

Review of Effectiveness

Social norms are the perceived standards that define what beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are considered acceptable within a social group.⁵⁵ Norms are very powerful in shaping how individuals think and behave. In fact, the perception of the social norm is one of the strongest predictors of personal behavior.^{21,62} Yet perceived norms (i.e., what individuals think their peers do and believe) often do not align with actual peer norms (i.e., what most peers actually think and do).^{17,21}

For example, the vast majority, and a growing number, of American youth are **choosing not to use any substances**, especially illicit drugs.¹² Yet both youth and adults overwhelmingly overestimate the number of 11–18-year-olds who use substances (especially alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana). People tend to believe that substance use and tolerance of substance use are more common than they actually are (e.g., “everyone drinks”, “most parents let their kids drink”, “most peers don’t try to prevent friends’ substance use.”^{15,5} In reality, the most common attitudes and behaviors among youth (and their parents) are positive, healthy, and protective.

The SNMC aims to increase positive attitudes and behaviors by correcting the overestimation of negative attitudes and behaviors and the underestimation of positive attitudes and behaviors. Correcting misperceptions occurs by identifying the positive behavioral and attitudinal norms of a group and effectively communicating those norms to the population of interest through social norms marketing.^{12,63} Research has shown that as misperceptions are corrected, behavior change follows. So, when youth are exposed to messages that explain the positive, true norms that most youth make healthy choices and engage in prosocial activities, they are more likely to take part in those positive behaviors.¹¹

The social norms approach has been well studied in high school and college age populations and the literature on middle school-aged youth is growing. This research shows that social norms have consistently been found to influence adolescent risky behaviors, such as substance use.²⁹ In addition, middle and high school-aged youth overestimate the number of their peers who engage in substance use.^{5,15} These findings have been replicated across substances, grades, large and small schools, and geographical regions.¹⁵

A review of the literature suggests that the social norms approach is an appropriate strategy for youth substance use prevention. Early work found that normative education significantly reduced alcohol, marijuana, and cigarette smoking among junior high students.⁶⁴ More recent research has demonstrated the effectiveness of SNMCs more broadly in youth populations. For example, several studies in both community and school-based settings have found that SNMCs were effective at correcting youth misperceptions related to substance use and ultimately leading to decreased substance use.^{11,15,45}

Factors related to campaign effectiveness have also been studied. One study found that levels of social norms messaging exposure, recall, and satisfaction were associated with higher preventive effect.⁶¹ Specifically, youth exposed to social norms messages were less likely to overestimate peer alcohol use and less likely to report alcohol-related harms.⁶¹ In conclusion, as a universal prevention strategy, the SNMC can be used to prevent the onset and escalation of substance use in youth.