

# Social Norms Theory

## Activity Handout G6-12



Know Your  
*Neuro*

**Social Norms Theory** explains that people often decide how to act based on what they think other people are doing or approving of. Our brains naturally look to others for clues about what is 'normal'. This can be helpful—but it can also lead us to make unhealthy choices if our information is inaccurate.

### When They Help

Healthy social norms include:

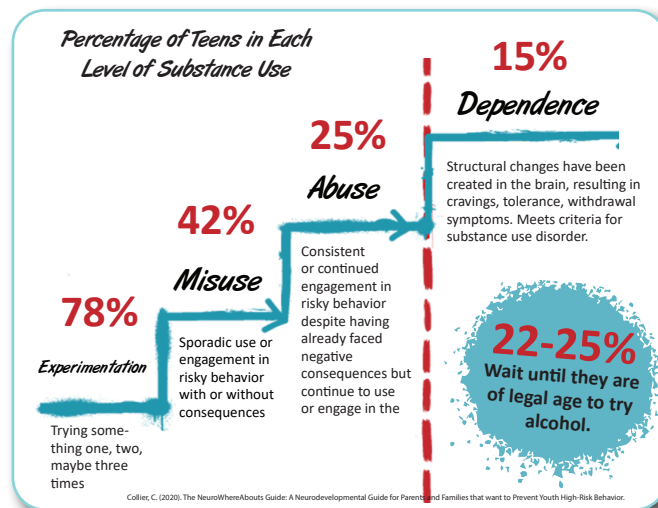
- Wearing seat belts
- Being kind to others
- Recycling
- Returning shopping carts
- Saying thank you
- Studying for tests
- Looking out for friends

### When They Become Harmful

When we overestimate how many people engage in a risky behavior like believing:

- Everybody drinks.
- Everybody cheats.
- All teens vape.
- Everyone watches XXX.
- Everyone gambles online.

'Everybody does it' beliefs increase pressure to fit in—even when they aren't true. Sometimes the loudest people seem like the majority, but they aren't. Most teens actually choose healthier behaviors than their peers believe, as seen in the figure.



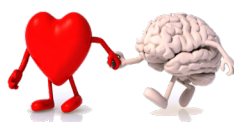
## Long-Term Learning

### Brainstorm

In a small groups or share pairs, discuss the following ideas and questions:

- In states where cannabis and gambling have been legalized, teens see more billboards and advertising related to them. How do you think increased exposure to this advertising might affect them?
- Have you ever thought 'everyone was doing something' only to later discover they weren't?
- What risky behavior do you think teenagers exaggerate the most? Why?
- Where do young people get ideas about what is 'normal'? How much influence comes from:
  - Social media
  - Friends
  - Movies
  - Music
  - Advertising
  - School

### Hardwired to Belong



Our brain is wired to belong. During adolescence,

acceptance from peers becomes especially rewarding because teens' social learning and reward systems are highly active.

This is why teens pay close attention to what seems 'normal'. So, if young people are surrounded by others making healthier choices, the norm builds strong brains that make healthy choices.

If unhealthy norms take hold and risky behavior becomes the norm, healthy brain development can be arrested reducing the growth of executive functioning skills.

Research consistently shows that teens usually overestimate alcohol use, drug use, vaping, risky sexual behavior, gambling, and time spent on social media.

### Majority Voice

If the **majority voice** is silent, how can students empower the majority of students who make healthy choices?

- What could youth do to help make healthier choices more visible?
- How could social norms theory be used to influence positive behavior?
- How can young people dispel myths about negative norms?
- Who do you know that has positive habits? How could their voice be amplified?
- How could common, unhealthy norms be rewritten?
- How could the following media be harnessed to replace false norms with accurate ones in your school?
  - Posters & infographics
  - Morning announcements
  - Short videos
  - Social media graphics

For more information and resources on this topic go to [www.knowyourneuro.org](http://www.knowyourneuro.org)