



# Promoting Positive Community Norms

*A Supplement to CDC's Essentials for Childhood:  
Steps to Create Safe, Stable, Nurturing  
Relationships and Environments*

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control  
Division of Violence Prevention





This guide provides information about creating a context for increasing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children and families by promoting positive community norms. The key aim is to provide prevention leaders one way of learning about the power of positive community norms, the importance of understanding the difference between actual and perceived norms, and the ways they can grow positive norms in their communities.

## The Power of Promoting Positive Community Norms

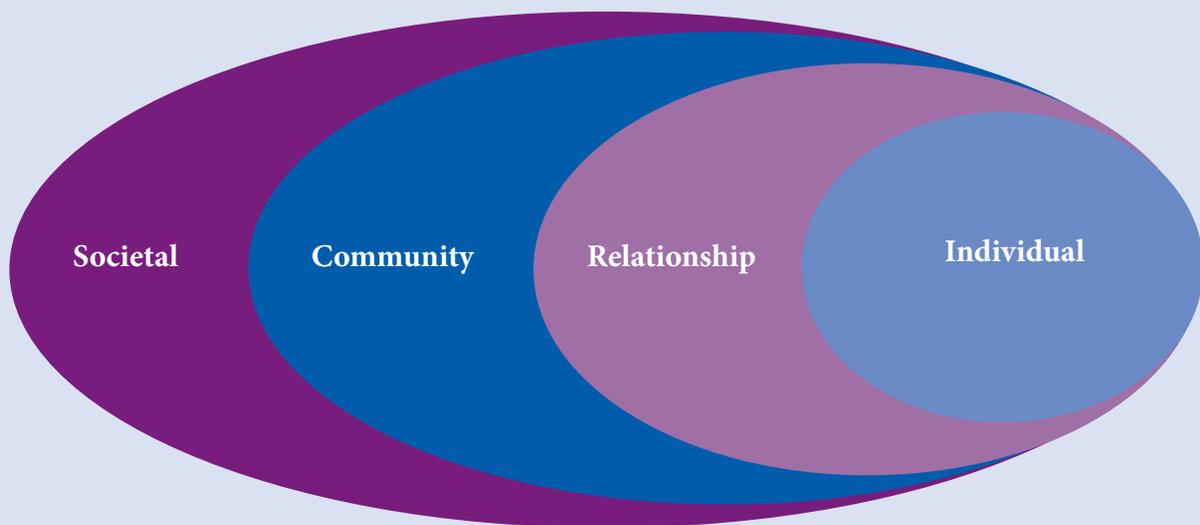
Recognizing safe, stable, nurturing relationships (SSNRs) and environments as essentials for childhood provides a new and exciting shift in the prevention of child maltreatment. This focus on healthy relationships moves beyond focusing on reducing risk. To be successful in increasing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments in our communities, we will need broad engagement with not just parents and primary caregivers, but with all those who provide such relationships with children (teachers, day care providers, and coaches), as well as those in decision-making positions (healthcare providers, school principals, and elected officials). To foster broad engagement and adoption, it is critical to establish a context in our communities that supports safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

One way to think about community context is by examining norms. Norms are defined as those values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors shared by most people in a “group.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, norms are what most people value, believe, and do. The group could be a physical community (like a town or county), students within a school, employees of an organization or workplace, people linked by a common experience (such as first-time parents), or any other affiliation that allows individuals to establish a group identity.

Often, a group’s norms align with child well-being. For example, if survey data show that most people in the community recognize the importance of early childhood education and believe it should be readily available in their community, then such support is the ‘normative’ attitude or the community norm. Early childhood education is expected in the community and this support might also be expressed in perceptions, language, voting behavior, and public conversations. This community norm about early education is an example of a positive norm because it is associated with improved health and safety. For example, in preventing child maltreatment, positive norms may include valuing children as special members of our community, using age-appropriate discipline, providing engaging activities and interaction, supporting public investment in quality day care services, and the like. There are many positive norms that are associated with improving child well-being.

To foster a broad context in support of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, it is helpful to increase positive norms within our communities: among individuals, families and peers; workplaces, schools, and community organizations; local governments and entities; and state organizations. While it may seem daunting, there is tremendous opportunity to embed support for safe, stable, nurturing relationships in a community’s culture by strengthening positive norms across these different levels of community systems known as the social ecology. (Figure 1) Prevention strategies should include a continuum of activities that address multiple levels of the social ecological model. These activities should be developmentally appropriate and conducted across the lifespan. This approach is more likely to sustain prevention efforts over time than any single intervention.

**Figure 1 The Social Ecological Model for Violence Prevention**



Through years of research and engagement in community-based projects, prevention leaders have learned the importance of promoting positive community norms. This approach is founded on the principle that the solutions to issues such as preventing child maltreatment exist in our communities. Such a belief establishes hope for the future and thereby creates energy for engagement for local practitioners. Promoting positive community norms does not deny or minimize the very serious and prevalent issues of child maltreatment, but instead promotes hope from a strength-based orientation. It is through this combination of concern and hope that communities can do the work of growing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. Creating a context of positive norms matters because it establishes an expectation and acceptance of healthy attitudes, behaviors, programs, and policies. Momentum for positive change grows when more people in a community recognize that the norms of people around them support such change.

## Perceptions Matter

Thus far, we have discussed actual norms—the actual values, beliefs, attitudes or behaviors shared by most members of a group. But it is essential to recognize that positive norms are often misperceived. Therefore, it is important to examine both actual norms and the perception of norms, or perceived norms.

Perceived norms are what individuals think are the actual norms of a group of people. For example, research involving parents and their protective behaviors with adolescent children found that most parents (86 percent) always knew when their teenage children did not come home on time. Among these parents, there was a norm of parental monitoring. However, this norm was not accurately perceived. In fact, when asked their belief about this behavior for other parents, only 6 percent of these same parents thought this behavior was the norm.<sup>2</sup> Misperceptions of norms occur not only for norms about behaviors but also norms about beliefs (see box on page 5 for more examples of actual and perceived norms).



## Examples of Survey Results of Actual and Perceived Norms

Among parents in Montana, when asked about school truancy: 60% of parents surveyed said they would be extremely concerned if their teen skipped school one or two times during the semester (actual norm); however, only 15% of these same respondents thought that typical Montana parents of teens would be extremely concerned (perceived norm). (Source: Montana Parent Norms Survey, 2000, n = 787.)

Among adults in Wyoming, 75% reported they strongly agreed that adults who supply alcohol to youth under age 21 in violation of Wyoming law should be prosecuted (actual norm); however, only 22% perceived that MOST Wyoming adults would strongly agree (perceived norm). (Source: Wyoming PCN 2008 Community Survey Results, n=4659.)

Among adults in Idaho, 82% reported they had NOT driven a motor vehicle within two hours after drinking alcohol in the past 60 days (actual norm); however, 95% perceived that MOST Idaho adults had driven after drinking (perceived norm). (Source: Idaho 2011 PCN Community Survey, n=553.)

Among parents of high school students in Minnesota, 92% of parents responded that they did not allow their child to drink alcohol (actual norm); however, 84% of parents who responded perceived most parents of students in their child's school allowed their children to drink (perceived norm). (Source: Minnesota PCN 2010 Parent Survey, n=274.)

Research shows that perceptions of norms can be strong predictors of behavior. Experiments have shown that perceived norms influence a wide variety of behaviors including high risk drinking,<sup>3</sup> tobacco usage,<sup>4</sup> impaired driving,<sup>5</sup> home electrical usage,<sup>6</sup> bullying,<sup>7</sup> and even the use of sunscreen.<sup>8</sup> However, perceived norms often remain hidden because we do not ask the right questions to measure them.

Both actual and perceived norms are important. A number of psychosocial theories predicting individual behavior recognize that perceived norms can influence the decisions of individuals within that group. We are social beings who look for cues in our environments about how to think, act, and belong. One way we search for these cues is by looking to the opinions and behaviors of others, as well as those expressed in the media. Therefore, even if the norm within a group aligns with improved health and safety (such as using age-appropriate discipline), if parents misperceive the norm and believe that most people do not use age-appropriate discipline, those parents may be more likely to engage in similar behavior.

Normative misperceptions may not only create risk for engaging in unhealthy behaviors, but they can also inhibit protective practices across the social ecology. For example, if key leaders perceive that most of the members of their community oppose implementation of a new program, the leaders may be less likely to support the program themselves, even if most people actually do support the program. Correcting this misperception could be a critical step in fostering the adoption of the new program.

Therefore, the work of promoting positive community norms to create a context supportive of safe, stable, nurturing relationships involves more than just focusing on actual norms; it must also include correcting misperceptions of norms. These normative misperceptions are pervasive across the social ecology and influence a wide variety of behaviors, both risky and protective. For the community leader seeking to promote positive community norms to support safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, understanding the roles of accurate perceptions and misperceptions is critical. Strategies to grow positive community norms are explored in the next section.

## Seven Steps for Promoting Positive community Norms

The work of promoting positive community norms can be daunting. While a high percentage of people in a community may agree with supporting child well-being and reducing child maltreatment, their misperceptions about the norms of their community (and of specific groups within the community) can be very strongly held and can inhibit progress. Challenging misperceptions of norms is really about challenging people's core assumptions. And when we challenge people's core assumptions, they may become anxious and appear resistant.

Research on positive community norms informed the development of a seven-step process to grow positive community norms at state and community levels.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, each community's journey is unique, and there is still much to learn through ongoing research. Development of these seven steps has continued to evolve with different projects and issues. While these steps are presented as if they are linear, many of them will overlap and, in fact, they will eventually loop back to the beginning in a cyclical process.



## Step 1. Planning, Engaging, and Educating

Any comprehensive effort to grow positive community norms should be well thought out, engage the necessary partners, and receive appropriate resources. While we all become excited to get into the work, conducting careful planning and engaging partners and stakeholders is part of the work. Our experience has shown that of all the steps, Step 1 can be most predictive of successful efforts. Critical activities include carefully developing operating principles; clarifying purpose; identifying, recruiting, and educating key partners; and establishing goals, focus audiences, and timelines.

In the case of creating a context to grow safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, Step 1 involves assembling a diverse coalition of community members representing a wide variety of businesses, government, and organizational sectors. This coalition needs to establish clear principles for how they will operate, clarify their purpose, and identify resources. In some cases, this effort might take several months or even a year.

## Step 2. Assess Norms

Each of the many groups involved across the social ecology have common and unique values, beliefs, and behaviors. An assessment of the actual and perceived norms amongst different community groups (across the social ecology) will reveal opportunities to establish a common understanding of existing positive norms as well as identify opportunities that need to be addressed. A variety of techniques may be used to achieve this assessment including surveys, observational studies, focus groups, reviewing archival data, and epidemiological studies. It is critical to recognize the difference between actual and perceived norms.

A coalition growing safe, stable, nurturing relationships would benefit from gathering a wide variety of data about child maltreatment agencies and existing programs in their community. Interviews with various key leaders may help the coalition better understand how child maltreatment and the role of safe, stable, nurturing relationships are perceived in their community. For example, leaders may believe that child maltreatment is very common among certain sub-populations in their community and that there is little that can be done about so large a problem. Others may believe that child maltreatment is the sole responsibility of parents and that there is little that can be done outside of “fixing” families.

## Step 3. Establish a Common Understanding and Prioritize Opportunities

The assessment of the norms among the many groups across the social ecology will reveal a better understanding of how the issue and norms are perceived. Establishing a common understanding will help foster engagement among and between the various groups by sharing common language and values. Furthermore, the assessment will reveal critical gaps in beliefs and behaviors which will inform the selection of strategies to address these gaps. The assessment may reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of child maltreatment issues, child development, or skills for fostering safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. It may reveal significant misperceptions about norms in the community. It may reveal a critical lack of resources. Sharing data about these gaps with the different audiences is an important step in building a supportive context.

For example, a community survey reveals very strong norms for caring about children and public investment in after school programs and child care resources. However, upon careful review of interview notes, the coalition learns that leaders and community members perceive that some parents are not engaged with their children because they don't care or are being irresponsible when in fact many are working multiple jobs. Using the strong norms revealed in the survey, the coalition seeks to clarify misunderstandings and transform how the leaders and the community view after-school programs and child care resources.



#### Step 4. Develop a Portfolio of Strategies

Based on the opportunities identified in Step 3, a variety of strategies can be identified that are appropriate for different levels of the social ecology. These strategies should be aligned with the common understanding developed in Step 3. These various strategies will form a portfolio. In some cases, strategies may involve communication efforts to close normative gaps. These communication efforts may be formal media campaigns, focused conversations, or education programs. It is important to recognize that there is no one strategy that will close all gaps and work for all groups across the social ecology. A key task will be to prioritize efforts and recognize the limitations of available resources. The work of closing gaps and correcting misperceptions takes time and concentrated effort. It may be much more effective in the long-term to narrow the initial focus and concentrate resources, than to do it all and end up with an intervention that is “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

For example, upon careful review and discussion with their community, a coalition elects to focus its limited resources and time on promoting affordable child care options co-located with major employers. They develop educational resources about reduced turn-over among employees, fewer missed work days, and enhanced recruiting opportunities. They build on the community's strong positive norms in support of children to establish a context for their conversations with local employers.

#### Step 5. Pilot Test, Select and Refine

To make the best use of limited resources and optimize outcomes, the strategies should be pilot-tested, selected, and refined before they are implemented community-wide. This step involves extensive testing as well as listening and demonstration projects implemented with attention to cultural sensitivities. Future refining of strategies is anticipated and planned for in work timelines. The work of changing misperceptions is complex, and community prevention leaders are often limited by their own misperceptions. Being open to change and learning is critical.

Following our on-going example, the local coalition schedules a meeting with local business leaders. Several members of the coalition participate in the presentation and dialog. They do so in a spirit of learning—truly interested in how the business leader sees the issue. Based on their experience, they refine their presentation, they seek additional data to answer the business leader's questions, and they create sample organizational practices that businesses could use such as providing affordable child care options to employees.





## Step 6. Implement Portfolio of Strategies

Once strategies are pilot-tested and refined, they can be implemented broadly with ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Based upon resource availability, the portfolio may be implemented in phases or stages. Leaders can play a strong role in supporting implementation and in fostering integration with existing practices and systems. During implementation, the next “layer” of misperceptions is often revealed. These additional misperceptions can be the focus of future efforts at shaping context for promoting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

After refining their presentation and resources, the local coalition trains several members so that others can approach businesses. They develop a press release and work with the local newspaper and media agencies to promote their ideas. They provide presentations at several Chamber of Commerce meetings as well as other local community organizations. They expand their network to include members of faith communities to see how they can assist as well.

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Improving the well-being of kids and families is something over 70% of Wisconsinites agree on. So let's do what it takes to make Wisconsin a safe, stable, nurturing place for every kid. Because we're all in this together.

WISCONSIN'S IN IT FOR KIDS | [INITORKIDS.ORG](http://INITORKIDS.ORG)

This ad is from the 2014 *Wisconsin's In It for Kids Campaign* focused on growing positive norms to increase safe, stable, nurturing environments. It is based upon formative research and stakeholder input extending over a year. This is the first ad for the campaign and establishes a common-values platform for future efforts. The campaign's communications strategy includes print, radio, billboards, and social media.

## Step 7. Evaluate Effectiveness and Future Needs

Ongoing evaluation is important in order to increase the effectiveness of implementation and inform future needs. Critical questions to be asked include what norms changed and how context was transformed. The process of evaluation occurs with every cycle through the steps. By comparing outcomes to baseline data, new normative issues are revealed to guide next efforts.

The local coalition creates a community map of businesses and child care facilities. They strive to keep the map current and promote businesses that establish or partner with child care facilities in the local newspaper. They celebrate their successes and continue to follow up with businesses who may be interested.



### Tips For Community Leaders

1. **Focus on concern and hope.** Child maltreatment is a very serious and challenging topic. People need a sense of hope that their community can make a difference.
2. **Understand your community's positive norms and misperceptions before jumping to solutions.** Your community has many positive norms; however, these are often misunderstood. Taking the time to understand first will help you later.
3. **Establish a common understanding by correcting misperceptions.** Our perceptions are our impression of the world around us. Our perceptions create our context. Correcting misperceptions and clarifying existing positive norms create a context to move forward.
4. **Be effective by narrowing your efforts to address the best strategies for your community.** By spending the time to understand your community and its best opportunities to grow safe, stable, nurturing relationships, you can narrow your focus and be more effective.
5. **Listen and learn.** We must listen and learn from our own community and from what other communities are doing. The science will constantly shed new light on how best to do our work. We must embrace ongoing learning.
6. **Don't be afraid to challenge misperceptions.** Challenging misperceptions takes courage. However, proactively helping our community overcome misperceptions will lead us to a better future.
7. **Celebrate the successes. Celebrate as positive norms grow.** This work is hard and takes time. We must invest in rejuvenating ourselves and others. Don't forget to connect with the passion of serving our community and our community's children.

## The Positive Community Norms Journey Ahead

Moving beyond only focusing on reducing risk and recognizing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments as essentials for childhood provides a new, exciting and even transformational shift in the prevention of child maltreatment. This document provides information about creating a context for this prevention work by promoting positive community norms. By understanding the difference between actual and perceived norms and learning strategies to grow positive norms in their communities, prevention leaders can be more effective. This work is a cyclical and expanding process. As we succeed in promoting a positive context and measuring increases in safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, we will discover new gaps and misperceptions that must be addressed. As we strive to improve child wellbeing we must remember that creating context takes time, but the rewards of healthier children and families are worth our efforts.

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