



Supporting Military Families Through  
Research and Outreach

# Positive Social Norms

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Developed in Collaboration with the Department of Defense's Office of Family Policy, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture under Award No. 2009-48667-05833.



## Positive Social Norms

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### Introduction

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High-quality youth development programs provide an ideal opportunity to design activities that foster pro-social behaviors and help young people integrate positive social norms into other realms of their life (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Positive social norms are the ways in which things are done, rules for behaviors, values, and obligations for service. Attaining positive rather than negative norms assures optimal development in youth that can assist youth to gain the competencies they need to become economically self-sufficient and civically engaged, and become healthy adults with positive social relationships (Gambone & Connell, 2004; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005).

### Research Overview

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Young people move between multiple social groups, such as family, school, peer groups, team sports, extra-curricular clubs, and faith-based organizations, and require an understanding of appropriate norms and the skills to navigate fluidly between different groups. Through the development of positive social norms, youth learn how to behave appropriately in the variety of situations they encounter each day. Positive youth development programs offer young people a variety of supervised growth-promoting activities outside of school (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These programs develop responsibility, cultural competencies, and social capital (Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004).

Children and youth develop behavioral and social patterns based on their relationship with others. The patterns established and norms learned affect all aspects of a young person's development, including academic achievement and school performance (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). The influence of parents is most apparent in very young children. As young people grow, their circle of influence grows to include factors beyond the family that include peers, school, community and society as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Stormshak and Webster-Stratton (1999) have shown children as young as ages 4-7 learn patterns of interaction in the context of parent-child relationships and then transfer those behaviors to other close relationships and later into communities. In children as early as age 5, research has shown children reveal less and less liking for in-group members who do not conform to in-group norms (Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005). Thus, children develop early on a clear understanding of social norms and expected and acceptable forms of behavior.

American youth spend a significant amount of their waking hours in schools, which provide a critical setting for development (Smith, Boutte, Zigler, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). Schools act as a formative setting where the relationships between adults and students establish a social norm model for children (Rosenberg, 2002). These models set the norms for behavior that youth see and emulate in the other facets of their lives. For example, middle school students who perceive their teachers to be supportive are more motivated to perform better and achieve more in school (Wentzel, 1999). It is the perceptions youth have that are most significant and influence their understanding of normative behavior, both positively and negatively, as well as the various relationships they have that help them form their identity (Ungar, 2004).



The influence of peers is especially strong during adolescence (Park, 2004). Therefore, when youth work together in group settings, they acquire skills and abilities through the modeling of others (Rosenberg, 2002). While peers are of great influence, there is a growing body of research that underscores the important role that supportive, attentive, and caring adults can play as models for youth (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Supportive adult role models are critical to the setting of positive social norms to help young people acquire the skills needed for successful adulthood.

Youth develop planning and problem-solving skills, persistence, and confidence in their abilities through participation in well-structured out-of-school activities. Furthermore, norms established by the group are critical, and youth development programs need to be designed to foster intentionally pro-social norms (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). It is the *intentionality* of these programs that foster the development of positive norms or expectations of behavior.

Every culture or society is tasked with preparing youth for positive, productive adulthood (Murphey, Lamonda, Carney, & Duncan, 2004). As part of the process of preparing a young person for adulthood, youth need opportunities to learn acceptable norms of behavior. Youth with a sophisticated understanding of social norms have the skills to function successfully within the society and the ability to move through a variety of environments.

## Practical Application

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### ***When thinking about positive social norms, organizational leadership should consider:***

*How as youth development professionals do we create environments that communicate the expectations of our programs to youth in a clear and consistent way?*

- Eccles and Gootman (2002) note the need for appropriate structure where expectations are set and clear boundaries are given. Those limitations can provide young people with a sense of security. They suggest the following:
  - Engage youth in open conversations about the norms they would like established and the expectations they have for others. These could include use of appropriate language, being on time, supporting all members, telling the truth, full participation, and being responsible. Expectations can become the rules of an organization, and in particular, incorporate the mores and the cultural values that are important to the group that might be otherwise unspoken.
  - Norms or expectations should be posted for everyone to follow and youth can then become part of the enforcement of the rules.
  - When youth are involved in the creation of norms they are more likely to follow them and encourage others to do so as well.
  - Organizational leadership must intentionally assure that the group creates positive opportunities and venues in which to develop.



*How do we as youth development professionals help diverse youth gain the skills needed to successfully meet our programmatic norms?*

- Young people come to organizations and programs with various skills and abilities and bring with them individual cultural and social identities. Creating the appropriate environment for inclusion is paramount for success in any youth development organization.
- Skill building, including the opportunity to establish positive social norms, must be intentional. Program staff can assist by helping the group focus on a specific goal and facilitating how the group will work together to reach it.
- Youth development organizations must encourage and support youth leadership and voice. Adults work as guides rather than leaders in the organization. They impart helpful skills and implementing programs that help young people handle the stressors of their busy lives (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004).
- These skills are not evident without open discussions with youth about what they want to learn.
- Through these discussions, youth development professionals can ascertain a variety of skill building activities.

## Summary

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Youth development programs that foster a clear understanding of positive social norms, contribute to the creation of positive, productive citizens (Murphey et al., 2004). Youth develop positive social norms from the social support, role modeling and opportunities to develop new skills, through mentoring relationships (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), and cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control from well run programs (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). As youth spend more time in groups with positive social norms, the more likely they will be to integrate positive norms into their behaviors and in the long-term achieve greater life satisfaction and less-likely to partake in risky behaviors (Mahoney et al., 2004).

By creating intentional programs that meet the collaborative needs of the group, and involving youth in every aspect of the program, youth will gain self-esteem. It is through these programs that youth have the opportunity to reach their full potential.



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