

Talking to Parents About Vaccines

“Physicians cannot hope to compete with the erroneous messages in the media about vaccine safety. However, they can continue to be the trusted health care leader and understand that most parents with questions about vaccines are simply trying to perform due diligence on behalf of their children.”

— Jason Terk, MD, Fort Worth, pediatrician and
Be Wise — Immunize program advocate

Many parents are aware of the benefits of vaccines and comply with the annual required vaccination schedule. However, you may encounter parents who question the necessity and/or safety of vaccines for their children. These parents may decide to postpone or skip the recommended vaccines because of myths or misinformation. Because of media hype, many parents are concerned about supposed links between vaccinations and autism.

The Office Visit: Time to Listen

In a growing trend, more patients are seeking health care information and advice outside the doctor's office, especially on the Internet. The good news is that numerous studies suggest patients prefer and use their physician as their main source of health information. One study found that 70 percent of its participants would most likely contact their physician or other health care provider for information about medical conditions in the future.

Therefore, effective, empathetic communication is critical in responding to adults who are considering not vaccinating their children. You can help your patients feel comfortable voicing their concerns or questions about vaccinations, and be prepared to listen and respond effectively.

Tips for Talking About Vaccines

The Alliance for Immunization in Michigan offers these tips for communicating with families about vaccines.

Ask questions. Evaluate whether the patient has had a valid contraindication to a vaccine by asking about medical history of the child and family, allergies, and previous experiences.

- Assess the reasons for wanting to delay or forgo vaccination in a nonconfrontational manner. (Did the patient have a bad experience or obtain troubling information? Does the patient have religious or philosophical reservations?)

- If parents, caregivers, or other adults have safety concerns or misconceptions about vaccination, ask them to identify the sources of those concerns or beliefs.
- Listen carefully, paraphrase to the adult what he or she told you, and ask if you have correctly interpreted what the patient said.

Respect and address concerns. Provide factual information in language that is easily understood, addressing the specific concerns or misconceptions the patient has about vaccination.

- Use a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Vaccine Information Statement (VIS) for discussing benefits and risks. Federal law requires that you give (and send home) a copy of the current VIS to a child's parent or guardian before administering any vaccine. Be sure to include in the child's medical record the date you provided the VIS and publication date of the VIS.

You can find Vaccine Information Statements on the CDC's Web site at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/vis/ or you can order them from the Texas Department of State Health Services at <https://secure.immunizetexasorderform.com>.

- Educate families about the dangers of vaccine-preventable diseases and the risks of not vaccinating as they relate to the child, adult, family, and community.
- Express your personal support for vaccinations and share experiences you have had with patients with vaccine-preventable diseases.

Educate about responsibilities. Inform parents who defer vaccination for their children of their responsibilities to protect other family and community members, including people who may be immunocompromised.

- Explain to parents about keeping sick children at home and other ways to limit the spread of infection.
- Advise parents that state laws require unvaccinated children to stay home from school during outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. (See Conscientious Objection on page 18.)

Explore acceptable options. Explore whether patients or parents are willing to allow themselves or their children to receive certain vaccines, be vaccinated on an alternative schedule, or delay vaccination and “catch-up” if they change their mind.

Keep communication open. If adults choose to defer or refuse vaccination for their children, express your desire to talk more about vaccines during future visits.

- Periodically assess the adult's or parent's willingness to vaccinate, including at every well visit.
- Document any refusal to vaccinate in the medical record.

Source

Talking to Families. AIM Provider Toolkit for Childhood and Adult Immunization. Alliance for Immunization in Michigan. www.aimtoolkit.org/talking.htm.