



Module 5:

Positive Social Norms

Fact Sheet

Research Overview

All groups of people develop social norms. These norms are expectations for behavior communicated among group members to help create a shared culture and organize group behavior (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Siu, Cheng, & Leung, 2006). Social norms can be conveyed through a wide variety of sources. Among youth, norms are commonly communicated through peers (e.g., friends, romantic partners, acquaintances), parents, teachers, media (e.g., television, music, advertisements), community members, and many others (Collins et al., 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kirby, 2001; Prinstein, Meade, & Cohen, 2003). In addition, youth may be most strongly influenced by norms that are communicated from an individual with high status or a close relationship with the youth (Choukas-Bradley, Giletta, Cohen, & Prinstein, 2015; Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Kirby, 2001).

Fostering positive social norms is often a primary goal in positive youth development programs (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Kirby, 2001; Payton et al., 2000). Within youth programs, positive social norms are defined as standards or expectations for youth's attitudes and behaviors that are considered socially and culturally appropriate and desirable. These positive social norms often promote behaviors viewed as safe, healthy, and morally or ethically valued (e.g., volunteering, school attendance) and discourage unhealthy, risky, or deviant behaviors (e.g., substance use, violence, risky sexual behavior) among youth program participants (Catalano et al., 2004; Cheng, Siu, & Leung, 2006; Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004; Siu et al., 2006). Research suggests several youth programs have successfully fostered positive social norms that have resulted in more positive youth development outcomes among youth participants (Gavin, Catalano, David-Ferdon, Gloppen, & Markham, 2010; Perkins, Craig, & Perkins, 2011; Santelli et al., 2004). Therefore, youth programs provide an opportune setting to foster positive social norms, which are vital to youth's development and well-being.

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Intervening with Misperceived Norms

The theory of misperceived norms suggests that youth's perceptions of others' problematic norms, particularly peers, are often much more extreme than others' actual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Perkins, 2003; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins et al., 2011). Three potential reasons for this discrepancy include youth generalizing others' behavior that they observe to how those people typically behave overall, discussing the most extreme examples of behavior, and being exposed to media that focuses on the most extreme examples. Therefore, Perkins and colleagues (2003; 1986; 2011) suggest that programs take the following steps to intervene with youth when group norms are misperceived and problematic:

- Collect data on beliefs, behaviors, and misperceptions specific to the group
- Create materials (e.g., flyers, presentations) to convey accurate norm messages, which are consistently more positive than perceived norms, based on the groups' data
- Examine whether perceptions of norms are more accurate post-intervention

Implications for Youth Programs

Youth program activities that foster positive social norms may include the following strategies:

- Provide youth with opportunities to make positive contributions to their community, allowing them to experience the value of positive social norm behavior firsthand
- Foster close relationships with peers and adults who can serve as role models for positive norms
- Facilitate discussions about how to identify social norms and why social norms are in place
- Integrate positive social norms into tasks in order to help youth understand and internalize those norms
- Deliver accurate information about problematic peer norms in order to reduce problematic norm attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors

Youth workers should consider the following approaches to fostering positive social norms in youth programs:

- Engage youth in open conversations about the social norms they would like to establish within the program (e.g., appropriate language, respect for other members, timeliness)
- Clearly communicate behavioral expectations that align with positive social norms and discuss the rationale behind those expectations
- Publicly post expectations so that all youth program members are aware of and reminded of the group's norms
- Discuss the consequences of breaking program norms at the beginning of a program and when new youth join the program
- Focus primarily on promoting positive social norms rather than decreasing problematic norms
- Build close relationships with youth, considering that youth are more likely to follow and internalize norms portrayed by someone close to them

The following organizational practices should be implemented in order to foster positive social norms in youth programs:

- Ensure that all youth workers know, enforce, and communicate positive social norms
- Encourage the organization-wide use of strategies to intervene with misperceived norms (e.g., collecting data on problematic norms specific to the group, providing accurate information, measuring whether perceived norms become more accurate and positive)
- Recruit high-status individuals (e.g., popular, well-known, knowledgeable on the subject) to discuss positive social norms with youth participants
- Avoid grouping program participants with behavior problems together as they may encourage problematic social norms amongst each other
- Plan program curricula primarily focused on positive social norms and well-being rather than on problematic norms

For a complete discussion of this topic and a full list of references, see the topic paper by the same name.



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