

FAMILIES AND VACCINES: WHEN OPINIONS DIFFER

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

While most parents choose to vaccinate their children, some concerned about vaccine safety choose not to. From a community perspective, these choices create pockets of unimmunized people, providing opportunities for diseases to gain a foothold in otherwise vaccinated communities. From a family perspective, these choices can cause minor friction to untenable situations.



The differences of opinion can occur between husbands and wives, parents and their teens, or parents and grandparents, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, cousins, friends and other loved ones.

Individuals caught in these situations often look not only for reliable information, but also for guidance related to keeping vaccine-preventable diseases from harming their unvaccinated family members. They also seek guidance for having conversations with those in their family concerned about vaccine safety.

GETTING RELIABLE INFORMATION

Reliable information about vaccines can be found in many places. A few are described here:

- **Vaccine Education Center (VEC), vaccine.chop.edu:** In addition to vaccine science and safety information, a list of reliable websites from other organizations is also available. Likewise, the VEC offers a free mobile app, *Vaccines on the Go*, vaccine.chop.edu/mobileapp.
- **Vaccine Safety Net (VSN), vaccinesafetynet.org:** A program of the World Health Organization, the VSN vets vaccine-related websites in multiple languages from around the world.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cdc.gov/vaccines:** Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this organization makes vaccine recommendations and oversees disease outbreaks and vaccination coverage.

PROTECTING UNVACCINATED FAMILY MEMBERS

At some point, every family has unvaccinated family members who need to rely on those in the community to shield them from vaccine-preventable diseases. This can include babies too young to be immunized, family members undergoing treatments that compromise their immune systems, or those who cannot get particular vaccines because of certain health conditions.

Those who are unvaccinated should limit opportunities for exposure to vaccine-preventable diseases, stay abreast of outbreaks in the area, and ensure that others around them are immune if possible.



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HAVING CONVERSATIONS

Like with politics, vaccine conversations can become heated and uncomfortable. Unlike with political conversations, however, in some cases joint decision-making related to the health of a family member is required.

Expectant parents — Pregnancy is a good time to gather vaccine information and discuss each other's concerns or opinions related to vaccination. In most cases, parents agree that vaccination is an important way to protect their babies, as evidenced by the fact that most children are immunized.

Some parents may consider individualizing the vaccination schedule; however, this approach is not recommended since the schedule, established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), is tested for safety and is designed to afford children the best levels of protection in a timely manner.

Parents of young children who disagree or older children who disagree with their parents' decisions not to vaccinate when they were younger — In these situations, respectful conversations and listening are an important starting point. If agreement upon next steps is not able to be reached in these conversations, consider making an appointment with the child's healthcare provider to discuss concerns and help with making a plan that is amenable to all involved.

Unfortunately, sometimes these situations end up being decided in courts — most often as part of custody disagreements. Because courts are not the best place to get accurate health information or to make health-related decisions, it is important to try to resolve differences of opinion before a situation rises to this level.

Grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other extended family members — For generations, families have passed along advice and offered guidance about virtually every aspect of life, including parenting. The recipients of this guidance have not always opted to listen to or act on this guidance, but in most cases, they at least consider what is said or offered. So, families are natural places for vaccine conversations to occur.

Because the topic of vaccines has become emotionally charged, opinions (solicited or unsolicited) are sometimes not well received. However, most new or expectant parents are just trying to do what is right for their children and welcome input from others. Often, older family members have witnessed the severity of vaccine-preventable diseases in a way that younger family members have not. They have also typically chosen to vaccinate themselves or their children without evidence of harm. Whatever a young family decides to do, they should be respected in their decision. If they are opting not to vaccinate, it may be difficult to support the choice, but try to remain respectful and share information when or if it feels appropriate. They may eventually opt to vaccinate if they do not feel like they have to constantly defend themselves.

If you are the sibling or cousin of someone who has opted not to vaccinate, you may decide you are not willing to have your child exposed to their unvaccinated children. These conversations can be difficult, but just as much as they have the right to make the choice not to vaccinate, you have the choice to limit interaction. The Q&A Special Topics sheet, *Vaccinated or Unvaccinated: What You Should Know* (chop.edu/collective-immunity), provides information that may be helpful in creating a plan and for offering support as to why you are making your decision.

Regardless of how you decide to proceed, be respectful and realize that the difference of opinion and approach between yourself and the family member choosing not to vaccinate will not only affect the two of you, but will also affect the extended family. At a minimum, try to work together in a way that does not require the rest of the family to feel as though they need to pick sides.

In sum, remember that family relationships are more important than a single topic or issue. Hopefully, these tips and resources will help. Finally, don't lose sight of the fact that by vaccinating your family and encouraging others to do so, you are protecting not only your family but also your community.

An original version of this article was published in the March 2019 issue of the Parents PACK newsletter. Find out more at vaccine.chop.edu/parents. This information is provided by the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The Center is an educational resource for parents and healthcare professionals and is composed of scientists, physicians, mothers and fathers who are devoted to the study and prevention of infectious diseases. The Vaccine Education Center is funded by endowed chairs from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The Center does not receive support from pharmaceutical companies. ©2020 Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. All Rights Reserved. 20118-05-20.