

INTRODUCTION

Humans are social animals, and the need to fit in is instinctive. In looking for a place to belong, what is perceived as “normal” influences the choices a person makes every day. What is considered “normal” varies depending on where one lives, and the values and standards of behavior shared among any given group. Social norms are key to understanding human behavior and the choices, good and bad, that people make.

Social norms are the written or unwritten rules about values, beliefs, attitudes or behavior shared by a group of people (Bernstein, Penner, Clarke-Stewart, & Roy, 2011). They can be as simple as saying “please” and “thank you”, or tipping a waiter 15% at a restaurant. Social norms can be more complex to a high school student who is struggling with sexual identity, binge drinking, or substance misuse.

An individual’s behavior towards public health issues, such as providing alcohol to underage youth, vaping, or seat belt use, is influenced by the perception of that behavior, and others’ approval of that behavior. People are more likely to engage in behavior that is perceived to be “normative behavior” supported by the perception of high peer support for this choice. The desire to fit in provides a valuable opportunity for adult allies working with youth, especially when it is used as part of an evidence-based practice or a theory on how people are influenced by others’ behavior (CDC, 2010).

Health experts in every community grapple with how to address the growing number of youth engaging in unhealthy behaviors ranging from alcohol and tobacco use to teenage pregnancy. Research shows that significant change is possible through social norms messaging and campaigns (Haines, 2016). As adult allies working with young people towards

For more information on youth-led programs, please see the following white papers:

Community-Based Process: This paper explains the foundational role of community-based processes in prevention and youth-led programs.

Media Campaigns: Media campaigns are one strategy young people may choose to implement as a result of their strategic planning process. This paper provides an overview of types of media campaigns and messages.

Policy and Advocacy: Young people have a right to be heard on matters affecting their lives. This white paper provides an overview of how young people can engage in policy and advocacy.

Prevention Education: This paper provides an expanded definition of prevention education and explains how this strategy may be utilized by youth-led programs.

community-level change it is essential to recognize the existing community social norms, talk about the perception (or misperception) of those norms, and explore ways social norms can positively or negatively impact a school or community (Haines, 2016).

SOCIAL NORMS THEORY AND PREMISES

Social norms theory recognizes the importance of peers' behavior and how the perception of the normative behavior of the peer group influences behavior. (Rimal & Real, 2005). It asserts that behavior is influenced by the misperception of what others think, do, and say. The "gap" between the perception of others' behavior and their actual behavior forms the basis for social norms theory. There are three core premises of social norms theory.

PREMISE #1 ALL COMMUNITIES HAVE POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMS

Every functioning social system has healthy positive social norms, but these healthy norms are often misperceived by a school or community. Problems are overestimated and solutions are underestimated, further exacerbating a community's ability to affect change (Haines, 2016).

Ex. Community newspaper headlines report a "vape culture", leading parents and teens to believe that youth are vaping at record levels. In reality however, these record levels reflect a relatively small percentage of students who are actually choosing to vape with nicotine. Research demonstrates that teen nicotine non-vape use is the social norm in most communities, with only 13 percent of eighth-grade vapers and 20 percent of 10th- and 12th-grade vapers opting for nicotine (Ingraham, 2016). Yet if asked, many parents and teens believe that "everyone" is vaping, increasing youth's likelihood for vape use or support for peer vape use.

PREMISE #2 MISPERCEPTION OF SOCIAL NORMS INFLUENCES BEHAVIOR

Misperceptions of social norms create real pressure to expect, tolerate and even adopt risky behaviors and beliefs. Additionally, young people may seek to minimize, suppress and hide normative safe behaviors and beliefs.

Ex. Leo, a twelve year old boy, is faced with two boys in a group of friends who have started vaping. He has heard that all the kids in high school are doing it. He assumes others in his group will begin vaping sooner or later and it's just a matter of time. Leo misperceives himself as part of the minority, even though the great majority of his friends has never vaped.

PREMISE #3 CORRECTION OF MISPERCEPTION INCREASES ADOPTION OF HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

Correction or clarification of the misperceptions of unhealthy social norms can drive people to align their behavior with the majority's (corrected) social norms. The closing of this gap corrects any misperception one might have of a social norm to encourage them to join the majority already participating in the healthy behavior.

Ex. The youth-led program at the middle school that Leo attends begins a social norms campaign that corrects Leo's perception that "everyone" vapes. The campaign demonstrates that 94% of Leo's peers choose not to vape and 88% of the high school students also choose not to vape. Leo no longer feels pressure to "belong" as he is already part of the majority.

SOCIAL NORMS CAMPAIGN

When the data demonstrates a misperception of unhealthy behavior, the implementation of a social norms campaign will serve to correct the misperception and promote healthy peer behavior. Studies consistently demonstrate that correcting students' perceptions of peer drinking promotes decreases in consumption (Lee, Geisner, Patrick, & Neighbors, 2010).

Adult allies and youth-led programs have the power to shift the story of community youth from negative risk behaviors to highlight youth's healthy community norms. Research demonstrates this shift will not only correct any misperceptions about social norms, but also demonstrate an increase in youth adopting the healthy norm (Haines et al., 2004). When given a choice, most youth will adopt the healthy choice, if they perceive it is the popular choice.

Michael Haines, an expert in social norms campaigns, believes that a paradigm shift is needed in how adult allies work to reduce risk-taking behaviors in communities. The key is to focus on credible messages which highlight the majority behavior. In his research, Haines cites statistics which show a 25% reduction in tobacco use and an 11% reduction in alcohol use two years after a social norms campaign was implemented (Haines, 2018).

Haines identifies a *social norms formula* to help adult allies and youth-led programs put social norms theory into practice. The formula provides guidance and helps adult allies support young people as they identify protective practices and healthy beliefs and create campaigns that model and promote positive social norms and reduce risky behaviors (Haines, 2018). The five-stage model includes planning, data collection, strategy development, implementation and evaluation (Haines, Perkins, Barker & Rice, 2004).

1. Initial Planning Stage

Groups start the process of creating a social norms campaign by assessing the issue they wish to address with their campaign. By defining the issue, including populations served, existing solutions and possible solutions objectives, they gain a clear understanding of the current status of the targeted issue within their community.

Ex. Fulton County's Youth Advisory Council (YAC) through a strategic planning process guided by their adult allies identified youth vape use as their problem of practice. They wrote a problem statement, identified root causes and local conditions, determined currently utilized strategies and potential gaps in those strategies.

2. Data Collection Stage

Data collection provides an opportunity to gather information about the indicated need and further identify the audience. Collection should include both quantitative and qualitative data. Focus groups can be particularly effective as a method for diving deeper into the information received through a survey.

Ex. YAC youth members reviewed the youth health assessment data for vape use, gathered some stakeholder information to further assessment, and utilized information gathered from law enforcement and school authorities by HC3 (adult coalition connected to YAC).

3. Strategy Development Stage

Analysis of baseline data previously collected provides a foundation for the development of messaging options to be considered. Through marketing research, the most effective message to reach priority population is determined resulting in the development of a social norms marketing plan.

Ex. YAC members, guided by adult allies, analyzed collected data to determine while youth perception of youth vape use was high, actual use was 17% of 6th - 12th graders in the county. This clearly demonstrates the majority of youth in their community do not vape.

4. Implementation Stage

The production and distribution of selected media formats launch the campaign into the community. It is essential to develop a method for monitoring the impact of messaging within the community and to gather feedback from the audience as to what they heard, their response and retention of the information.

Ex. YAC members, through a strategic planning process, decided to create a social norming campaign to correct the misperception about the number of youth vaping in their community. To reach their priority population of middle school and high school youth, they chose to utilize messaging and popular memes from youth culture. They created some rough draft materials and reached out to their peers for feedback. The messaging they created will be utilized as ads in their local movie theatre.

5. Evaluation Stage

The goal of this stage is to determine the extent to which the campaign has corrected the identified misperception about the identified public health issue within the community.

Ex. YAC members plan to run their ads throughout the summer due to the large numbers of youth attending movies. They are planning a brief electronic survey in the fall to determine if perception of vaping use has been impacted by their campaign.

CONCLUSION

All schools and communities have healthy positive norms. When data demonstrate a misperception, a social norms campaign is an appropriate way to correct the misperception and promote healthy peer behavior. Social norms campaigns are an effective, data-driven approach, that may be implemented by young people to promote healthy protective behaviors and attitudes through positive messaging (Haines, 2018). Many youth-led programs, guided by their adult allies, have implemented social norms campaigns within their schools and communities with much success. It is essential to utilize a strategic planning process to ensure the use of data, evidence-based strategies, sustainability and cultural competency are being practiced when selecting, developing and implementing the campaign. Adult Allies play a critical role in guiding young people through the process, including how to negotiate through community systems and political processes. Youth engaged in this process gain critical skills around resiliency, group efficacy and the opportunity to change the narrative of youth role as part of a community system.

AUTHORS



Beth Dixon expanded the Project Jericho program by partnering with the Clark County Juvenile Court, working daily with incarcerated youth. The initiative played an active role in the Juvenile Court's specialized dockets for youth whose offenses revolved around substance abuse and unaddressed mental health issues.



Beth Thomas has served as the Program Director for HC3, and developed the youth-led prevention initiative, YAC, which empowers young people to become community change agents.

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Ohio University's Voinovich School and Leadership and Public Affairs and Prevention Action Alliance collaborated with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) to host a series of training and technical assistance (T/TA) activities for adult allies of youth-led programs. This series of white papers was developed by adult allies to support their peers who work with young people to use local data and evidence-based prevention strategies to create meaningful change within Ohio's communities. Dr. Jessica Collura, Ms. Aimee Collins, Dr. Holly Raffle and Mr. Zach Gheen of the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs supported Ohio's adult allies as they developed the white paper series. Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Grant# 1900157 provided funding for the Youth-Led Training and Technical Assistance Project.