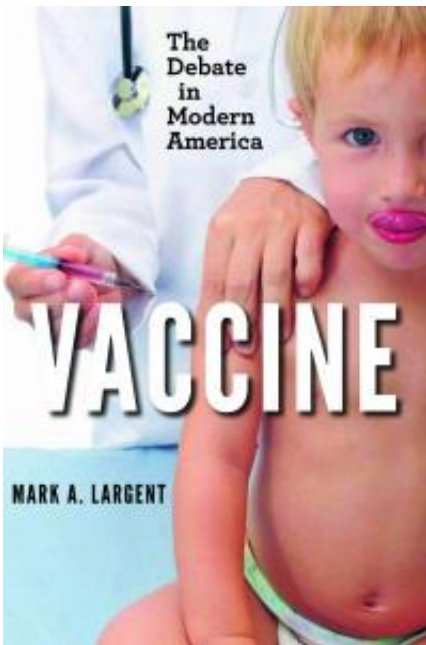


Vaccine and autism debate masks real problem

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A book by Michigan State University scholar Mark Largent argues that the debate over whether vaccines cause autism is masking real problems with the modern inoculation schedule. Credit: The Johns Hopkins University Press

The bitter debate over whether vaccines cause autism is masking real problems with the modern inoculation schedule and encouraging a growing number of parents to refuse recommended vaccines for their children, argues a Michigan State University scholar.

In his new book "[Vaccine](#): The Debate in Modern America," Mark

Largent writes that extremists for and against vaccinations have clouded the issues for parents seeking to make the best possible decisions for their children's health.

On one hand, there is no scientific evidence that vaccinations cause autism, Largent said, adding that vaccines are "one of the most effective tools in the [public health](#) arsenal."

On the other hand, Largent said some shots raise serious concerns among many parents, such as the vaccines against [chickenpox](#) and [hepatitis B](#), which is typically given within the first days of life. Further, he said pediatricians and [health officials](#) have created an all-or-nothing approach to vaccinations that gives the false impression that all inoculations are equally important.

"It's a signal to parents that the [vaccine schedule](#) is an all-or-nothing affair – that you either accept that the mandated vaccines are all equally valuable and comply with the entire schedule or reject it in its entirety," said Largent, associate professor in MSU's James Madison College. "As a result, parents who find some vaccines unnecessary are encouraged to question the entire vaccine schedule."

Fueled by celebrity activists, public anxieties over vaccines have emerged during the past 20 years, Largent noted. On one side of the debate is actress Jenny McCarthy, who believes her son's vaccinations triggered a series of seizures that led to his eventual diagnosis on the autism spectrum. On the other side are vaccine proponents such as actress Amanda Peet, who publicly supports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommended vaccination schedule and declared that parents who do not vaccinate their children are "parasites."

Meantime, legislators in many states have loosened requirements on childhood vaccinations for attendance at schools and daycares. Today,

more than half of Americans live in states that allow for philosophical exemptions to mandatory vaccinations – often requiring little more than a parent's signature on an exemption form.

Public health officials worry that children who do not get all recommended and mandated vaccines pose a risk to those who get the full complement of shots. Although vaccines are not guaranteed to be effective, officials say the best way to guard against the spread of communicable diseases is to get all recommended and mandated vaccines.

Ultimately, Largent believes parents must accept responsibility to decide the best course of action for their children when it comes to vaccines. In his case, he decided against a doctor's recommendation to give his then 4-year-old daughter Annabelle a seasonal flu shot and supplemental vaccine for swine flu because she had already contracted the flu that year.

"Parents should examine the vaccination schedule, think about their child's situation and consider their options," Largent said. "That way, when they decide in favor of or against a vaccine, they are actually making a conscious choice rather than simply drifting into a decision that has been made by someone else."

Provided by Michigan State University

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