

Vaccine Hesitancy Among Parents: Listening and Learning from Community

SUMMARY

Vaccine hesitancy among parents is resulting in low vaccination rates among children. Understanding and addressing parents' concerns are the keys to increasing pediatric vaccination rates. This research revealed the most common concerns among parents including those about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine, lack of trust due to the presentation of information, and the motivating factors that ultimately led some parents to vaccinate their children. The results of this project provide actionable recommendations to address those concerns and increase pediatric vaccination rates.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Since that time, there have been 360 million cases and the death toll has reached nearly six million globally. Among the U.S. pediatric population, roughly 10.6 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. Although the cumulative mortality rate for children is much lower than adult counterparts, challenges remain with infection rates, pediatric hospital bed availability, disruptions to in-person learning, school closures, and the rampant spread of vaccine-related misinformation.

In May 2021, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in pediatric populations under an emergency use authorization. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was approved to administer to children as young as 12 in May 2021, and for children as young as five in October 2021. A vocal segment of the population has expressed concerns about the vaccine, including the perceived speed with which it was developed, and thus its safety and effectiveness. As a result, many people are hesitant or refuse to get vaccinated both for themselves and for their children.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Vaccine hesitancy is connected to concerns about effectiveness and safety, especially for children under five
- Pediatricians and healthcare providers are trusted sources of information
- Targeted and nuanced messaging to parents should be tailored to specific age groups
- Mandates are an effective strategy to increase vaccination rates

OUR RESPONSE

We launched an initiative called VaccinateLA, a community-partnered, USC-wide initiative that aims to reduce barriers to COVID vaccinations in Los Angeles. The focus of this initiative has been on areas of Los Angeles that had the lowest vaccination rates, which were identified by zip code. We then conducted focus groups where we listened and learned about local hesitancy and barriers to becoming vaccinated, and used that information to inform educational messages, outreach and navigation services, vaccination clinics in partnership with community leaders and organizations, the faith community, advocacy groups, and healthcare providers.

Despite these strides, vaccine hesitancy has remained a pervasive problem among the population since the vaccines were first released, and have continued with the release of the vaccine for children. A variety of concerns related to vaccine hesitancy are expressed by parents as reasons for waiting or refusing to vaccinate their children. Low vaccination rates for children continued in those same areas of Los Angeles, and as a result, we followed the model of our VaccinateLA project and shifted our focus to parents to listen and learn about the concerns they had about vaccinating their children.

RESULTS

In January and February 2022, we conducted a series of 14 virtual focus groups with 95 participants, all parents of unvaccinated and vaccinated children. The focus groups ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes, and sessions were conducted in either English or Spanish, depending on the participant population and their primary language. For parents with unvaccinated children, we wanted to learn about their concerns, and for those with vaccinated children, we wanted to understand the motivating factors that led to vaccinating their children. There were many families with mixed vaccination status, in which the older children were vaccinated while the younger children were not. Several important themes emerged from this research.

THEMES

Safety

Concerns about the safety of the vaccine were related to potential short and long term side effects, the perceived speed with which the vaccine was developed, and the potential impact on children's developing bodies. These concerns were more prominent for children in the younger age bracket, from infancy to five years old.

Effectiveness

Participants questioned the effectiveness of the vaccine for two main reasons: rising rate of COVID infections around the country, and the number of shots needed to be fully vaccinated. The surge of cases related to the Omicron variant increased questions about effectiveness, as many parents were under the assumption that the vaccine would or should prevent COVID-19. Parents also expressed that needing multiple doses or shots made them question whether the vaccines "worked." These concerns about effectiveness made many parents question the utility of vaccinating their children at all.

Presentation of Information and Lack of Trust

There was a consensus among our participants that there is too much information coming from too many sources, and presented by too many messengers. There continues to be mixed messages, misinformation, rumors, conspiracy theories, and fear mongering, which cause confusion and makes it difficult for people to determine what information is believable, reliable, and true. This leads to a lack of trust. News outlets and social media were widely viewed as fear-based and unreliable respectively. Doctors and healthcare professionals were viewed overwhelmingly as the most trusted sources of information.

Motivating Factors

Mandates and fear were the primary motivating factors. Many parents vaccinated their children because of a school mandate, mandate to participate in extracurricular activities, or to be able to go to public places that required proof of vaccination. Older children also played a role and were shown to influence their parents by asking to get vaccinated so they could attend school, engage in extracurricular activities, and be with their friends. Fear was a motivator for parents who were aware of children developing severe illness or who required hospitalization, which scared parents enough that they were motivated to vaccinate.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative work helped to uncover key reasons for vaccine hesitancy among parents, which can then be directly addressed to help increase pediatric vaccination rates. There is a need for clarity about the vaccine and its purpose in preventing severe illness and hospitalization, not the transmission of COVID-19. Doctors were overwhelmingly viewed as trusted sources of information and doctor's offices, hospitals, and clinics were the preferred location for vaccination due to the presence of medical personnel who could both perform an exam prior to vaccination to rule out the possibility of an adverse event, and also who could quickly respond to an adverse event if it occurred.

Parents want to understand more about the vaccine and want to do what is best for their children. They want to learn more in the form of clear, consistent information from a reliable and trustworthy source. The results of this work provide clear actions that can be taken by healthcare workers and policymakers to assuage the concerns of parents and increase pediatric vaccination rates.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Messaging

Concerns about the vaccine differed relative to the age of the child. Concerns about side effects and the potential impact to development increased as the age of the child decreased. While many parents were concerned for their young children, they had vaccinated their older children but were questioning the need for a booster. When the vaccine was newly approved for an age group, many parents adopted a "wait and see" approach. These findings suggest that the messaging around vaccination and boosters should be tailored to specific age groups.

Mandates

Mandates are an effective strategy to increase vaccination rates. Mandates to attend school, participate in extracurricular activities, or to enter into public and private spaces increased vaccination rates. Our findings show that mandates should be implemented as a policy as a condition of employment, attending school, and engaging in social and civic activities.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED SOURCES

[VaccinateLA.info](https://vaccinateLA.info)

Community Report - VaccinateLA
<https://vaccinateLA.info/additional-resources/>

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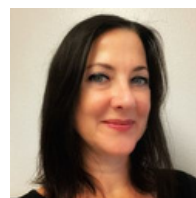


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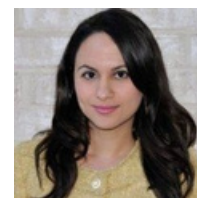


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