

# Montana Parent Norms Survey

**“Not My Little Angel”**

**Summary Findings from a Survey of Montana  
Parenting Behaviors and Perceptions  
Associated with Teen Substance Use**

**July 2000**



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**Montana Tobacco Use Prevention Program**

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## Executive Summary

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The Montana Social Norms Project would like to thank the parents who took the time to respond to our survey and take part in this landmark study in Montana. The high levels of participation in this survey are testament to the genuine concern most parents have for their children, and the role they play in advancing drug free lifestyles among Montana's young residents.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the Montana Department of Public Health & Human Services – Addictive and Mental Disorders Division for their foresight and support of the social norms marketing process and its application to promoting positive parenting behavior. The Montana Social Norms Project supports the goals of the Montana Inter-Agency Coordinating Council for State Prevention Programs – a state agency council responsible for integrating and improving the delivery of state-funded prevention practices.

Funding to support the Parent Norms Survey and the development of this report has been provided through grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Montana Parent Norms Survey was conceived and developed as part of an overall strategy to reduce substance use among Montana teens and young adults. Data from the survey is being used to develop social norms messages and materials as part of an overall marketing campaign to reduce teen substance abuse.

The Montana Parent Norms Survey is an original effort to provide the research base for addressing the misperceptions associated with parental expectations and norms, and to strengthen existing positive and protective parenting behaviors. To our knowledge, it is the first time a survey has focused empirically on documenting the normative expectations, attitudes and actions of parents of teenagers in a population. Additional analyses are currently in progress that compares the perceptions parents hold of teen substance abuse norms, with reported norms found through other statewide measures. This survey found that with regard to certain behaviors, parents tend to believe that their teens are not representative of typical Montana teenagers — hence the subtitle “*Not My Little Angel.*”

A total of 787 randomly selected households throughout Montana participated in the survey. Each parent participant was asked 54 questions about their relationship with their teenager, ages 12 through 17 years. The content of some of the questions focused on family rules and parental knowledge of their teen’s non-use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. Parents were asked how much influence they have on their teens’ choices. Other questions looked at curfews and completion of schoolwork in the home.

In addition to questions about their own parenting behavior, we asked our respondents to think about the *typical* Montana parent. Our goal was to construct and compare two models. The first was the *actual* reported parenting norm, based on what the respondents stated about their own behavior. The second model was the *perceived* parenting norm, based on our respondents’ perception of what was typical of all Montana parents.

The phrase “actual social norm” is used to describe how the majority of parents report how they behave toward and interact with their teenagers. “Perceived social norm” is how parents think the majority of *typical* parents behave and interact with their teens. Invariably, our respondents thought they were more involved with and informed about their teens than the perceived norm they carried in their minds about the *typical Montana* parent. The reality is that parents are much more involved with their teenagers’ lives than they think is normal (typical) for other Montana parents. This research demonstrates that the actual social norm is more conservative than the perceived social norm.

These two models (actual social norms versus perceived social norms) were expanded to our respondents' knowledge and perceptions of teenagers' behavior. Some of the survey questions asked about the behavior of respondents' own teenagers, and other questions asked about respondents' perceptions of *typical* Montana teens' behavior. Again, the parent-reported behaviors of their teens were more conservative than the perceived social norm of *typical* teenagers.

Future research will examine the relationship between the findings of this study and the self-reported behavior of Montana teenagers. No teens were surveyed in this study, but other research has used Montana teens as respondents and our results will be compared to theirs.

Parent respondents expressed very strong concerns about their teenagers using alcohol, tobacco and marijuana. They also stated they had very solid, trusting relationships with their children and knew a lot about their behaviors. Montana families have clear rules and almost all parents have curfews in place for their teenagers.

However, without exception, when asked about typical Montana families — our respondents' perceived social norm was that typical parents were more lenient in the manner in which they raise their children than they themselves were. Parent respondents also thought that typical teenagers were more likely than their children to use tobacco, alcohol and marijuana.

The Montana Parent Norms Survey provides important insight into the misperceptions that exist in parenting behavior associated with teenage substance use. This information serves as the basis for structuring normative message campaigns to support parents in their role as primary caretakers through reducing misperceptions that exist among parents and reinforcing the positive actions (norms) already practiced by the majority of parents across the state.

Following are a number of key findings from the Parent Norms Survey.

### **Major Finding...**

**There is great disparity between how parents see themselves parenting, and how they perceive other parents raising their children. Montana parents see themselves as being more involved with their teens than they perceive typical parents to be. This pattern was illustrated time and again through the survey data, with a number of interesting misperceptions being reported.**

**(a) Parents report they have a great amount of influence over their teens' decisions to smoke cigarettes, use marijuana and/or drink alcohol.**

- *Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)*... fifty-eight percent (58%) report they have great influence over their teens' decisions to smoke and/or drink.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... however, only nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents believed that typical parents have great influence over their own teens' decisions to smoke and/or drink. Sixty-six percent (66%) believed that typical parents only had some influence.

**(b) Parents are setting curfews for their teens' involvement with activities outside the home.**

- *Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)*... nearly half (48%) report having a set curfew for their teen. Another forty-eight percent (48%) said they have curfews, but they are set each night depending on circumstances. Only four percent (4%) said their teens have great latitude or no curfew at all.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... twenty-five percent (25%) of the respondents believed typical Montana parents have set curfews for their teens. Forty-seven percent (47%) perceived the norm to be that typical parents have curfews, but the curfews are set each night depending on circumstances. There was greater disparity between parents' actual social norm and their perceived social norm in that twenty-eight percent (28%) of the respondents thought typical parents give their teens great latitude or no curfew constraints at all.

**(c) Parents indicated they know where their teens spend time outside the home.**

- *Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)*... fifty-seven percent (57%) report they always know where their teens are and whom they are with, when they are not home.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... only one percent (1%) of the respondents believed that typical parents always know where their teens are, although that was the actual social norm. Fifty-three percent (53%) thought that typical parents usually, but not always; know where their teens are.

**(d) Parents know when their teens do not come home on time.**

- *Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)*... eighty-six percent (86%) report they always know when their teens do not come home on time.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... only six percent (6%) of the respondents believed the typical-parent norm was that parents always know when their teens do not come home on time. The vast majority (70%) of the responding parents believed that typical parents usually, but not always, know when their teens do not come home.

**(e) Parents either always or usually know when their teens complete their school homework.**

- *Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)*... thirty-four percent (34%) indicated that they always know when their teens complete their homework. Forty-five percent (45%) say they usually know.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... one percent (1%) of the respondents believes that typical parents always know when their teens have completed their homework. Forty-nine percent (49%) perceived the social norm to be that typical parents usually, but not always, know when their teens have completed their school homework.

**(f) Parents know if their teens are skipping school.**

- *Parent Respondent (Actual Parent Norm)*... sixty-three percent (63%) report they would always know if their teens were skipping school.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... only thirteen percent (13%) of the responding parents believed that typical parents would always know if their teens were truant at school. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the parents perceived the social norm to be that the typical Montana teen's parents would usually know if their teen was truant.

**(g) Parents reported that their teens bring forward and discuss serious problems with them.**

- *Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)*... when asked if their teen would discuss a serious problem with them, twenty-one percent (21%) of respondents said that their teens would always do so. Another fifty-seven percent (57%) indicated that their teens would usually discuss serious problems with them.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... only one percent (1%) of the responding parents believed that typical teens would always discuss serious problems with their parents. Thirty percent (30%) thought that typical teens would usually talk to their parents about their serious problems. The majority (64%) perceived the norm to be that typical Montana teens only sometimes discuss serious problems with their parents.

**(h) Parents regularly discuss rules about alcohol and drug non-use with their teens.**

- *Parent Respondent (Actual Parent Norm)*... three-fourths (75%) of respondents reported that they discussed rules about alcohol and drug non-use with their teens during the previous three months.
- *Perceived Typical Parent Norm*... when respondents were asked what proportion of typical parents had discussed rules about alcohol and drug non-use with their teens, forty-two percent (42%) believed that between ten and thirty percent of typical parents had

talked to their teens. Forty-three percent (43%) thought that between forty and sixty percent of typical parents had talked with their teens about alcohol and drug non-use rules. Fifteen percent (15%) of parents said that between seventy and ninety percent of typical parents had talked to their teens about these rules in the previous three months.

**(i) Parents discuss rules and expectations regarding alcohol with their teens on a regular basis.**

- ***Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)***... during the month prior to the survey, forty-six percent (46%) of respondents had told their teens that they expect them not to drink. Seven percent (7%) told their teens never to try alcohol. Two percent (2%) said that a few drinks on special occasions would be all right. One percent (1%) said they told their teens to decide for themselves. Thirty-five percent (35%) had not talked to their teens about alcohol-related rules during the previous month.
- ***Perceived Typical Parent Norm***... when respondents were asked what alcohol-related rules typical Montana parents used, thirty-two percent (32%) thought typical parents expect their teens to not drink. Six percent (6%) believed that typical parents told their teens that they should never try alcohol. Ten percent (10%) perceived the social norm to be that typical parents told their teens a few drinks on special occasions would be all right. Four percent (4%) thought typical parents told their teens to decide for themselves. Forty-four percent (44%) thought that typical parents had not talked to their teens about alcohol rules during the previous month.

**(j) Parents believe their teens do not drink alcohol and drive afterward.**

- ***Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)***... ninety-five percent (95%) reported their teens had not driven after drinking alcohol during the past 30 days. Four percent (4%) said their teens had driven after drinking once or twice during the past month. One percent (1%) said their teens had driven after drinking three or more times during the past month.
- ***Perceived Typical Parent Norm***... only six percent (6%) of the respondents believed that typical teens never drove after drinking during the last 30 days. Thirty-eight percent (38%) thought the norm for typical Montana teens had been to drive after drinking one or two times during the past month. Twenty-five percent (25%) believed teens had driven after drinking three or four times and thirty-one percent (31%) believed they had driven after drinking five or more times. Clearly, the respondents perceived the social norm for typical Montana teens was to drink and drive at least once, if not more times, each month.

**(k) Parents report their teens use seatbelts nearly all of the time.**

- ***Parent Respondent (Actual Parent Norm)***... forty-four percent (44%) stated that their teens wore seatbelts 100% of the time during the previous month as a driver and passenger. Thirty-two percent (32%) reported their teens wore seatbelts between 70% and 99% of the time. Nineteen percent (19%) said their teens wore belts between 10% and 60% of the time. Five percent (5%) of parents think their teens never wear seat belts.

- **Perceived Typical Parent Norm...** only one percent (1%) of respondents believed that typical teens wore a seatbelt 100% of the time as a driver and passenger during the previous month. Thirty-six percent (36%) thought typical teens wore seatbelts between 70% and 99% of the time. Sixty-one percent (61%) believed that typical teens wore belts between 10% and 60% of the time. Two percent (2%) of the parents think that typical teens never wear seat belts.

**(l) Parents reported that they have very good-to-excellent relationships with their teens.**

- **Parent Respondents (Actual Parent Norm)...** when asked to describe their relationships with their teens, thirty-two percent (32%) said they had excellent relationships with their teens. Forty-eight percent (48%) said their relationships were very good; sixteen percent (16%) said their relationships were good; three percent (3%) said fair and one percent (1%) said poor.
- **Perceived Typical Parent Norm...** when asked to describe what they believed to be the relationships between typical Montana teens and their parents, less than one percent (1%) of the respondents believed that typical parents had an excellent relationship with their teen. Fourteen percent (14%) perceived that the typical parent-teen relationships were very good; sixty-three percent (63%) thought the norm was good; twenty-two percent (22%) thought fair; and one percent (1%) said that typical parents have poor relationships with their teens.

**Other Important Findings**

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**Parents are very-to-extremely concerned about their own teens’ use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana.**

- More than ninety percent (90%) of parent respondents would be extremely or very concerned if they found that their teens were drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or using marijuana.

**TABLE 1 - Summary of the Level of Parental Concern Regarding the Use of Substances by Their Teens**

<u>Level of Concern</u>	<b>Alcohol</b>	<b>Cigarettes</b>	<b>Marijuana</b>
<b>No Concern</b>	0	0	0
<b>Little Concern</b>	1%	2%	.05%
<b>Very Concerned</b>	7%	13%	3.5%
<b>Extremely Concerned</b>	92%	85%	96%

**Parents place partial responsibility for a teen’s starting to use alcohol, tobacco and/or marijuana on various factors.**

- On the average, sixteen percent (16%) of the respondents said that parents are most responsible for teens' uptake of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana.
- Parent respondents picked the teens’ friends forty percent (40%) of the time on the average.
- The teens themselves were picked as being the most responsible for their starting to use alcohol, tobacco and marijuana by twenty-five percent (25%) of the responding parents.

**TABLE 2 - Summary of Where Parents Place Responsibility for a Teen’s Starting to Use Alcohol, Tobacco and/or Marijuana**

<i>Responsibility rests with...</i>	<b>Alcohol</b>	<b>Cigarettes</b>	<b>Marijuana</b>
<b><i>Our Culture</i></b>	17%	11%	6%
<b><i>Older Teens</i></b>	6%	6%	10%
<b><i>Teen’s Friends</i></b>	33%	38%	48%
<b><i>Teen’s Parents</i></b>	18%	19%	11%
<b><i>Teens Themselves</i></b>	10%	25%	24%
<b><i>Don’t Know</i></b>	1%	1%	1%

**Most (86%) parents believe that allowing teenagers to drink in the home sends the wrong message and seventy-four percent (74%) never allow their teenagers, and their friends, to drink alcohol in the home.**

- Parent beliefs about allowing teenagers to drink alcohol at home, to reduce unsafe behavior like driving under the influence, was examined. Eighty-six percent (86%) of parent respondents agreed it was a bad practice. Only fourteen percent (14%) of respondents said they thought allowing teens to drink at home would help reduce risky behavior.
- When asked if they allow their teens to drink at home, even a small glass of wine or beer with dinner, seventy-four percent (74%) of parent respondents said that they did not. Twenty-five percent (25%) said they allow occasional drinking and one percent (1%) said they allow regular drinking.

## Additional Findings

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### Alcohol Use

- When asked if they would know if their teens drank alcohol without their permission, twenty-seven percent (27%) of parent respondents indicated they would always know and an additional fifty-two percent (52%) said they would usually know.
- When asked if their teens had used alcohol during the past 30 days, only ten percent (10%) of parent respondents said that they thought their teens had consumed alcohol.
- When asked to estimate the proportion of teenagers who are heavy drinkers (five or more drinks in a row during the past two weeks), parents reported that they believed that fifty-four percent (54%) of teens were not heavy drinkers. Parents thought that twenty-eight percent (28%) had drunk heavily 1 or 2 times during the past 2 weeks, and that eighteen percent (18%) had drunk heavily 3 or more times during the past 2 weeks.

### Tobacco Use

- Sixteen percent (16%) of respondents were certain, or fairly certain, that their teens had tried chewing tobacco, snuff or dip (at some point in their life). The respondents thought that on the average, forty-eight percent (48%) of Montana teens had tried chewing tobacco.
- Thirty-one percent (31%) of respondents were certain, or almost so, that their teens had tried at least one cigarette in their life. The respondents thought that on the average, sixty percent (60%) of Montana teens had tried smoking cigarettes.
- When asked if their teens had used tobacco during the past 30 days, only seven percent (7%) of parent respondents thought their teens had.
- Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the parent-respondent households have someone besides their teens who use tobacco.

### Marijuana Use

- Parent respondents perceived that an average of forty percent (40%) of all Montana teenagers had tried smoking marijuana at some point in their lives, and thus sixty percent (60%) had not tried it.

### Clear Family Rules Established

When asked if their family had clear rules:

- Eighty-three percent (83%) of respondents said they definitely have clear rules. Fifteen percent (15%) said they have somewhat clear rules. Two percent (2%) said they do not have clear rules.

### Access to a Car

- Forty-five percent (45%) of the parent-respondents' teens have their driver's licenses.
- Thirty-four percent (34%) of those teens who have driver's licenses have unlimited access to a car. Forty-six percent (46%) have somewhat limited access to a car. Twenty percent (20%) have restricted or very restricted access to a car.

### **Parent-Teen Communication**

- When asked if teenage boys or teenage girls are easier to talk to about the dangers of tobacco, alcohol and/or illegal drugs, parent respondents chose girls seventeen percent (17%) of the time and boys nine percent (9%). However the vast majority, seventy-four percent (74%) said there were no differences between the two.

### **Parent-Parent Communication**

- Forty-one percent (41%) of parent respondents reported that they have discussed frequently (frequently is self-defined) with their spouse, strategies for helping their teen understand and avoid the risks of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Forty-two percent (42%) reported that they had talked a few times with their spouse. Four percent (4%) reported that they had talked with their spouse maybe once. Seven percent (7%) reported that they haven't talked about it with their spouse. Six percent (6%) of respondents said there were no other parents helping to raise their teens.

## CONCLUSION

Disparity exists between actual parenting behavior and the perceptions parents have of typical parenting behavior of other Montana parents. In other words, there is a difference between the actual parenting social norm (what parents most commonly do) and the perceived social norm of *typical* parents (what they think typical parents commonly do). This pattern holds powerful implications for both the adoption and practice of healthy parenting behavior across Montana. Social normative theory provides an understanding of how the behavioral misperceptions of one's peer reference group can impact the behavior of individuals.

The process of social norms marketing provides a framework for displacing these misperceptions through communicating the "true" norms that exist within a reference or peer group. By clearly communicating the normative behavior of the group through high enough levels of message saturation, the commonly held misperceptions among the group begin to drop. If this communication is sustained and becomes the predominant view held by the majority of parents, corresponding behavioral changes should follow. However the rigor associated with any type of cultural change process should not be underestimated.

Patterns of misperception appear to hold true in Montana for parents of teens. It is plausible that targeted social norms media campaigns, composed of carefully developed and tested messages, can begin to reduce the misperceptions that exist in Montana. We believe a rigorous social norms campaign, delivered to parents of teenagers, provides a means to increase the number of parents practicing protective parenting skills for reducing teen substance use.