

The snowball survey and peer-education posters: Methods of teaching social norms.

By: Christopher M. Seitz, David L. Wyrick, Rebecca Caldwell, Melodie Fearnow-Kenney, Mushin Michael Orsini

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Abstract:

Adolescent substance use is a major health issue in the United States. Adolescent substance use is associated with motor vehicle crashes,¹ risky sexual behaviors,² and the development of substance disorders during adulthood.³ National studies indicate that the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD) among adolescents attending high school has declined considerably since the early 1990s.⁴ However, within the past few years, reductions in ATOD use have slowed to moderate or insignificant levels,⁴ an issue requiring the focus of health professionals.

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Article:

Adolescent substance use is a major health issue in the United States. Adolescent substance use is associated with motor vehicle crashes,¹ risky sexual behaviors,² and the development of substance disorders during adulthood.³ National studies indicate that the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD) among adolescents attending high school has declined considerably since the early 1990s.⁴ However, within the past few years, reductions in ATOD use have slowed to moderate or insignificant levels,⁴ an issue requiring the focus of health professionals.

One method in which health professionals can influence adolescent substance use is by correcting social norms. According to the social norms theory, individuals often erroneously believe that the majority of people engage in unhealthy behaviors, a misperception that may motivate individuals to increase their own unhealthy behaviors.⁵ Research supports this theory. For example, Perkins and Wechsler's⁶ national study found that student misperceptions regarding the prevalence of substance use by their peers is a key factor for alcohol consumption on college campuses. Fortunately, the social norms theory argues that when misperceptions

regarding the substance use of peers are corrected, people will tend to lower their own substance use.⁵ Several high schools throughout the country have utilized the social norms theory in prevention efforts and have experienced significant decreases in ATOD use.^{7,8}

Teachers can address the social norms theory in the classroom setting by utilizing an activity known as the “Snowball Survey.” Developed by Mary Crozier and later adapted by Linda Hancock,⁹ the Snowball Survey is becoming a popular teaching technique for changing the social norms of students. Creators of “Crossroads,” a high school substance use prevention program implemented through the University of North Carolina Wilmington, have successfully coupled the Snowball Survey with a student-led social norms poster campaign. Both the Snowball Survey and the poster campaign used in the Crossroads program are described in this article.

GRADE LEVEL

This lesson is intended for high school students enrolled in a personal health course.

NATIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION STANDARDS: PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

This teaching technique covers the following National Health Education Standards performance indicators:¹⁰

(2.12.2): Analyze how the culture supports and challenges health beliefs, practices, and behaviors.

(2.12.3): Analyze how peers influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors.

(2.12.5): Evaluate the effect of media on personal and family health.

(2.12.7): Analyze how the perceptions of norms influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors.

(8.12.1): Utilize accurate peer and societal norms to formulate a health-enhancing message.

(8.12.2): Demonstrate how to influence and support others to make positive health choices.

(8.12.4): Adapt health messages and communication techniques to a specific target audience.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to (1) identify the social norms held by themselves and fellow classmates regarding substance use, (2) discuss the various factors that influence social norms, and (3) teach peers about social norms through a basic health communication poster campaign.

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

The following items are required for this lesson: the social norms survey (Figure 1), computers/laptops, printer, paper, whiteboard/chalkboard, and whiteboard markers/chalk.

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1. In your opinion, what percent of high school students in the nation drank at least one alcoholic beverage (eg, beer, wine, wine cooler, liquor) during the past 30 days?
A. <10% B. 10-30% C. 31-50% D.51-70% E. 71-90% F. 91-100%
 2. During the past 30 days, did you drink at least one alcoholic beverage (e.g., beer, wine, wine cooler, liquor)?
A. Yes B. No
 3. In your opinion, what percent of high school students in the nation drank at least FIVE alcoholic beverages in a row (eg, within a couple of hours) at least once during the past 30 days?
A. <10% B. 10-30% C. 31-50% D.51-70% E. 71-90% F. 91-100%
 4. During the past 30 days, did you drink FIVE or more alcoholic beverages in a row (eg, within a couple of hours)?
A. Yes B. No
 5. In your opinion, what percent of high school students in the nation have EVER smoked a cigarette (even just a puff)?
A. <10% B. 10-30% C. 31-50% D.51-70% E. 71-90% F. 91-100%
 6. In your lifetime, have you EVER smoked a cigarette, even just a puff?
A. Yes B. No
 7. In your opinion, what percent of high school students in the nation smoked at least one cigarette during the past 30 days?
A. <10% B. 10-30% C. 31-50% D.51-70% E. 71-90% F. 91-100%
 8. During the past 30 days, did you smoke at least one cigarette?
A. Yes B. No
 9. In your opinion, what percent of high school students in the nation used marijuana at least once in during the past 30 days?
A. <10% B. 10-30% C. 31-50% D.51-70% E. 71-90% F. 91-100%
 10. During the past 30 days, did you use marijuana at least once?
A. Yes B. No
 11. In your opinion, what percent of high school students in the nation used cocaine during the past 30 days?
A. <10% B. 10-30% C. 31-50% D.51-70% E. 71-90% F. 91-100%
 12. During the past 30 days, did you use cocaine at least once?
A. Yes B. No
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ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

Part 1: The Snowball Survey

Distribute the social norms survey to each student in the class. Direct the students to complete the survey and keep their answers anonymous by not writing their names on the survey. After the students have completed the survey, instruct them to crumple their surveys into a ball. Tell the

students that the balled up surveys are now “snowball surveys” and that they will toss the snowball surveys at each other on the count of 3. Count to 3 out loud and then yell, “Toss your snowballs!” Encourage the students to toss the surveys at each other multiple times. This will ensure that the surveys remain unidentifiable. Also, remind students to avoid tossing directly at someone's head or face. If students tossing surveys at each other raises concerns about injury or liability, then adapt the activity by having students toss the surveys at a target at the front of the classroom. Once the tossing has finished, let each student pick up 1 survey and bring it back to their seat.

Instruct the students to uncrumple the surveys. Read the survey's first question out loud and ask the students to stand up if the survey they picked up contains the answer A. Remind the class that the surveys are anonymous and to not feel uncomfortable standing up. Tally the number of students who stood up on the whiteboard/chalkboard and then instruct the students to sit down. Repeat the procedure for each possible answer to each question on the survey. The tally should demonstrate the discrepancy between actual substance use and perceived use of peers. Announce to the class that you will write on the board the statistics regarding the substance use of high school students throughout the nation, which are based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS): drank at least 1 alcoholic beverage during the past 30 days (42%), drank at least 5 alcoholic beverages in a row at least once during the past 30 days (24%), ever smoked a cigarette (46%), smoked at least 1 cigarette during the past 30 days (20%), used marijuana at least once during the past 30 days (21%), and used cocaine during the past 30 days (3%).⁴ Write these statistics on the board beside each survey item that was tallied. The national data will help support accurate social norms regarding the true use of substances among high school students. If substance use among students in the classroom is higher than that of the YRBS data, the teacher should use the opportunity to warn students that their use is higher than the national average, which will act as a strong prevention message to the students.

Part 2: Class Discussion

Initiate a class discussion regarding the inconsistency between perceived and actual substance use. Discuss major influences of social norms, including the influence of peers, family, and media. Ask students to talk about how each of these has influenced their perceptions about how prevalent substance use is among their peers and their own decisions to avoid or use substances.

Examples of questions to spark discussion include:

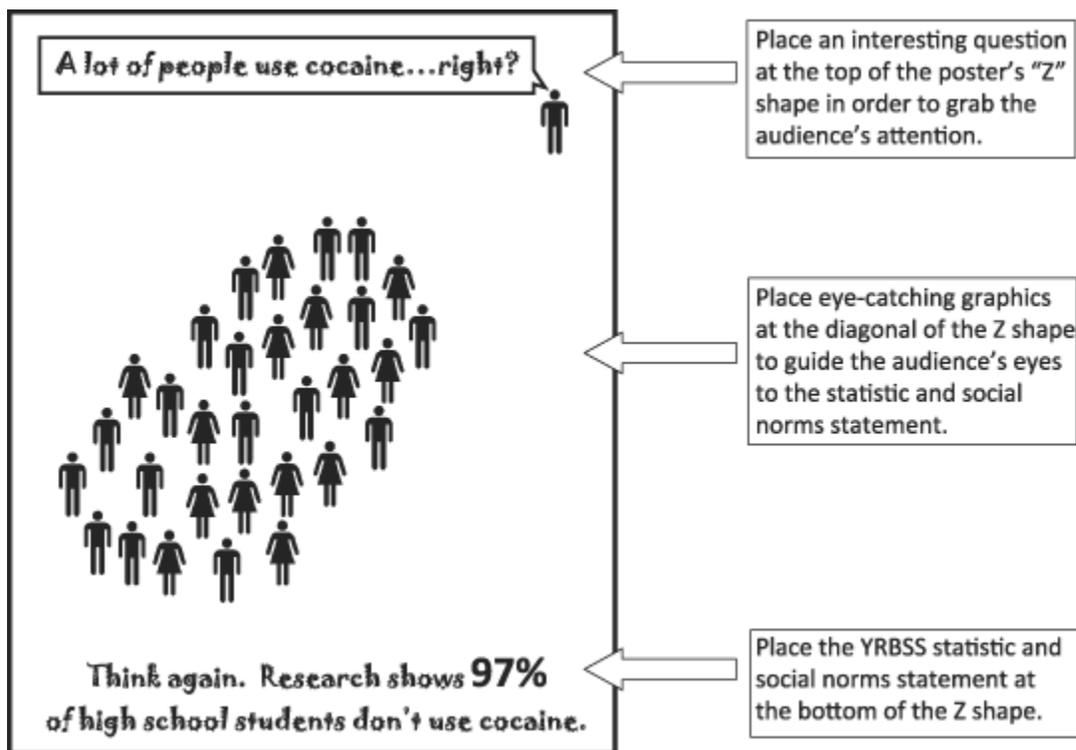
1 Who is more of an influence on your decision to avoid or use substances (peers, family, or media)?

2 Describe your reaction to the inconsistencies between the perceptions of the class versus the actual substance use statistics.

3 How do your perceptions influence your behavior in other areas of your life?

Part 3: Instruction for Poster Campaign and Construction

Inform students that they will now switch from their role as students to health educators. Tell them that as they are knowledgeable of social norms, they are now responsible to influence the health of their peers by educating them about the misperceptions of substance use. First, assign students into small groups and tell them that they will create a social norms poster campaign using the YRBSS statistics. Tell students to focus their 8.5 by 11-inch posters on just 1 substance use behavior. Second, teach students about proper poster layout. Specifically, instruct students to guide their audiences' eyes through the poster's contents by assembling information into a Z-shape, with eye-catching material (eg, interesting questions, odd facts) located at the top and diagonal slant of the "Z" and a transition statement with YRBSS statistics at the bottom (Figure 2). Discourage material that attempts to scare or shock their peers into not using ATOD. Inform students how their posters will be assessed before poster construction (see Section "Assessment Technique").



Part 4: Poster Construction and Placement

If possible, allow students to construct posters by computer. Students may construct the posters using any type of computer software (eg, MS Word, MS Publisher, and MS PowerPoint). Have

the groups view each other's posters and provide feedback to one another. Once finished, direct the groups to print their posters and erect them in highly visible areas, such as behind bathroom stall doors, above urinals, or at certain places permitted by the school (this may require the coordination of school administration). If you gain permission to display the posters for the whole school, encourage students to distribute enough posters for market saturation, meaning that the entire student body will be repeatedly exposed to the message. Have the groups hand in an extra copy of their poster with their names written on it for grading purposes.

ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE

The instructor will grade the groups' social norms posters based on a "C and R" grading scale. In this scale, the letter "C" is an acronym that means the assignment is "Complete and Correct." A C score is given to a group's poster that contains the proper Z-shape layout, attention-grabbing words/graphics, and relevant statistics that address a social norm. The letter "R" is an acronym that means the group needs to "Revise and Resubmit" 1 or more parts of their poster's contents (layout, words, graphics, and statistics). Students who receive an R should be given a week to make the proper changes. If the requested changes are made, then the group's poster grade should be changed to a C.

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