

# Don't Hesitate:

Talking to Your Vaccine-Hesitant Loved Ones with  
Compassion and Confidence



Occasionally, the desire to protect all the children in your life against vaccine-preventable diseases can strain relationships with friends and family members who have misplaced fears about vaccines. If this is the case, chances are you'd like to calm their fears and help them understand the safety and importance of vaccines, while maintaining a positive relationship with these important people in your life. This toolkit is dedicated to you.



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## Introduction

Fear is powerful. It's so powerful that sometimes even the effort of trying to ease it can be upsetting to the person controlled by it. This can be especially true when the topic is vaccines. Perhaps you've experienced this yourself and now hesitate to even bring up the topic of vaccines. Maybe you've "agreed to disagree" on vaccines, even though doing so creates a fear of your own—that your children and the children you love will be affected by a vaccine-preventable disease.

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If you've been in this situation, or know of someone who has, then this toolkit is for you. We hope to help you start a conversation about immunization with vaccine-hesitant parents in a manner that will maintain and even enrich your relationships. More important, we hope to equip you with the tools to address their fears and concerns and bring them to an improved understanding of the importance of vaccination. Keeping the conversation open, friendly, and respectful may be the best way to give all children a chance to be protected against preventable diseases.



## Why is your friend or loved one not vaccinating his or her children?

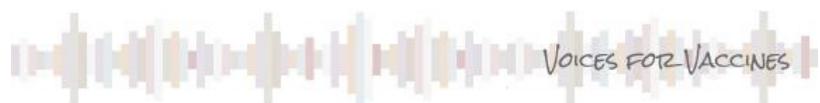
If you have friends whose children are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated, your first step should be determining whether the parents are refusing vaccines intentionally out of fear. We call these parents “vaccine refusers.” Recent research<sup>1</sup> from Rutgers University, in partnership with two German universities, has identified four major reasons people do not vaccinate their children.

**Complacency:** Some parents do not vaccinate their children because they do not see diseases around them. This invisibility—made possible by widespread vaccine coverage—results in a belief that the diseases do not exist or do not pose a threat. Therefore, they reason, vaccines are unnecessary.

**Convenience:** For some people, lack of health insurance, inability to take time off of work, problems with provider availability, or other access issues keep them from vaccinating their children. These parents do not need a long conversation from a friend. They just need someone to help them work out how to overcome these barriers and get their children vaccinated.

**Confidence:** Some people are not confident in vaccine safety and worry about their side effects. These are the parents who will mention thimerosal, vaccine ingredients, and “vaccine injuries.”

**Calculation:** Parents on the fence about vaccines weigh what they perceive as the costs and benefits of vaccines. They often rely on conflicting and erroneous information when making this risk analysis.



## What makes someone vaccine-hesitant?

It's important to understand that nearly all parents have questions about vaccines. Having concerns about the immunization schedule or the ingredients in vaccines does not make a parent "anti-vaccine." Some parents simply have questions or worries about vaccines, but they are not necessarily against immunization. In fact, the vast majority of parents who choose not to vaccinate according to schedule are not anti-vaccine—they are vaccine-hesitant. You can maintain your friendship with them and discuss their concerns.

Gaining an understanding of what makes people vaccine-hesitant might be a good place to start when preparing for a discussion about vaccines with your friend or family member, especially if you are uncertain about wanting to open the topic. The sidebar contains some trusted resources that may help you better understand the mindset of a vaccine-hesitant parent (or, in some cases, an anti-vaccine parent).

Anti-vaccine to pro-vaccine stories:

<http://tinyurl.com/AVtoPV>

A podcast with former vaccine-hesitant mothers:

<http://tinyurl.com/AVtoPVpod>

An article about being married to a vaccine-hesitant spouse:

<http://tinyurl.com/AVspouse>

Myths about vaccine-hesitant people:

<http://tinyurl.com/AVmyths>



## Having the conversation: Before you begin

Here are a few guiding principles to consider before you decide if you would like to open the conversation about vaccines.

### Changing someone's deeply held fears takes time.

You likely will not sit down with a friend or family member, present them with facts, and change his or her mind about vaccines in a single conversation. We all need time to absorb information and think things out. This conversation will probably happen over time.

### Conversations are two-way streets.

You might be tempted to trot out all the science and all the reasons why vaccines are so critically important to a child's health and well-being, but the people to whom you are talking expect to be given respect for their beliefs or feelings. You must be a good listener at all times and truly hear what your friend or family member is saying.

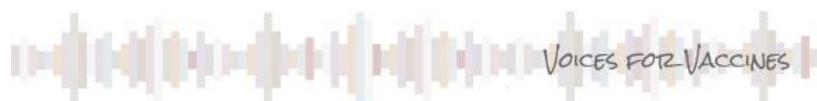


### Respect is the most important tool in changing a mind.

If you are opening a conversation with someone you dislike, it's unlikely you will change that person's mind. If you respect the person with whom you are discussing vaccines, show that respect by remaining calm and courteous throughout the discussion.

### You both care deeply about the children being discussed.

In any discussion about vaccines, the welfare of children is your common ground. It's easy for a pro-vaccine parent to lose sight of this fact. Parents are vaccine-hesitant because they do not want to harm their children, and they are concerned that vaccines could be harmful. Remember that your friend is doing the best he or she knows how to keep that child safe, even if science proves these choices are putting his or her children at greater risk.



## Vaccines are not perfect.

It's important not to overstate the benefits of vaccines. While they are widely considered one of the greatest public health achievements in human history, vaccines do not protect 100% of the children who receive them, and, as with any medicine, rare serious side effects can occur.<sup>2</sup> We advocate for vaccines not because they are perfect, but because they are the best choice.

## Beginning the conversation: Listening is the first step

The first conversation is about your friend's thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and fears—it's not about you or the power of vaccines. Active listening<sup>3</sup> builds trust and ensures that you understand why your loved one is uncomfortable with vaccines. Two important tips:

1. **You do not have to counter misinformation the first time you talk.** Ask your friend what gives him or her pause about vaccines. **Listen** without interrupting, and, if appropriate, take notes. **Repeat** to your friend his or her important points to ensure that you understand the concerns. **Ask** follow-up questions. If you have feedback to give them that will not make your loved one feel defensive, you can offer it. However, you most likely will want to prepare a thoughtful response. At the end, ask if you can look into what he or she said and return to the conversation.
2. **It is okay to wait a few days before resuming the conversation.** Use this time to analyze what he or she listed as concerns. Look for a pattern. Oftentimes, fears about vaccines follow particular patterns. This time could also allow your friend or family member to reflect on the conversation.



## Analyzing the conversation

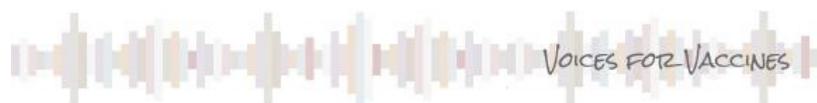
After comparing your friend or family member's response to some common patterns among the vaccine-hesitant, you will want to respond. However, it is also critical to realize that as you have conversations with your friend or family member over time, his or her concerns might change. This shifting of concerns should be expected. When we challenge one set of ideas that people use to sustain their beliefs, they may reach for another set of ideas to help hold on to those beliefs. This is normal. Address the patterns as they come up. Below are a few of those common patterns among the vaccine-hesitant.

### Feeling a lack of control or needing to be in control of health outcomes

People who have had a life event in which they were out of control, such as living through a natural disaster, losing a job, or becoming ill, can be more prone to believing in conspiracy theories<sup>4</sup>, including the idea that the "truth" about vaccines is being hidden by healthcare providers, government officials, nurses, and so on. Others may not believe in conspiracy theories, but feel that they can better protect their families through easily controlled means—nutrition, homeopathic remedies, immunity boosters. These parents might need to understand how vaccines are studied and tested<sup>5</sup>, and that they are the safest, most effective way of preventing disease.

### A negative healthcare experience in the past

For women, having a disappointing or traumatic birth often results in distrust of doctors. Perhaps there was a misdiagnosis or a doctor who was dismissive of their symptoms. Maybe a loved one suffered because of poor medical care or a serious reaction to a medication. Negative experiences with doctors can create a distrust of all medical professionals, and these parents will need to find a good doctor<sup>6</sup> who listens and builds a trusting relationship with them.



## Buying into a particular parenting style

Some parents believe that if they do everything correctly, no harm can come to their children. Others simply prefer an organic, natural lifestyle, and their children are an expression of their lifestyle. In many parenting philosophies, refusing vaccines is a way of fitting into a particular lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> These parents might need to be introduced to parenting advisors who offer a more flexible, evidence-based approach to childrearing.



**The risks of not vaccinating are greater than the risks of a serious side effect from a vaccine.**

## Distrust of the government or corporations

For some parents, refusing to vaccinate is an extension of a belief that vaccine requirements and recommendations are symptomatic of governmental overreach or are part of a profit-driven scheme by pharmaceutical companies. The people making the decisions about the recommended vaccine schedule are, to these parents, hidden behind faceless committees, organizations, and companies. Parents who believe this might need to learn more about the people making these decisions<sup>8</sup> and the history of the vaccine schedule<sup>9</sup>.

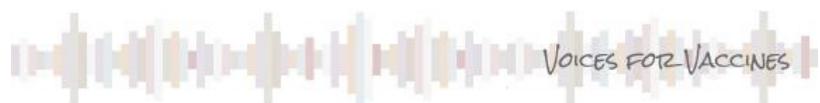


## Flawed risk assessment involving vaccines and diseases

Sometimes parents fear that if they do something and a bad outcome occurs, they will not be able to live with the guilt. They fear that if their child gets a vaccine and suffers a side effect, they will be responsible for something terrible happening to their child. These parents do not fully understand that choosing not to vaccinate also carries a risk<sup>10</sup>, and that the risks of not vaccinating are greater than the risks of a serious side effect from a vaccine<sup>11</sup>. These parents might need to see how disease affects children, to understand how rare vaccine reactions are, and to learn how unvaccinated children are at increased risk of preventable disease.

## Chemophobia<sup>12</sup>

Because of clever marketing touting all-natural and organic goods, some parents have become afraid of chemicals and have tried to rid their lives of them completely. This fear of chemicals naturally extends to vaccines. These parents need to understand the tiny amounts of ingredients used in vaccines, what they do, and how they naturally work with the body's existing immune system to protect us against disease.



## Finding good vaccine information for conversations

A few websites have gathered myth-busting information and might help both of you better understand the facts about vaccines.

NBC News: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/measles-outbreak/7-vaccine-myths-debunked-doctors-n303211>

USA Today: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/02/06/debunking-vaccine-myths/22886985/>

Global News Canada: <http://globalnews.ca/news/1260577/vaccination-myths-debunked/>

SERMO: <http://blog.sermo.com/2014/08/18/debunking-the-myths-fueling-of-the-anti-vaccine/>

Dr. Vince Iannelli: <http://pediatrics.about.com/od/immunizations/tp/Anti-Vaccine-Myths-and-Misinformation.htm>

Once you've gained a thorough understanding of the reasons behind your friend or family member's vaccine hesitancy, consider how to counter the erroneous information they have come to take as truth. While you might want to "win" the battle against vaccine hesitancy by using facts, recent studies have shown that utilizing facts and evidence-based information alone often makes people cling to their beliefs more fiercely. Research shows that, instead, presenting stories about the diseases we prevent with vaccines can change minds.<sup>13</sup>

Helping your friend find reliable, accurate information is an important step to take with him or her. If your friends have complicated questions about vaccines, direct them to an appropriate doctor or nurse, if at all possible.

A number of sources have good information readily available to both of you (see sidebar). It is important to note that countering misinformation is not always the best way to proceed, thus other methods are covered in the next section.



## Preparing to share your reasons for vaccinating

You might need to gather some stories that have an emotional impact on you to share with your vaccine-hesitant loved one. When sharing these stories, place them firmly in the context of your own reasons for choosing to vaccinate. There are several places you can find these stories online, including the Voices for Vaccines website.

### Look at your own background.

What experiences have you had with vaccine-preventable disease that motivated you to vaccinate your children and to care about the vaccine status of other children in your community? Look into your family history. Measles was distressingly common up until the middle of the twentieth century when the vaccine was introduced, and many senior citizens, including grandparents, have vivid memories of this disease and others now preventable with vaccines. Do you have photos you can use to accompany telling this story? Do others remember this story, as well, and are they willing to help you tell it?

If you do not have a personal experience, are there stories you have heard that inspired you to work hard to advocate for vaccines?

#### Online stories to share:

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/growing-up-unvaccinated/>

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/category/immunocompromised-children/>

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/not-just-a-harmless-childhood-disease/>

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/my-baby-has-measles/>

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/measles-and-my-sister/>

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/surviving-influenza-nathans-story/>

<http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/the-dreadful-swiftness-of-disease/>

<http://shotbyshot.org>



## Are there people who are vulnerable to disease in your life?

The stories of newborn babies, organ transplant recipients, people undergoing chemotherapy, or people with compromised immune systems are compelling testimonies to the importance of vaccines. Would some of those people be willing to talk to your friend? Oftentimes, vaccine-hesitant parents have not considered the risk unvaccinated children pose to individuals such as these, particularly infants too young to be vaccinated and other neighbors in our community who may have increased vulnerability that that may not be obvious.

As you decide how to approach this conversation, use your compassionate understanding of your loved one to shape your approach. Vaccine-hesitant parents may fall into patterned thinking, but that does not mean they fit easily into a mold. Decide how you can best package your information in a way that is respectful and persuasive.



## Resume the conversation

Now that you understand your friend or family member's reasons for not vaccinating, and have listened to his or her reasons with attention and respect, ask if you may explain why you've chosen to vaccinate your children. You may need to ask that friend or family member to offer the same respect you gave him or her when s/he explained reasons for not vaccinating. **If the discussion becomes contentious, agree to table it for a while.** If you do resume, ask if you can try the ground rules again or renegotiate the ground rules. Try to remain calm so the other person does not shut down.



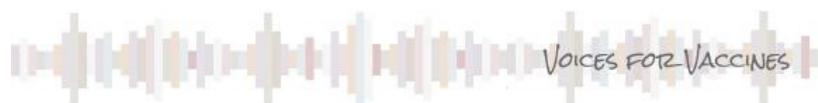
When you have finished presenting your information, ask your friend if he or she has any questions or thoughts about what you have said. If the conversation is productive and you can answer the questions, do so. If you cannot answer the questions or your loved one brings up new concerns, ask for some time to look into them.



**End each discussion by asking if it is okay to continue the conversation.**

## **You probably aren't done.**

This conversation should be seen as an ongoing dialogue. Sometimes it takes years for people to become comfortable about vaccinating. Sometimes people simply have a few questions that can be answered quickly.



## Steps you can take beyond talking to your loved ones

### Help them communicate better with their children's doctors.

It is possible that they need a new pediatrician for their child. More likely, however, their current pediatricians are working with them the same way you are. If appropriate, ask to go to the doctor with your loved one. You can also look at the doctor's reviews online. If the doctor seems to be dismissive of concerns about vaccines or seems to be enthusiastically against vaccines, you might suggest some new doctors.

### Help them get appropriate healthcare for themselves.

It may have been years since your friend saw a good medical doctor or nurse practitioner. Finding someone he or she trusts might help in rebuilding trust in the medical system.

### Expand their peer group

Consider introducing your loved one to a welcoming, nonjudgmental parenting community that provides support and science-based advice. Introduce your friend to parents who vaccinate and who are patient and open-minded. Alternately, introduce your loved one to online forums that can provide the same support.

### Offer support

Find out where your loved one feels he or she lacks control, and offer support in these areas. While you might not be able to find a friend a new job or place to live, you can offer a listening ear.



## Keep the conversation going

Ask your friend to email you any **concerning articles** they find on the Internet. When they do so, ask if you may respond by explaining why you disagree with that article.

When you come across a **story about disease**, someone changing their mind about vaccines, an immunocompromised person, or outbreaks, ask your friend if he or she would be willing to read it and give you his or her thoughts on it.

Don't be afraid to share articles about **bad news concerning vaccines**. For example, a news story about vaccines being stored incorrectly is a possible starting point. Negative press about vaccines might generate some good conversations with your friend.



**Finally: don't make vaccines the only topic you discuss.  
Nurture a normal relationship.**



## Sources

- <sup>1</sup> <http://bbs.sagepub.com/content/2/1/61.full>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vac-gen/side-effects.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://psychcentral.com/lib/become-a-better-listener-active-listening/>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-do-people-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/infographics/journey-of-child-vaccine.html>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/2014/09/how-to-choose-a-doctor/index.htm>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://gendersociety.wordpress.com/2014/09/02/neoliberal-mothering-and-vaccine-refusal/>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/acip/committee/members.html>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/history-immunization-schedule>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.voicesforvaccines.org/the-consequences-of-refusing-vaccines/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2011/12/vaccines-preventable-disease-nature-risk.html>
- <sup>12</sup> [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2013/02/curing\\_chemophobia\\_don\\_t\\_buy\\_the\\_alternative\\_medicine\\_in\\_the\\_boy\\_with\\_a.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2013/02/curing_chemophobia_don_t_buy_the_alternative_medicine_in_the_boy_with_a.html)
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tarahaelle/2015/08/04/how-do-you-change-an-anti-vaccine-parents-mind-scare-the-crap-out-of-them/>

