



LINCOLN Medical Education Partnership
Strengthening Families through Health Education

SOCIAL NORMING

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Kids of every age attempt to sway parents and other adults with the arguments that everyone is doing it, everyone has it, or no one else has their rules. This is a type of persuasion, much like the self-fulfilling prophecy that kids can fall into if they believe that everyone is partying, drinking, using drugs, or participating in other risky behaviors.

Parents try to counter the arguments of younger children with comments such as, "If everyone was jumping off a bridge, would you?" But how can parents and adults respond to the other comments youth are exposed to in today's society? The answer is: know the facts. Be able to tell children and youth what the social norm actually is, not what they believe it to be.

The movement called "social norming" has a message: What's "normal" for most teens isn't getting drunk or high, having sex, getting pregnant or vandalizing property. The stereotype of the opposite is a myth. Rather than focusing on the bad behaviors among today's youth that widespread statistics lead the public to believe all youth are doing, look at these statistics:

- About 56.7% of high school students say they have not consumed an alcoholic beverage in the past 30 days.
- An estimated 90.1% had not driven a car while under the influence of alcohol within the past 30 days.
- Only 13.4% of students have smoke one cigarette a day for the last 30 days.
- Nearly 61.6% have never tried marijuana.
- About 87.6% have never sniffed glue, breathed the contents of aerosol spray cans or inhaled paints to get high.
- An estimated 96% have never taken steroids with or without a doctor's prescription.

By focusing on these positive statistics and emphasizing teenagers doing positive things, a new and more accurate social norm can be established. When kids don't believe that everyone is participating in the negative behaviors, perhaps they will make the choice to join the kids in the majority who are not participating in the negative activities. As youth, they are trying to fit in and find themselves. Hanging out with positive kids doing positive things will lead them in that direction.

And parents can use this concept with their own children well before college age. Parents must let their children know that "there are a lot of teenagers doing positive things...the norm is not where we have to go out and party and drink." (Dr. Sherry Blake, psychologist) The philosophy of social norming is to curb unhealthy habits and is a way parents can become a strong and positive influence in their child's life. Here are some tips from the National PTA to help parents stay involved and minimize risks their child takes:

- Keep lines of communication open.
- Set fair and consistent rules.
- Support your child's future.
- Be an example.

Keep in mind the following points about discipline from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry:

- Trust your child to do the right things within the limits of your child's age and stage of development.
- Make sure what you ask for is reasonable.
- Speak to your child as you would want to be spoken to if someone were reprimanding you. Don't resort to name-calling, yelling or disrespect.
- Be clear about what you mean. Be firm and specific.
- Model positive behavior.
- Whenever possible, consequences should be delivered immediately, should relate to the rule broken and be short enough in duration that you can move on again to emphasize the positives.
- Consequences should be fair and appropriate to the situation and the child's age.