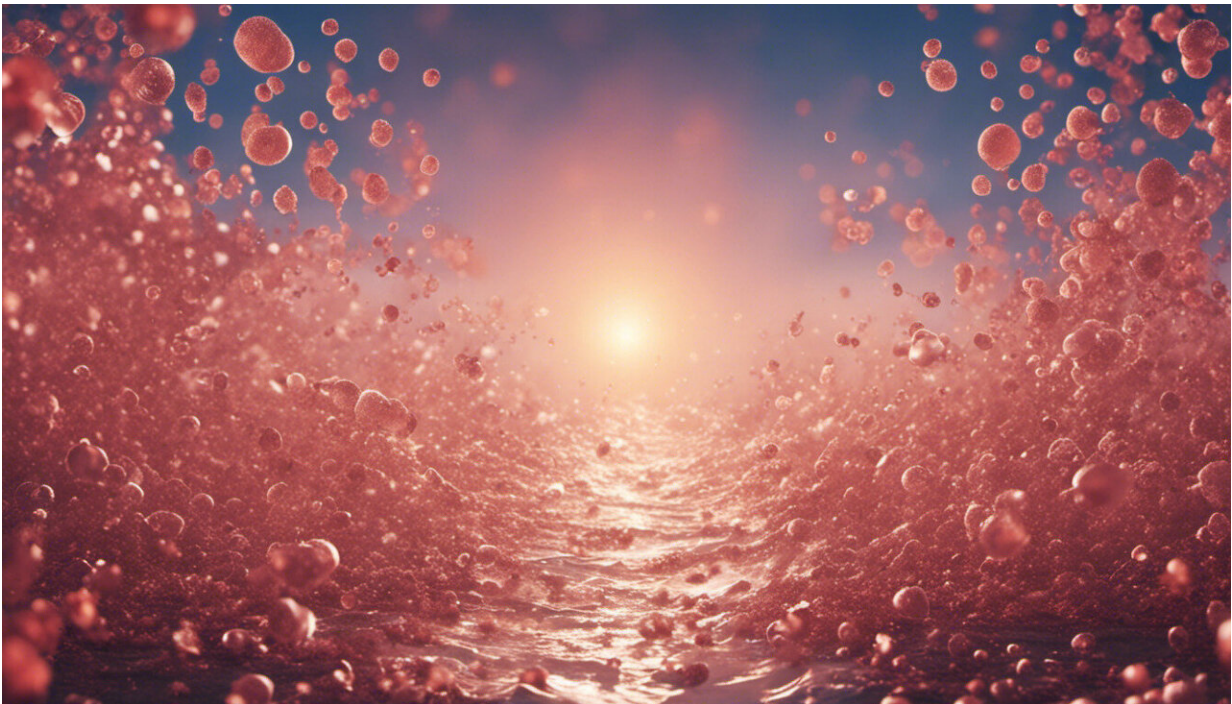


Everyone can be an effective advocate for vaccination: Here's how

February 20 2019, by Jessica Kaufman And Margie Danchin



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has named vaccine hesitancy as one of their [top 10 threats to global health](#) for 2019.

Last week, the wife of an NRL footballer [made national headlines](#) after posting on Instagram that the couple did not plan to vaccinate their

children.

Indeed, there's rarely a time vaccination isn't a hot topic of public debate. What's important to note is that anyone can use evidence-based communication techniques to be an advocate for vaccination – you don't need to be an expert in the field.

Conversations between peers can be very influential, because our behaviours are shaped by [social norms](#), or what other people in our network value and do.

Who do we need to talk to?

While the current measles outbreaks in the [United States](#) and [Europe](#) are concerning, much of the reporting has over-simplified the issue, with sensationalised headlines placing the [blame](#) almost solely on "[anti-vax](#)" parents.

In reality, the vast majority of people whose children are missing some or all doses of the recommended vaccines are not "anti-vaxxers", and labelling them as such is unhelpful.

The ability to register for vaccination exemption based on conscientious objection was removed in 2016, but it was last recorded in December 2015 as affecting only [1.34% of eligible children](#).

Current childhood vaccination coverage in Australia is between [90.75-94.67%](#), depending on age.

This suggests that missed opportunities and access barriers, such as parents being unable to get to the GP or a council immunisation session, are [much more substantial contributors](#) to under-vaccination.

Communication about vaccines is unlikely to impact the behaviour of firm refusers and those facing access barriers. However, communication has enormous influence when it comes to the [43% of parents](#) who have some questions or concerns about vaccines.

Aggressive or dismissive language can make people [less likely to vaccinate](#), while open, respectful discussion with a trusted individual can encourage hesitant parents towards vaccination.

Tips for discussing vaccination

Many people struggle with how to discuss vaccination when confronted with a friend, relative or acquaintance who expresses hesitancy.

Simply [providing lots of facts](#) or dismissing their views is not effective.

Instead, these are some tips everyone can use when talking about vaccines, drawing from evidence-based communication techniques. Studies in the United States and Canada have trained [healthcare providers](#) to use techniques like these to increase uptake of [adolescent HPV vaccination](#) and [infant vaccines](#), and [more studies](#) are currently underway.

Ask about, and listen to, people's concerns: not everyone is driven by the same issues or experiences. Find out what specifically is concerning the person. Is it safety? Effectiveness? Side effects?

Acknowledge their concerns: remember, everyone loves their children. No one is refusing to vaccinate because they want their child to get sick, or because they wilfully hope other children will get sick.

Acknowledging that you see where someone is coming from can go a long way in establishing trust.

Provide information to respond to their concerns: share what you know, and try to provide reliable sources for your information. Be careful not to debunk myths too aggressively, as this can actually [backfire](#).

Share personal stories: emotive stories tend to have more impact than facts. This is one reason stories of rare [vaccine](#) adverse events can seem to carry more weight than overwhelming safety figures. Share your own stories of positive experiences with vaccines, or better yet, discuss your experience with the diseases they prevent.

Don't pass judgment: people may discuss vaccination many times with many different people before they decide to vaccinate, especially if they are very hesitant. Your goal should be to establish yourself as a trusted, non-judgmental person with whom they can share their questions and concerns. Berating them won't convince them to vaccinate, but it will convince them never to speak to you about vaccines again.

These communication tips can help support discussions about vaccines with someone who is hesitant, but open to discussing their position. If, however, you find yourself publicly debating a "vocal vaccine denier", the WHO has developed a [toolkit](#) to help guide your responses.

In such a situation, your intended audience is not the vaccine denier themselves, but the public who may be watching or reading your debate.

The techniques used by a [vaccine](#) denier could include referring to conspiracies, fake experts, selective or misrepresented evidence, or impossible expectations (such as 100% safety). The WHO recommends you identify the techniques the denier uses and then correct their content.

If you're a strong supporter of vaccination, you can become a powerful

ally in the effort to sustain high coverage rates in your community. Listen and share your views respectfully, build and maintain open and trusting relationships, and yours may be the words that encourage another person to vaccinate.

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