



# Science, Kids, and Alcohol

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## Why Kids Drink— The Influence of Social Norms

**William B. Hansen, PhD**  
Tanglewood Research, Inc.  
Greensboro, North Carolina

Social norms are standards or guides that define correct and incorrect behavior in a given situation. Norms embody sentiments that citizens within a given culture hold about what is proper and appropriate. Although there is no law that says we must shake hands when introduced to someone, most of us do because that is the norm in American culture. In other cultures this same behavior is considered rude.

Norms are reflected in our beliefs about what “most people like us do,” and these beliefs have a strong impact on our behavior. But what does this all have to do with alcohol use among children and young adolescents?

If you ask 6th-graders what proportion of 6th-graders they believe drink, the average answer will be approximately “one-half” — well above the actual figure of 20 percent. Students who overestimate the proportion of drinkers are more likely to drink compared with those students who have correct or low estimates of drinking levels. In other words, students’ drinking behavior is shaped by their normative beliefs — beliefs that are often wrong.

If normative beliefs are important in shaping alcohol use, and if these beliefs are often incorrect and exaggerated, then it follows that we can reduce alcohol use through strategies that correct erroneous normative beliefs.

Consider a program that gathers data on actual alcohol use rates from 7th graders. These data are then fed back to students and used in debates and discussions about the appropriateness of alcohol use among people their age. A study of the effects of

such a program showed significant reductions in alcohol use, drunkenness, and alcohol-related problems, such as fights, and getting into trouble at home or school. Youngsters in a comparison group that received instruction in resisting peer pressure increased their alcohol use as if there had been no instruction. It appears that the pressure to drink is literally inside the young person’s head, stemming from the pressure to conform to normative beliefs about alcohol use.

- The average 6th grader believes that half of his or her peers drink alcohol — well above the actual figure of 20 percent.
- Students who overestimate the proportion of drinkers are more likely to drink compared with those students who have correct or low estimates of drinking levels.
- The pressure to drink is literally inside the young person’s head, stemming from the pressure to conform to normative beliefs about alcohol use.

As a society, we do a fairly poor job of shaping children’s normative beliefs about alcohol. When we fail to make our expectations clear, when we tolerate alcohol sales to minors, when we are indifferent to the media messages children receive about drinking, or when we ourselves use or serve alcohol irresponsibly, we contribute to children’s erroneous beliefs about drinking. Current research is exploring methods for altering normative beliefs about alcohol both in the classroom and in the larger community.

Hansen WB, Graham JW. 1991. Preventing alcohol, marijuana, and cigarette use among adolescents: peer pressure resistance training versus establishing conservative norms. *Prev Med* 20(3): 414-430.

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