

Building Confidence When Talking to Parents About Children's Vaccines

Immunizations are an essential part of preventive care, offering critical protection against potentially deadly diseases. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) recommends that children, adolescents, and adults are routinely vaccinated with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-recommended vaccines.

To assist family physicians and care team members, the AAFP has developed this handout to help build confidence and address 10 common questions parents may have about vaccines for children.

1. Why are multiple vaccines needed to help protect children?

ANSWER: It is important children receive all vaccines listed for their age on the CDC-recommended vaccine schedule. These routine vaccines provide the best protection we can give to your child. Depending on the vaccine, your child may need more than one dose to build immunity. All the recommended vaccines are needed to help prevent disease or boost immunity that may fade over time.^{1,2}

2. Are vaccines safe for my child?

ANSWER: Yes. The United States has a long-standing vaccine safety system. Vaccines are carefully reviewed during development, when being approved, and after they are available to the public. The review process is ongoing—it does not ever stop. Vaccines have been developed specifically because these diseases are dangerous. Without vaccines, many diseases will return, as has been seen in recent outbreaks. It's important to vaccinate your child to help prevent these diseases from posing serious problems for their health.³⁻⁵

3. I heard vaccines can weaken my child's immune system. Is that true?

ANSWER: No. "Weakening" of the immune system can be a result of a severe disease caused by natural infections. Vaccines actually make your child's immune system more effective in protecting them in two ways. First, they help prevent severe disease, and second, they help your child's body to recognize and fight multiple infections.^{3,6,7}

4. Many preventable diseases are part of childhood. Would it be better for my child to have the disease than become immune through vaccines?

ANSWER: Natural immunity that comes from fighting an infection often provides strong and long-lasting protection; however, you should know as parents that there are potentially serious consequences of your child getting the disease. The CDC estimates that vaccination of children born between 1994 and 2013 will prevent 322 million illnesses and 732,000 deaths over the course of their lifetimes.⁶

5. Can vaccines cause autism in children?

ANSWER: No. This is a common misconception in popular culture. After years of thorough review of scientific evidence, it is clear that there is no link between a child receiving vaccines and developing autism spectrum disorder.^{4,8-11}

6. What are the side effects of vaccines?

ANSWER: Most vaccines will have some side effects. The side effects children may experience are typically minor, such as soreness in the injection site, fussiness, or a low-grade fever, and go away within a few days. Remember, vaccines are continually monitored for safety, and like any medication, vaccines can cause side effects. Serious adverse reactions are rare. If your child does experience any reactions that concern you, please contact this office.^{4,10}

7. My child is sick. Are vaccines still safe to administer?

ANSWER: The CDC and doctors at leading health organizations, like the AAFP, recommend that children with mild illnesses receive vaccinations on schedule. Specifically, your child can still be vaccinated if they have a low-grade fever (less than 101 degrees Fahrenheit); a cold, a runny nose, or a cough; an ear infection (otitis media); or mild diarrhea. We can help determine the vaccines your child can safely get at each visit.⁸

8. Why do vaccines start at an early age?

ANSWER: Children are vaccinated at a young age because their immune systems are still developing and need some protection from vaccine-preventable diseases. Of all age groups, babies have the highest risk for complications, which may lead to hospitalization or death.^{12,13}

9. I heard delaying some vaccines would be a better alternative. Is that true?

ANSWER: The schedule recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) is based on a thorough review of the scientific evidence. Medical and public health experts, from organizations such as the AAFP, are appointed by the CDC to serve on ACIP. According to these medical and public health experts, when you spread out or delay vaccines according to an alternative schedule, it can result in children who are more vulnerable to disease. In addition, vaccines are recommended at a particular age based on how a child's immune system may respond.⁸

10. If my child is not in day care or school, can't I wait to vaccinate?

ANSWER: It is important that you do not wait to vaccinate your child. Your child is at risk for getting diseases, and vaccinations will help provide protection, even if they are not in a child care setting or school. If your child is cared for at home, they may still be exposed to vaccine-preventable diseases. Therefore, it's important for them to get all their CDC-recommended vaccines at the recommended ages.¹²

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