it actually tells us. Look at this chart which shows real data from our school. The question students were asked was whether they had used substances like alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana in the past 30 days. What do you notice?" Students observe the chart. "Right, 86% of students said no. So if we have 400 students in this school, how many is that? Let's calculate it." Students work through the math: $400 \times 0.86 = 344$ students. "So the vast majority, 344 out of 400 students, are not using substances. Does that match what you assumed before seeing this data? Why do people sometimes think something is more common than it actually is?"

Scenario 3: A school counselor is meeting with a student who is feeling overwhelmed with schoolwork and social pressure to fit in. The counselor uses the moment to introduce positive norms.

- "It sounds like you're carrying a lot right now between schoolwork and feeling like you need to keep up socially, that's a real weight. I want you to know that feeling overwhelmed is something a lot of students come in here talking about. Can I share something that might help put things in perspective?" Let the student respond. "When students here are surveyed, 9 out of 10 say they haven't used alcohol or other substances in the past month. I know it can feel like everyone is coping in unhealthy ways, but that's really not what the data show. Most kids are finding other ways to deal with stress."
- Use the moment to explore healthy coping strategies and normalize them: "Actually, when I talk to students about how they manage stress, I hear a lot of the same things, like listening to music, going for a walk, talking to a friend or a parent, watching something funny, getting outside. Those are the kinds of things most students tell me actually help. What do you already do when things feel like it's just too much? Are there things that have worked for you before?"
- Affirm their strengths and reinforce that seeking support is itself a healthy norm: "And I want to point out the fact that you're here talking about this. That's exactly what most students who manage stress well do. Reaching out and talking to someone is one of the most common and effective ways people cope. You're already making a positive choice by reaching out for support."

- Embed positive norm messages into announcements (e.g., at the start of the school day, at school events) and display them on school monitors and print media (e.g., flyers, table tents, teacher buttons, floor decals, bathroom stall journals) with statements like, "Fairview Middle School students CARE! They think it is wrong to pressure each other to use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs (92%), and would discourage their friends from ever using these substances."

- Require positive norms messages to be shared as part of communications that go out any time there is a substance use-related school event, a health class lesson, or school-wide presentation being given. For example, a principal could kick off Red Ribbon Week with school-wide messaging directly to students' emails and student portals that promotes positive youth norms, such as: "We want to take a moment to remind our school community that the overwhelming majority of our students, 79%, are not using substances. We are proud of you and committed to supporting the healthy culture you are building."



COMMUNITY ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

CONVERSATIONS

HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING

Scenario 1: A healthcare provider is seeing an adolescent patient for their annual wellness visit, and is reviewing the substance use screen completed at check-in. "I'd like to take a moment to review the substance use screen you completed before your visit today. And please know that I ask all my patients your age about this. I was pleased to see that you're making safe choices and haven't used any substances this past year. Do you know what most kids say when they're asked if they use substances like alcohol or marijuana?" After the teen responds, the provider can share: "You know, we actually see that about 85% of our teens here don't use substances of any kind, that includes, nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs. Most people assume it's way more common than it is. Does that surprise you?"

Scenario 2: A healthcare provider is meeting with a teen and discussing stress management behaviors. The provider uses the conversation to normalize healthy coping and introduce positive norms. "Stress is something I talk to almost all of my teens about as life can get really busy with school, family, activities, and friends. It can be a lot and I'm curious how you've been managing it." Listen and affirm healthy strategies they are already using, and then offer: "Is it OK if I share what many other teens find helpful?" Get their permission to proceed. "When we ask our teens how they cope with stress, the most common answers are things like talking to a friend or family member, listening to music, exercising, spending time outside, or just taking a break and watching something they enjoy. And most of them, about 85% of the teens I see, are not using substances to cope with stress. Are there any areas where you feel like your current strategies aren't quite enough? Perhaps we can work together to build out your toolkit a little."

Scenario 3: A healthcare provider is addressing a situation where a teen has reported they are vaping to fit in.

- "Thank you for telling me. I know that's not always easy to share, and it's really important that I know so I can support you. I want to be straightforward with you: vaping does carry real health risks, especially for lungs that are still developing. But I'm not here to lecture you. I'd rather understand what's going on for you. Tell me what vaping looks like for you - how often do you do it? what do you like about?" Listen without judgment and try to understand the social pressure, stress relief, curiosity, and/or habit.
- Introduce the positive norm in a way that feels supportive: "I want to share something that might be useful. Most of my patients actually do not vape, about 82%. And that's pretty consistent with the local school survey data. I bring that up because a lot of teens who are vaping tell me they feel like everyone is doing it, and I can see how that could make it feel like the thing to do to fit in, and the data just doesn't back that up. How does that sit with you?" Use their response to explore motivation for change and collaboratively identify next steps, whether that is a cessation resource, a conversation with a trusted adult, or a follow-up visit to check in on progress.

- Share positive norms messages on waiting room and exam room displays, such as: "Did you know? 84% of all Fairview Pediatrics teens make the healthy choice to not use substances of any kind."
- Send out a message to teenage patients when new positive norms become available, like: "We celebrate you, Fairview teens! Over the last year you've shared with us the great choices you are making and here is what you said..."

CONVERSATIONS

EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAM LEADERS

ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING

Scenario 1: A high school basketball coach is holding a team meeting at the start of the season to set expectations and build team culture. "I want to talk to you about something that's actually part of what makes a great teammate and a great competitor. You know what sportsmanship really comes down to? Knowing who you are and not letting outside pressure turn you into someone you're not. On the court, we call that mental toughness. I saw some data from our school recently. 76% of students haven't used alcohol or other substances. That means the teammates sitting next to you right now. Most of them are making healthy choices. That's discipline. That's exactly the same muscle you use when you're down in the fourth quarter and you don't give up."

Scenario 2: A theater director is working with students during an intensive rehearsal period and notices that stress and burnout are running high. The director uses a natural break to open a conversation about stress and healthy coping:

- "Hey, I want to take five minutes before we get back to it. I can feel the energy in the room and I know this stretch of rehearsals is a lot. I want to check in. How is everyone doing?" Let students respond honestly. Then share: "I want to tell you something that I think is worth knowing. When students your age are surveyed about how they manage stress, the most common answers are things like listening to music, talking to a friend, getting outside, moving their body, or doing something creative. Sound familiar? You're literally doing that right now. You're in a room making art. Most young people are coping in healthy ways, even when it doesn't feel like it."
- Address the connection to substances: "I also want to name something directly. The performing arts has a long history of romanticizing unhealthy coping. I want us to push back on that story together. The data show that 78%, almost 8 out of 10 students, in our community are not using substances. That's the real norm. You are the real norm. What are the things that help you most when the pressure is high? Let's talk about that for a few minutes." Use the conversation to share ideas and reinforce the healthy coping norms within the group.

- Display positive norms messages in locker rooms, studios, music rooms, and other shared spaces that allow for it with tailored messaging, like:
 - "Champions protect their edge. Most athletes in our community are making substance-free choices."
 - "Great art comes from a clear mind and a full heart. 8 out of 10 students in our community are making healthy choices and it shows in their work."
 - "You can't pour into your craft if you're running on empty. Most students here are taking care of themselves and performing at their peak because of it."

COMMUNITY ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

CONVERSATIONS

EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAM LEADERS (cont.)

ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING

Scenario 3: A sports coach notices a few athletes joking before practice about a party over the weekend. Before practice begins, the coach gathers the team.

- "Before we get started, I want to share something I think is worth knowing. Your school does an annual survey, and the results show that 76% of our students haven't used alcohol or other substances in the past month. I bring it up because I know there can be a lot of noise about what everyone's doing on the weekends, and I want you to know what's actually true. Most of your teammates and classmates are making choices that protect their health and their performance."
- Connect the conversation to things they care about. "As athletes, your bodies are your tools. I'm proud to coach a team where most of you are already making that choice. If you ever feel pressure or find yourself in a tough situation, I want you to know my door is open."

- Send an announcement out to students sharing positive norms during times of the year when youth substance use is highest, such as spring break, school dances, and graduation, such as:
 - "Homecoming is one of the best nights of the year and most students keep it that way. 7 out of 10 students in our community choose not to use alcohol or other substances. Have an amazing night, make great memories, and know that the healthy choice is the one most of your peers are already making."

CONVERSATIONS

OTHER YOUTH LEADERS

ENVIRONMENT & OTHER FORMS OF MESSAGING

Scenario 1: A youth pastor is leading a small group discussion on living with intention.

- "We talk a lot in this community about what it means to actually live with intention. To make choices that reflect who you actually are and who you want to become, not who you think everyone else expects you to be. So let me start with a question for the group: when it comes to substances like alcohol, marijuana, and vaping, what do you think most teens in our community are actually doing?" Let the group respond. "Our county did a survey of teens, and some of you may remember completing it, and here's what the data actually shows. 83%, that's 4 out of 5, students said they have never used any substances of any kind. What do you think about that?"
- Connect the positive norm of non-use back to living with intention. "Living with intention means making choices based on what's actually true and what actually matters to you. Most of your peers are already making intentional choices, and that is worth celebrating."

Scenario 2: A youth program director at a community organization is facilitating a session on goal setting and future planning with a group of teens. "We're talking today about your goals and I want to make sure we talk honestly about some of the things that can get in the way of that. One of the biggest ones I hear from young people is feeling like there's pressure to use substances to fit in or deal with stress. Can I share something with you?" Pause and let them engage. "When students in our community are surveyed, 7 out of 10 say they haven't used alcohol or other substances in the past month. And when asked how they manage stress, most say things like talking to someone they trust, staying active, listening to music, or spending time doing something they love. Those are the habits that actually move people toward their goals." Use the conversation to affirm their existing positive choices and connect substance-free choices to their personal goals.

Scenario 3: A mentor is meeting with a teen for their weekly check-in and the conversation turns to a difficult week the teen has had navigating social situations. The mentor uses the moment to introduce positive norms in the context of their trusting, ongoing relationship.

- "It sounds like this week had some real tough moments in it. Thanks for being honest with me about that. If it's OK I want to ask you something, and I'm just curious what your gut says...when you think about the kids at your school, what percentage do you think are turning to unhealthy coping like using alcohol or drugs?" Let the teen respond. Most will overestimate. "Believe it or not, 84% of the kids at your school say they haven't. That was surprising to me. How about you?"
- Affirm their strengths and keep the door open for ongoing conversation. "One of the things I see in you is that you think carefully about things. That's not nothing. That's actually a really important quality. And I want you to know that any time you're in a situation where you're not sure what to do, this is a safe place to talk it through before, during, or after. That's what I'm here for."

- Incorporate positive norms messaging into community spaces, such as fellowship halls, gymnasiums, lobbies, and hallways.
 - "In our community, 9 out of 10 young people are not using alcohol, marijuana, or other substances. This is who we are."
 - "Most of the young people in this community are making choices that honor their health, their future, and their relationships. We celebrate that."
- Add celebrations of positive youth choices into newsletters and program announcements.
 - Share a photo of youth from a recent social or community event, like volunteering at a local shelter, with a celebratory message: "This is what the majority looks like. Most young people in our community are making healthy choices and having a great time doing it. We are proud of what you do!"

COMMUNITY ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

EXAMPLES OF SUPPORTIVE MECHANISMS

Positive norms messaging works best when young people encounter it consistently across multiple settings. The more frequently a youth hears positive norms, the more likely it is to correct any misperceptions and influence their beliefs and behavior. This kind of reach requires coordinated support from the broader community. There are several organizations and systems that can help drive that coordination by developing policies that support collecting and sharing of positive norms messaging, collecting and sharing local data, training community members on how to use the social norms approach effectively, advocating for positive norms messaging across media and communication channels, and providing other types of assistance.

Below is a list of organizations that can play a role in supporting this kind of community-wide effort, along with examples of how each can help activate and spread positive youth norms throughout the community.

Local Prevention Coalition or Organization

- Provide tailored training and support to all community sectors so that each group understands how to share positive youth norms in a way that is relevant and natural to their specific role and setting.
- Advocate for local data collection so that the positive norms being shared are relatable to the youth in the community. While national statistics are useful, local data is more powerful.
- Lead the development of a messaging toolkit that gives community members ready to use language, statistics, conversation starters (such as those shared in this guide), and sample message templates that can be delivered through the environment and other forms of communication.
- Actively spread positive norms messages themselves by sharing positive norms data with other adults and organizations in the community, as well as in their everyday interactions with youth.
- Partner with schools to communicate positive youth norms to families by generating sample language that could be used in an email to parents and caregivers that shares positive norm data from the school survey and provides tips for how to bring those norms into conversations.
- Visit local healthcare practices to share the value of the social norms approach with providers. Give providers guidance on how they can bring positive norms data into their visits with youth and use their environment and other media channels to spread positive norms messages.
- Advocate to local media outlets, requesting they share positive norms messaging across their media channels.
- Recognize and celebrate community members and organizations that are actively sharing positive norms to reinforce norm-sharing and encourage others to do the same.

School Boards and Districts

- Adopt a formal policy requiring middle and high schools to collect youth risk behavior data, ensuring there are measures to identify positive attitudes and behaviors included in the survey.
- Strongly encourage positive norms messaging be integrated into any school-based substance use prevention effort, health curriculum, or student communications plan.
- Share positive youth norms in district-wide communications, such as newsletters, emails, and social media posts.
- Provide staff training on the social norms approach and positive norm messaging strategies such as how to integrate messaging into curricula.

Local/State Media

- Seek out and feature stories and data that highlight positive youth choices.
- Advocate internally for responsible and accurate representation of youth norms.
- Create state-level campaigns that promote positive youth norms and provide local media outlets and community organizations with guidance for how to align local efforts with the broader state messaging.

Local prevention organizations are uniquely positioned to serve as the hub of a community-wide social norms effort by increasing awareness, providing resources and guidance, and ensuring that positive youth norms are reaching the youth in the community.

COMMUNITY ACTIVATION IN PRACTICE

Law Enforcement

- Train local law enforcement officers on the positive youth norms of the community and how to share these messages with the youth they encounter.
- Display positive norm messaging on police vehicles, at precincts, and in other law enforcement spaces (e.g., “83% of local youth choose substance-free lives.”).
- Incorporate positive norms messaging into school resource officer programs, outreach initiatives, and community policing efforts so that officers who routinely work with youth are prepared to share and celebrate the positive youth norms of the community.
- Use community events and youth programs, like athletic leagues, as opportunities to spread positive youth norms messaging.

Healthcare Systems

- Develop a system-wide policy that affiliated practices universally screen adolescent patients for substance use.
- Collect anonymous, aggregate screening data from affiliated practices and create positive norms messages that can then be shared back to the practices with guidance on how to promote those messages during patient conversations and within their environments. Provide media templates that can be easily customized and used by practices. Recommend providers receive training in brief interventions for substance risk to address active use.
- Integrate positive norms messaging into the patient portal so that it becomes visible to adolescent patients and their families.

Government

- Promote local and state policies that require the regular collection and public sharing of youth behavior data to ensure communities have access to the true positive norms of youth. Data can be shared through data dashboards or dissemination of data reports that increase awareness of positive youth norms.
- Advocate for ongoing funding for youth behavior surveys at the local level.
- Display positive youth messaging throughout public spaces, such as bus shelters, parks, and libraries.
- Integrate positive youth norms into existing public health campaigns and government communications.
- Encourage local businesses to display positive youth norms in visible spaces, such as storefront posters and bulletin boards.

Activities that may involve both direct and supportive influences include:

- *Training community members in social norms theory and guidance on how to share positive youth norms within various roles and settings.*
- *Creating shared messaging toolkits specific to the community so that all community members are equipped with positive norms messages based on local data.*
- *Coordinating outreach and communications across systems to support a unified community voice celebrating the positive youth norms of the community.*

PROCESS FOR ACCESSING & SHARING POSITIVE YOUTH NORMS

Activating a community to spread positive youth norms effectively is an ongoing, intentional process that requires accurate timely data, tailored messaging, and people inspired to share those messages throughout the community. Below is a process for how communities can access, develop, and sustain positive norms messaging around youth substance use. For each step, we highlight the key activities involved. Deeper guidance and resources to support each step can be found in the tools listed in the Resources section of this guide. *Note: Different levels of the community may be involved in different steps within this process. For example, whereas a prevention organization or school may be involved in all steps, others may only be involved in sharing and reinforcing the message.*

- 1 COLLECT**

The foundation of the social norms approach is gathering accurate, local data. The more local the data, the more relevant and meaningful it will be to the youth and adults in the community. This step involves gathering data on what the community youth actually think and do when it comes to substances, often through anonymous surveys that allow them to respond honestly. This data may already exist through school-administered youth surveys (or for healthcare systems, within electronic health records or screening systems). Where existing data is not available, or when it may lack information related to the positive youth norms of the community, data can be collected. This can be a coordinated process among the supportive organizations.
- 2 ANALYZE**

Once data has been gathered, the next step is to reframe the data through a positive norms lens. Substance use data often leads with the problem, describing the percentage of youth who are using substances or engaging in other risky behaviors. In the social norms approach, data is reframed to focus on the positive. In practice, this looks like “flipping” the statistic. If data show that 15% of youth reported past month alcohol use, the positive norm is that 85% did not. This process of reframing also applies to attitudinal data. For an attitude or behavior to be used as a positive norms message, it must reflect the majority (over 50%). These norm-based data points will then be used to create positive norms messages. Note: positive norms percentages will typically be higher for younger middle school-aged youth compared to older high-school aged youth.
- 3 MESSAGE**

Translating positive norms data into effective messages requires shaping the data into language that is clear, relevant, and relatable to the intended audience. Effective messages are simple, grounded in data, and framed to celebrate the positive attitudes and behaviors of most youth in the community. Multiple positive norms messages need to be created to diversify the messaging and one way to do this is to create messages that highlight both what most youth think (injunctive norms) and do (behavioral norms). One of the most important elements of any positive norms message is a credible data source. The audience may doubt the accuracy of the positive norm so messages will want to include the source of the information (e.g., ‘based on an anonymous student survey at your school, May 2025’), so it becomes more believable.
- 4 SHARE**

The next step is to spread positive norms messages into the community through every communication channel and trusted voice available. This means disseminating positive norms messages across settings, sectors, and media sources so that youth encounter it from multiple directions. Messages can be interactive and also static, and many examples of how to deliver positive norms messages through conversations, the environment, and other forms of messaging are provided earlier in this guide. Sharing positive norms messaging also means being prepared to address skepticism. Because these messages are designed to correct misperceptions, it is almost inevitable that some youth and adults will push back when they first encounter data that contradicts what they believe to be true (which is the exact problem the social norms approach is designed to solve). Being ready to respond to doubt with curiosity, transparency, data, and a clear explanation of where the numbers come from is essential for effective message dissemination.
- 5 REINFORCE**

The social norms approach works by gradually correcting misperceptions, bringing what people believe to be true into closer alignment with true norms. That kind of shift happens through repeated, consistent exposure to the positive norm across multiple settings and trusted voices. The more consistently and broadly the message is shared, the more likely it is to correct misperceptions. The sharing of positive youth norms is sustained when positive norms messaging becomes a regular and expected part of how a community talks about its youth.
- 6 EVALUATE AND REPEAT**

Like any prevention effort, positive norms messaging can be monitored and measured over time to understand whether it is working and where adjustments are needed. This step involves tracking both the process (e.g., are messages actually being shared consistently) and outcomes (e.g., changes in attitudes and behaviors). One way to monitor outcomes is to resurvey youth at least every two years to track shifts in both perceived norms and actual behavior over time. Doing so also provides an opportunity to update messaging to reflect new data.

RESOURCES

ADAPT offers training and consultation in the social norms approach to HIDTA communities. Resources on this topic are also available on ADAPT's [Prevention Intervention Resource Center](#), and include:

- The Social Norms Intervention
- A Guide to Implementing a Social Norms Media Campaign for Substance Use Prevention in Secondary Schools

Other organizations that offer resources and consultation include [The Montana Institute](#), [Alcohol Education Project](#), [Youth Health and Safety Project](#), and [National Social Norms Center](#).

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