

Communicating with Families about Vaccines

Effective, empathetic communication is critical in responding to families who are considering not vaccinating themselves or their children. Patients should feel comfortable voicing any concerns or questions they have about vaccination. Practitioners should be prepared to listen and respond effectively. Below are some tips to facilitate this process.

First and Foremost: Build Trust

- Be clear
- Be accountable
- Listen (see below)

Listen and Ask Questions

- Assess reasons for wanting to delay or forgo vaccination in a non-confrontational manner
 - Have they had a bad experience?
 - Have they obtained troubling information?
 - Do they have religious or philosophical reservations?
- Evaluate whether the patient has had a valid contraindication to a vaccine
- If safety concerns or misconceptions arise, ask them to identify the source(s) of those concerns and beliefs
- Ask them who they consider to be a credible/trusted source of immunization information
- Listen carefully, paraphrase, and ask if you have correctly interpreted what they have said



Respect and Address Concerns

- Let patients know their concerns are legitimate. It is good to be concerned about vaccine safety, to question medical procedures, and to actively participate in their families' or their own health.
- Provide factual information in a way that is easily understood
 - Address specific concerns and/or misconceptions – don't use too many facts or figures
- Use Vaccine Information Statements (VIS) for discussing vaccine benefits and risks
- Provide educational materials to be taken home and refer patients to other credible sources of information (See AIM kit)
- Use message maps to practice communicating simple immunization messages and responses to commonly asked questions (See AIM kit). "Layer" your communication messages by using these maps.



Advocate for Vaccination

- If you don't advocate for vaccination, who will? Patients listen to their doctors and other trusted health care personnel - your advice matters.
 - Let them know that vaccines are one of the most powerful disease-prevention tools we have.
 - If you have children, let them know that you got your children vaccinated.
- Be a role model. Make sure you and your staff members are up-to-date on vaccinations.
- Share stories. Express your personal support for vaccinations and share experiences you have had with patients with vaccine-preventable diseases.
- 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.
 - Use stories, such as the "Why Flu Vaccination Matters" video, created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Families Fighting Flu.
 - Show pictures of vaccine-preventable diseases, available from the Immunization Action Coalition (IAC).



Educate about Responsibilities



- Inform adults and caregivers who defer vaccination of their responsibilities to protect other family and community members, including people who may be immunocompromised (i.e., keeping sick children at home and other ways to limit the spread of infection).
- Advise parents of state school and/or child-care entry laws, which might require that un-immunized children stay home from school during outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.
- Communicate to patients/parents that their choice to not get themselves or their children vaccinated is an active decision to put themselves, their children, their family, and their community at risk of disease. This is not a passive response, but one that could have dire consequences. Do not threaten or talk down to them but do let them know that vaccine-preventable diseases are real possibilities if vaccination does not occur.

Explore Acceptable Options

- Ask if the patient or parent is willing to allow themselves or their children to receive certain vaccines, to be immunized on an alternative schedule, or delay vaccination and "catch-up" if they change their mind.

Keep Communicating

- Keep the lines of communication open. Express your desire to talk more about vaccines during future visits.
- Periodically assess the adult's or parent's willingness to vaccinate at every well visit. Document any refusal to vaccinate in the medical record.

