

In recent years, FCD's work with schools has been increasingly informed by data from our social norms-based *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey*. More and more schools are recognizing that prevention strategies, activities, and programs based on social norms data are not only effective, but they are also essential to keeping healthy kids healthy.

FCD believes that a vital step in our prevention work is to help parents utilize a social norms perspective, as well. This perspective within homes and families can strengthen and reinforce healthy attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making on the part of children. Parents can work to both understand social norms, and also to communicate this perspective to their children in order to prevent student substance use, abuse, and addiction.

Overestimating Substance Use

The social norms approach to student substance abuse prevention posits that young people consistently overestimate the amount of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use among their peers. Younger students are especially vulnerable to believing that most teenagers drink or use other drugs more than they actually do. This misperception creates a self-fulfilling prophecy called "anticipatory socialization" – the incorrect assumption on the part of young students that, as they get older, most of their peers will be drinking or using other drugs. As a result of unhealthy anticipatory socialization, the idea of using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs becomes more acceptable over time to our young people. Data from FCD surveys consistently demonstrate that students, in large numbers, are susceptible to overestimating and misperceiving use among peers and older teens. Anecdotal evidence from our work with adults in school communities suggests that teachers, parents, and others who care for children are susceptible to these misperceptions about youth as well.

Parents' Misperceptions

Teenagers and younger students are not alone in their mistaken belief about adolescent substance use. Parents, faculty, and administrators all fall victim to a similar misperception for very innocent reasons. Adults and kids are constantly faced with media messages and images of young people drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, and using other drugs. Newspapers, magazines, and television news inform us about "the problem," while rarely emphasizing healthy adolescent behavior. Film and video intentionally or unintentionally glamorize substance use. Consider the following comments:

- "I'm not naïve; I know most high school kids are likely to drink."
- "Everyone in the senior class drinks."
- "My child doesn't drink but seems to be the only one."
- "I can count on one hand the number of kids at our school who don't drink."
- "Everyone was really drunk at the party Friday night."
- "I can go to any room in the dorm and get drugs."

Use Is Real, So Is Health

There is no question that alcohol and other drug use among young people is a serious health problem. Most research designed to establish prevention and treatment strategies focuses on the amount of substance use, because the problem needs to be addressed. FCD believes that if our primary focus is always on the extent and seriousness of substance abuse, we are failing to reinforce the vast majority of young people who are not using or abusing substances. For those students who are demonstrating healthy behaviors and are not part of the minority of higher-risk users, a social norms perspective is a far more powerful prevention message than dire warnings about behavior that doesn't involve them. *In fact, research shows that a social norms approach to prevention that reinforces health is more likely to prevent and reduce student substance use than efforts focusing only on the problem of use itself.*

This does not mean that students don't need to be educated about the risks of substance abuse. What it does mean, however, is that when young people realize that healthy decision-making is the reality among their peers – that most young people are not engaging in dangerous use of alcohol or other drugs – and that adults recognize and appreciate their positive effort, non-using kids become stronger in their commitment to be healthy, happy, and self confident.

Changing the Focus

A social norms perspective does not ignore the problem, but changes the focus. Schools that have begun to utilize data based on social norms have not only become better at intervening early to reduce problems caused by substance use, but have also reduced the occurrence of such problems by reinforcing healthy attitudes and behaviors. Consider the difference in the following perspectives.

According to the National Institute on Drug abuse, in 2013, approximately 13% of 10th graders reported getting drunk in the past month.

Drunkenness by teens is not good news by any means and must be addressed through a variety of prevention strategies, including warnings about the risk of alcohol use by young people. But, while likely accurate, the above statistic does not offer parents and young people the reality of 10th grade alcohol use: **87% of 10th graders did not get drunk in the past month.**

According to the National Institute on Drug abuse, in 2013, 18% of 10th grade students had smoked marijuana in the past month. **82% of 10th graders did not smoke marijuana at all in the past month.**

According to the National Institute on Drug abuse, in 2007, approximately 16% of 12th graders had at least one cigarette in the past month. **84% of 12th graders did not smoke cigarettes at all in the past month.**

Teen smoking is now at the lowest levels recorded within the 38-year history of the *Monitoring The Future* study of United States' youth.

If your child is among the majority of students who do not drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, or use tobacco, it is very important that you consistently reinforce his or her healthy behavior. Even though you might “expect” your student to refrain from use, as is your right and even obligation as a parent, your reinforcement of your child's health, and the many rewarding conversations you can share about the benefits of making healthy decisions in adolescence, will be a much more powerful prevention message than all the dire warnings and emphasis on the problem your child is likely to hear elsewhere.

For more information, please visit <http://www.nida.nih.gov/infofacts/HSYouthtrends.html>.

Why Social Norms Messages Prevent Adolescent Substance Use

- They focus on healthy behavior.
- They reinforce positive decision making.
- They emphasize adolescent strengths.
- They communicate caring and support.
- They help non-users know they are not alone.
- They marginalize those who use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.
- They put the problem in perspective: most kids are not abusing alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs).
- They strengthen adolescent resolve to be true to self, respect parents' expectations, support school rules, and reinforce friends and peers.
- They help healthy kids stay healthy.

The FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey

For many years, the *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey* has been conducted in schools. These surveys consistently identify three key findings:

1. False perceptions
2. Higher-risk users
3. Future prevention strategies.

False Perceptions

Based on social norms theory, and developed by a professional research company to ensure accuracy and validity of results, the *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey* has a powerful effect on adult and adolescent perception. By identifying misperceptions, the survey helps parents and faculty change their perspective on how to effectively deliver prevention messages to young people. Students realize that those who choose not to use are most often in the majority. They also begin to recognize how non-using students have a positive influence on peers and the overall school environment. Even more influential in reinforcing the prevention message is the realization by students who do use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, that their behavior is not commonly accepted and that it has a harmful effect on others by creating disruption and fostering concern and helplessness among peers, adults, and the school community.

Higher-risk users

The *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey* identifies the number of higher-risk users in a specific class or overall school community. One benefit of such information is that the number is usually much lower than most faculty and students think it is. Although this group is not identified by name, it is not uncommon that they are students already experiencing academic or behavioral problems. Many of these students may have already been identified as having academic, attendance, or disciplinary problems and have already been referred to counseling. Being able to put a number on this group shows the overall community that most students are not in this category. The survey is also able to identify the risk-taking behavior the higher-risk students engage in with alcohol or other drugs. This enables schools to refer these students to appropriate education or treatment services and assists parents in identifying the specific intervention or support such students require.

Being able to show teenagers that the higher-risk group is really a minority, that the majority of students do not approve of such behavior, and that the school wants to help these students change their risk-taking behavior, is invaluable as a prevention strategy. The overall result is recognition by students, faculty and parents that there are a lot of healthy kids – and the expectation becomes one of students living up to the “healthy norm.”

Future prevention strategies

Having identified healthy behaviors and higher-risk behaviors, this information makes it possible for schools and parents to continue developing creative and substantive ways to reinforce the healthy norm by strengthening the overall social norms perspective. Schools are able to improve early intervention strategies for students at risk, and create a variety of activities that reinforce healthy behavior, such as SALSA non-use groups that train students to be alcohol- and other drug-free role models for peers and younger students.

Social Norms Data Gives Parents Strength

Survey data provides parents with a foundation of accurate information from which they can communicate with their kids. Parents will be able to know what is really going on at school and not be at the mercy of fear and uncertainty. Knowing specific percentages of students who don't use, who disapprove of substance abuse, and who want to support healthy norms within their lives and school gives parents a position of confidence and strength in their conversations with kids. Even if students are hesitant to readily accept positive data, parents have a basis from which they can engage kids in a discussion about their doubt or skepticism.

When parents see data that helps schools strengthen early intervention and offer support to students at risk, they are able to feel secure that potential problems are being addressed. They can also see how schools are creating more activities and/or programs that reinforce the healthy norm, thus enabling them

to encourage their children to participate in these activities. Even without data from an FCD survey, schools and parents can help students see the reality of adolescent substance abuse by utilizing a social norms perspective. Data from NIDA, such as listed above, and from other sources, like the University of Michigan Householder Survey, can be used to point out to kids how the focus on use fails to include a majority of kids who aren't using or abusing.

With or without data, parents can practice developing a social norms perspective when talking with other adults, when listening to news reports, or reading articles about adolescent substance use. The more that parents are able to take any information about adolescent substance use and place it in context with a social norms perspective, the better they will be able to support their children's effort to exercise healthy behavior. For example: A student tells her parents, "Everyone at the party was so drunk." It is likely that everyone was not drunk, but those who were stood out more than the others. This does not mean that some parties won't have a majority of students drinking large amounts of alcohol. There are plenty of situations that parents want to their children to avoid. But, in many situations, the small percentage of truly higher-risk drinkers may be kids who are already in trouble. Fostering false perceptions gives validity to the higher-risk behaviors and legitimizes their actions, even while majorities of young people are making relatively healthy decisions.

Parents have an opportunity to play a most significant role in their children's lives, especially as they become older and require support in their efforts to manage new and often confusing challenges. When parents help their children develop a balanced perspective from social norms, maintain expectations of healthy behavior, and reinforce their kids' efforts, the foundation for prevention becomes solidified.

Talking with Kids – Parents Can Balance the Perspective

- Help your children understand that if they are not engaging in risk-taking behavior with alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, they are not in the minority.
- Help your children recognize how a focus on substance abuse problems can create an exaggerated picture of the number of young people using and abusing substances.
- Politely question generalizations your children make about any behavior (e.g. "Everyone has a cell phone," "Everyone gets to stay out later than me," "Everybody drinks at parties," "I don't know anyone who doesn't drink," etc.).
- Become aware of how newspaper and magazine articles, internet news sites, movies, TV shows, and other sources reinforce false perceptions about teenage substance abuse.
- When statistics are listed in the "negative," help your child see the reverse "positive."