

Strand 1 | Health and Wellbeing

Learning Outcome 1.3:

Students should be able to examine social norms, attitudes and beliefs related to alcohol, tobacco/vaping and substance use

What is the important learning?

The purpose of Learning Outcome 1.3 is to develop students' critical awareness of the social norms, attitudes and beliefs that influence how we individually and as a society relate to alcohol, tobacco/vaping and substance use and to encourage values, norms, beliefs and attitudes that prevent alcohol and substance misuse. This learning outcome invites students to critique and question social norms, and especially those which are harmful or do not reflect behaviours that young people actually know to be healthy. Given evidence of increased cannabis use amongst 17/18 year olds,¹ a particular focus of learning should be on examining attitudes and beliefs surrounding cannabis use. Equally, it is important to affirm positive trends, such as the growing number of teenagers who are choosing not to consume alcohol. See [We are falling out of love with booze: Why Ireland is drinking less – The Irish Times](#).

Social norms: the unwritten rules of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that are considered acceptable in a particular social group or culture.

What is the basis for a social norms approach?

Numerous surveys have shown that young people tend to overestimate the prevalence (behaviour) and acceptance (attitudes) of alcohol and substance use among their peers. During the teenage years, young people are strongly influenced by what they perceive to be the group norms among their peers. For example, if they perceive that binge-drinking of alcohol is the norm among their peers, they are more likely to form the belief/attitude that this is expected of them and engage in such behaviour. This pressure to conform can over-shadow their own better instincts and over-ride prior learning about the dangers of consuming large amounts of alcohol and the adverse effects of tobacco, cannabis and other drugs.

The social norms approach to drug education is regarded as more effective than conventional approaches which rely on providing information on the adverse consequences of alcohol and substance use. Reliance on such approaches is increasingly viewed as being ineffective in preventing, delaying or reducing substance use among young people. (Source [The social norms approach to tackling substance use – Drugs and Alcohol](#))

Possible questions to explore through this learning outcome:

- Is everyone doing it? Examine the evidence related to young people's use of alcohol, tobacco/vapes, cannabis and other drugs. (Draw attention to both positive and negative trends)
- What would a healthy approach to alcohol and drugs look like for young people? What are the barriers to achieving this and how can these be overcome? (e.g. can you imagine alternative ways of group socialising that don't involve alcohol or drugs?)

¹HRB Factsheet, July 2024 ([drugsandalcohol.ie](https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie))

Note: Some of the discussion may be difficult for some students. They may have concerns about their own drug or alcohol use, or they may have concerns about family members or friends. For this reason, the teacher is advised to address this learning outcome with sensitivity and highlight relevant supports and services.

Possible follow-on learning outcome from LO 1.3

The effect of alcohol and mood-altering drugs on one's mental health (LO 1.5), the pathways toward addiction, signs and consequences of addictions and where to go and how to access help (LO 1.9) rights, responsibilities and protections before the law with reference to alcohol and drug use (LO 3.4) ending out from the crowd (LO 3.5)

Go to the SPHE Toolkit for [classroom resources linked to LO 1.3](#)