

Talking to Parents and Adolescents

“Adolescents have different consent issues, and there is a difference in the way you approach adolescents.”

— Amy Middleman, MD, Houston, adolescent medicine specialist and adviser for TMA’s *Be Wise — Immunize*

Communication is key to educating patients and their parents about vaccines. A consistent, simple message is routinely the best practice when discussing health and safety with adolescent patients and their parents.

Talking to Parents

Discussion about adolescent vaccines should start early, when the child is 9 to 10 years of age. This allows parents and adolescents to be prepared for the vaccinations and aware of changing vaccine recommendations, particularly if a child has older siblings who may have followed different recommendations.

When talking to parents, allow sufficient time to discuss the benefits of vaccines, the diseases they prevent, any risks involved, and the schedule or follow-up if additional shots are needed to complete a series. If parents are concerned about vaccine safety, you can point out how the risk of not taking the vaccine is greater than the side effects.

For instance, countries that discontinued the pertussis vaccine, like Japan and the United Kingdom (U.K.), saw a tenfold increase in hospitalizations and deaths from the disease. The U.K. also has seen an increase in hospitalizations and deaths from measles with a decline in children taking this vaccine.

Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, such as polio, nearly have been eradicated in the United States. However, these diseases are only a plane ride away. Children in India are commonly paralyzed by polio, and children in Russia are killed by diphtheria.

Again, a general prevention message may be more effective than specifics about each disease and/or vaccine. You and your staff also may want to explain that some vaccines for adolescents are new, while others may have been missed when the child was younger.

Parents or guardians want to know vaccines are safe and effective. At each visit, provide a copy of the Vaccine Information Statement (VIS) for the patient and/or parent to

take home. Handing out the VIS is a federal requirement when administering any childhood or adolescent vaccine. You can find Vaccine Information Statements on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) Web site at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/vis, or you can order copies from the Texas Department of State Health Services at <https://secure.immunizetexasorderform.com/default.asp>.

Physicians and their staff should encourage parents and patients to report any adverse events after vaccine administration. They should report to the physician and to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System at <http://vaers.hhs.gov/>. See the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System section of this manual for more information.

Talking to Adolescents

Allowing adolescents to take greater charge of their health care helps them develop positive decision-making skills they can carry into adulthood. When talking to teens, be honest. A shot may cause some pain, but the overall gain is worth it. Answer questions honestly and provide the same information to adolescents as you do to the parents.

Make the adolescent comfortable. Make sure your staff is confident and that they have positive talking points about the importance of vaccines. If you have the parent on board, the patient likely will agree with the decision.

For More Information About Communicating With Adolescents

Visit the Educational Materials for Healthcare Professionals page of the Vaccine Education Center at www.chop.edu/consumer/jsp/division/generic.jsp?id=81902.

Sources

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Middleman AB. Adolescent Immunizations: Policies to Provide a Shot in the Arm for Adolescents. *J Adolesc Health*. 2007;41(2):109-118.

Vaccine Education Center at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. The Facts About Childhood Vaccines. www.vaccine.chop.edu.