

School Health

P R O F E S S I O N A L

AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL RESOURCE FOR SCHOOL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Volume 9, Number 10

May 29, 2003

Turn Peer Pressure to Your Advantage

Want your students to avoid risky behaviors including smoking, alcohol and sex? Instead of telling them what not to do, try telling them that most everyone else is doing not it either. That's the theory behind a risk behavior reduction strategy movement that started on college campuses in the 1990s and is now moving down the educational ladder to high schools, middle schools and even elementary schools.

It's called social norming and it's still relatively rare to see it used anywhere but on college campuses, but H. Wesley Perkins, an early advocate of the strategy and a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, says it's a strategy that can work at the lower grade levels.

"The fundamental principal is

based on the simple fact that students at every age level grossly misperceive what the norm is among peers. They grossly overestimate the risk behaviors and substance use and the permissiveness of their peers. If I think most of my high school peers are going out and drinking on the weekend and I think most of my peers smoke and use illicit drugs, it creates pressure on me because peers are the most important influence on me," he explains.

Starting as early as 5th and 6th grade peers become increasingly influential.

"The influence of parents steadily goes down so that peers become more influential by the time we get to the middle of high school, if not the beginning of high school," Perkins says.

Mix that influence with the misperception that "everyone is doing it" and students who ambivalent about risk-taking may feel pressured to take risks and the students who are permissive risk-takers are given license to go ahead and take risks by their own misperception that everyone is like them," he adds. "It's a reign of error."

The Intervention

So how do you turn peer pressure into a health education advantage?

continued on page 2

IN THIS ISSUE

<i>Department of Ed Has Crisis Planning Guide.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Schools Shouldn't Force Students to Take Drugs, Bill Says.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>FDA Approves New Asthma Drug.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Two Hours' Patching Works Well for Amblyopia.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>More CDC SARS Guidance for Schools.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Resources for: Promoting Physical Activity; Controlling Blood Pressure; Sexuality Education and ADHD...7</i>	
<i>Conferences and Seminars.....</i>	<i>8</i>

Turn Peer Pressure to Your Advantage

continued from page 1

By measuring the actual occurrence of risk behaviors and pointing out that most people aren't doing "it"—whether "it" is smoking, drinking, having sex, driving without a seatbelt or skipping school.

For instance, if you wanted to reduce tobacco use in your middle school, you'd first survey the student body to find out how many kids smoke and how often. It's critical, he adds, that your data are credible and that students trust you're telling the truth about the results.

"If you're talking about a middle school or a high school population, between 75% and 90% of the students never use tobacco," says Perkins. But when you ask the students what proportion of students smoke, you'll like find them thinking the opposite—that 75% to 90% of students are using tobacco. "You'll have a range of perceptions but the majority will think the majority of their peers use tobacco and that creates a pressure for them to use tobacco," he explains.

"The very next step is to get the truth out in terms of positive information. There are a variety of ways to get this message out. There's print media telling them not that 25% of them smoke, but that 75% of them do not smoke, or that 95% of them do not smoke in middle school," Perkins says.

"Mention these data to new 9th or 6th graders who are trying to figure out the norms. They have wild misperceptions so giving them the

information in orientation sessions can be important," he adds.

The idea that health education should focus on what's normative, rather than on the risks involved in unhealthy behavior, is a paradigm shift for many health educators, Perkins says. "The majority of students are not a problem and let's use that majority as an engine of change. It can take time to make that conversion in your thinking. Let's not tell the students what they should do, let's give them true information about their true peer healthy norms," he says.

Help Getting Started

If you'd like to try a social norming project in your middle school, you can start by visiting the Hobart Alcohol Education project's Web site (<http://alcohol.hws.edu>). There, you'll find a sample survey that could be used in middle or high schools.

You'll also find a link to order Perkins' new book, *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, and Clinicians* (cost \$45) and links to reference works on social norms.

Both the Web site and the book have examples of print media messages you can use to publicize your study results.

While most social norming projects have been run at colleges, that's not because the strategy

works better or is easier with higher education audiences. "It's been done there primarily because that's where the researchers are and we

were working in our own back yard with college students. You'll find the strategy will work great with younger age groups among whom

abstinence is the norm and the book provides chapters with examples in younger student populations too," he promises.