

Guide to social norming on social media



Social norms guide our behavior, expectations, and beliefs.¹ They're what we do, what we believe others do, and what we think others expect us to do.²

One of our most important social norms? Vaccination! But before we get into vaccines and social norms, let's briefly review the science of social norming. For the purposes of this guide, we are focusing on five kinds of social norms.

TYPE	DEFINITION	EXPLANATION	EXAMPLE
Descriptive social norms^{3,4}	The things we do.	We do these things because it's what is typical in our culture. We think this is what most people actually do or do not do.	"I will get my kid vaccinated because the other kids at school are vaccinated."
Prescriptive/Injunctive social norms^{4,5,6}	The things we think we should do.	We think these behaviors are desired and approved of in our culture.	"Everyone I know approves of vaccination. I do too."
Proscriptive social norms⁷	The things we think people should not do.	We think these behaviors are undesirable.	"I will not let unvaccinated people come to visit our new baby."
Moral social norms¹	What we think is the right thing to do.	People choose to engage in these behaviors because they think it is a moral thing, not because they were expected to.	"I vaccinate my child to protect them and protect those around them because it's the right thing to do."
Subjective social norms^{7,8}	What behaviors we think our peers or people we admire would do.	People choose to engage in behaviors because they are motivated by social influence.	"My parents vaccinated all of us. What they think is important to me. It's part of why I vaccinate my child."

¹ Unicef: <https://www.unicef.org/media/111061/file/Social-norms-definitions-2021.pdf>

² United States Agency for International Development: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZPZK.pdf

³ American Psychological Association: <https://dictionary.apa.org/descriptive-norm>

⁴ National Social Norms Center: <https://socialnorms.org/faqs/>

⁵ American Psychological Association: <https://dictionary.apa.org/injunctive-norm>

⁶ One Earth: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590332223001483>

⁷ Youth Power: https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/files/resources/Mackie_2014_What%20are%20Social%20Norms.pdf

⁸ American Psychological Association: <https://dictionary.apa.org/subjective-norm>

Vaccination is a social norm

So why does this matter to vaccination? **More than 9 out of 10 children are receiving their recommended vaccines in the United States.**⁹ It's not just parents. Medical, public health, and child health experts approve of on-time immunization of all children. This includes the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Nursing Association, and the March of Dimes, to name a few.

Child caregivers, community groups, and religious leaders also expect and rely on parents to vaccinate their kids for the collective good.¹⁰

Our communities may be diverse, but they agree on the value of vaccination. And for good reason: Vaccines save lives by protecting us from serious diseases.¹¹

Vaccination social norms have been attacked in recent years

Although most parents vaccinate their kids, a small yet vocal minority has led some to question it.⁹ Because this minority's voice is so loud, parents may incorrectly think support for vaccines has decreased.

Sociologists call this "pluralistic ignorance" because people have a misconception about what the majority believes.¹²

In other words, someone might think vaccinating their kids is important, but they do not hear other parents talk about doing it, so they may mistakenly think that fewer parents are vaccinating their kids than actually are.

This is where social norms come into play: We can correct the false idea that parents aren't vaccinating their children by using facts, stories, and emotional pleas to explain vaccine safety and build vaccine confidence.

BENEFITS OF VACCINATION AS A SOCIAL NORM

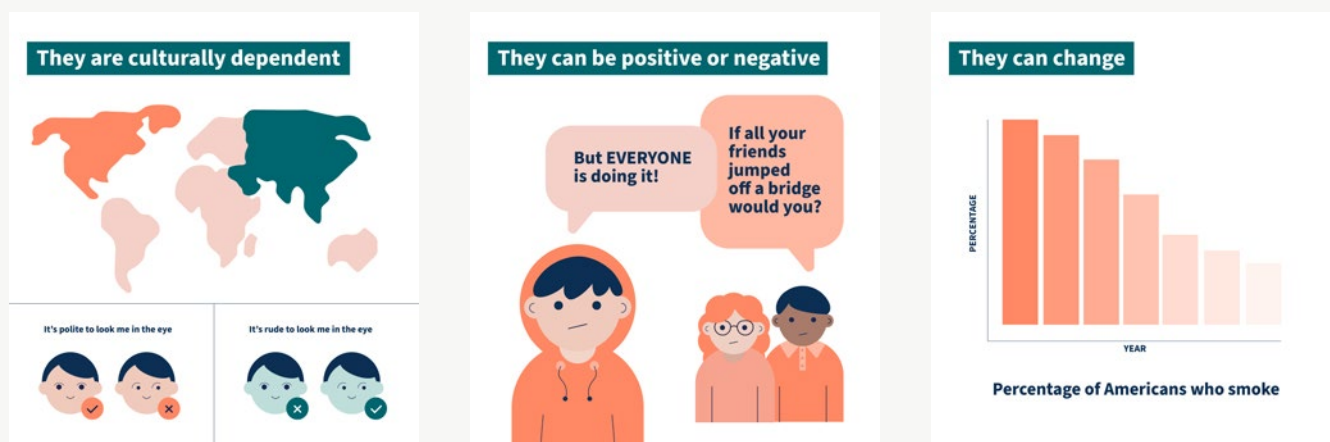
Routine vaccinations prevent kids from getting more than a dozen serious, and sometimes deadly, diseases.¹³ The benefits go far beyond health. They include ensuring children:

- **Can go to school.**
- **Don't miss important events.**
- **Can be with at-risk loved ones, like grandparents.**

Think about COVID-19 and how our world stopped. With vaccines, life started to return to normal.

Vaccines are powerful—this is why vaccination is a social norm.

There are also three important things to remember about social norms:



Social norms may not always be familiar to you. They may not always be positive. And most importantly, with work, we can change negative ones.

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7202a2.htm>

¹⁰ The Community Guide: <https://www.thecommunityguide.org/findings/vaccination-programs-schools-and-organized-child-care-centers.html>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: <https://www.hhs.gov/immunization/index.html>

¹² Psychological Science in the Public Interest: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100612451018>

¹³ CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/immunization-schedules/child-adolescent-age.html>

The role of social media in social norming

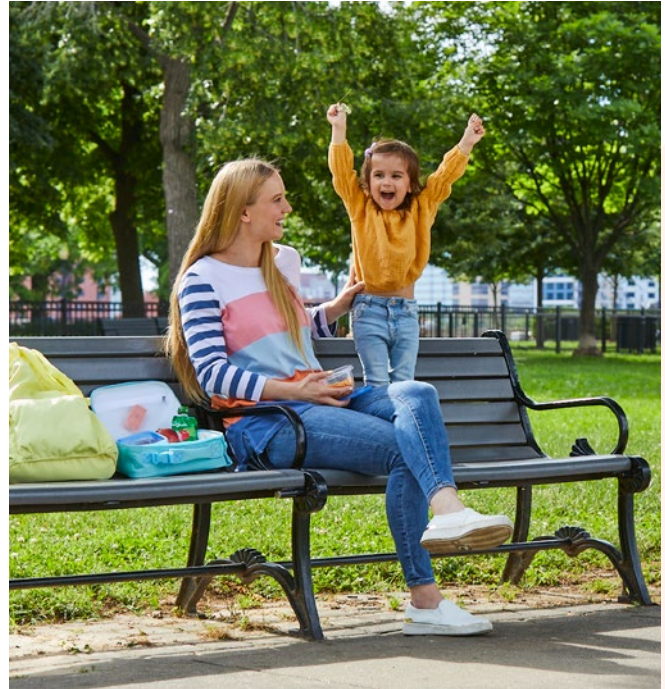
In recent years, social media has played a very large role in shaping social norms. Unfortunately, most of the normative behavior on social media has not been positive about vaccines. And many of us agree it's a problem. But where there are challenges, there are opportunities.

And here's the opportunity: **We can make vaccine advocacy a social norm.**

We can protect the social norms that are important to us. The ones that protect our children. The ones that help them grow up healthy.

When it comes to keeping kids healthy—ours or others—we must speak out. It's not only the right thing to do for our child, but for our community. There are real consequences when children are not fully protected from diseases we can prevent.

For vaccination, we have an opportunity to protect what we value and change beliefs by being vocal champions. And it's easier than you may think.

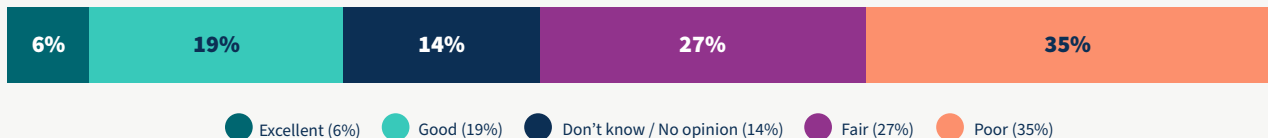


CURBING ANTI-VACCINE CONTENT

35% of the public think social media platforms are doing a poor job curbing anti-vaccine content.

A quarter of U.S. adults say social media companies are doing an “excellent” or “good” job preventing the spread of false COVID-19 vaccine information.

ALL ADULTS



Morning Consult. Poll conducted July 23-25, 2021, among U.S. adults, with a margin of error of +/-2%. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Use social media for social good

On social media, you can connect, inform, help, share, and more. In order to stop vaccine misinformation in its tracks and protect the vaccines that protect our kids, each of us must be vaccine champions and be vocal about why we support vaccines.

- **Be a change agent for good**

Tell your story and your purpose for sharing and reveal the real social norms. Make specific requests for people to join you in your effort by also sharing pro-vaccination content, including the facts, online.

- **Be vivid**

Personal details will make your posts more engaging and memorable. How can others feel your passion, see vaccination taking place, or learn something new?

- **Be yourself**

We share to tell people what we care about. It's rewarding to help others—especially other people who care about kids and keeping them healthy. So, be authentic and honest about why you care about vaccination.



- **Be visible**

Trust and engagement are built over time. People may need to see the same information more than once to truly see your point of view. Be sure to post often about the importance of vaccination as a social norm and our need to protect it.

- **Be social**

When you post, encourage others to do the same. If your friends or followers like a post, thank them. If they share your content, comment and let them know how much you enjoyed their post. Use your social media to connect and engage. These types of posts are popular with social media users:

- Short videos
- Infographics
- Interactive content (quizzes, polls, live web sessions)
- Heartwarming or inspirational stories and quotes
- Colorful and eye-catching images

- **Be aware of needle fears**

Please do not use images of needles in your posts. This can cause people with fears or phobias to react negatively to the thought of vaccines. You can use images of vaccine vials or, better yet, smiling people to get your message across.

Dealing with negativity

It's possible that while sharing about vaccines on social media, you will meet a skeptic, get negative comments, or even experience online bullying. The most important thing is to know what is okay and not okay on your social media.

For organizations, this means having clear codes of conduct posted on all social media platforms. For individuals, it means thinking about what the “lines in the sand” are for you and being clear with people if they cross them.

Regardless of what your lines in the sand are, always take the high road. Use these tips to respond gracefully.

- **Focus on facts, benefits, and stories**

When someone posts something that is untrue, avoid restating any falsities. This may backfire and people may be more likely to remember the myth instead of the fact. Emphasize the facts and then personalize the benefits that vaccines can give a child. People are rarely persuaded to change their behaviors with information, so it is also helpful to tell an engaging story.

- **Be responsive and kind**

We want people to get their questions answered about vaccines, so they can be confident in their decisions. If someone is skeptical, it's helpful to find their most important concern and respond with patience, empathy, and respect. Please do not label anyone as anti-vax or write off people who may not agree with you. While someone may have already made up their mind, others may be less sure and will find your responses helpful.

- **Correct misinformation and answer questions**

Although you cannot correct all myths, if you know information is false, it is important to correct it as soon as possible. If you need help with rumors or answering questions, visit [LetsGetRealAboutVaccines.org](https://www.LetsGetRealAboutVaccines.org) for credible answers.

- **Be balanced and cite sources**

Parents asked us for balanced information. When we talk about the health of our kids, we must be honest and acknowledge vaccine risks, as well as point out the risks of the disease the vaccine prevents. This doesn't mean giving air to myths, but rather making sure people have the right facts to make informed decisions. Citing credible sources helps back up your statements.

- **Do not dwell on anger**

If you experience angry reactions, be polite and factual. Anger drives viral sharing more than other emotions.

- **Disengage if you need to**

Sadly, some people may try to deliberately provoke you or others. Don't feed them. They are driven by the need for attention. Instead, you can post a polite response that the behavior is unacceptable and you are ending the conversation.



Stay safe and report crimes and abuse

If someone makes you feel afraid, it's important to detail this and report it. [Stopbullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) lists steps you can take for immediate action online.

You can also report crimes like a threat of violence, a hate crime, stalking, sexually explicit messages/photos, or a violation of privacy to the police.

Most social media sites flag improper content and want you to report abusive behavior. Use these links to get specific site information: [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com), [Snapchat](https://www.snapchat.com), [X](https://www.x.com), [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com), and [WhatsApp](https://www.whatsapp.com).

Sharing on social media

We are calling on you to share the facts and join us in correcting misinformation. We are also asking you to share what you value: a healthy child and the use of vaccines to protect them. Please use our resources to boost your impact.

- **Messages.** Find information on vaccine safety, effectiveness, and science. We also have messages about getting multiple vaccines at one time and why it's important to follow the routine immunization schedule.
- **Images and GIFs.** Get attention for your posts by including an image or GIF from our campaign. These items can also

help people process information more quickly!

- **Educational and engaging videos.** Our campaign highlights stories from real people. Use one or create one of your own to share.
- **Infographics.** Our infographics help draw attention and explain concepts.
- **Editorial calendar.** We have monthly social media content you can use to promote the campaign and help normalize vaccine conversations.

You can also share your own pictures, videos, and other content.

- **Add a call to action and link to us.** By encouraging others to engage with you or share your content, you can help spread the word. Examples include “Tag friends who vaccinate their kids” or “Please share if you agree.” Link to [LetsGetRealAboutVaccines.org](https://www.LetsGetRealAboutVaccines.org).



Together we can take back the conversation and ensure our children are protected by this important social norm!

