

Countering misinformation about COVID-19 shots for young children

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When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention endorsed both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines for [all children ages](#)

[six months to five years](#) on June 18, 2022, it opened the door for nearly 20 million children to get vaccinated.

While this news comes as a relief to many parents who have been anxiously waiting to get their [young children](#) vaccinated, a May 2022 survey found that the majority of parents with children under five [feel they don't have enough information](#) about the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines for this age group. About 40% also said that information from federal health agencies, such as the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration, about vaccines for this age group was confusing.

This is particularly concerning because confusing messaging from public health agencies opens the door for anti-[vaccine](#) activities on social media that target vulnerable parents.

We are a team of [medical](#) and [public health](#) professionals at the University of Pittsburgh. We have [extensive experience](#) researching [vaccine misinformation on social media](#) and [working with community partners](#) to [address vaccine hesitancy](#), counter misinformation and [promote vaccine equity](#).

Through this work, we have seen and studied the ways that anti-vaccine activists on social media target vulnerable parents who are trying to navigate the challenges of digesting [health information](#) to make appropriate choices for their children.

Social media and vaccine misinformation

Anti-vaccine activists are a small but vocal group. According to research conducted by the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate, [just 12 social media accounts](#)—the "disinformation dozen"—are [behind the majority](#) of anti-vaccine posts on Facebook. Studies also show that only

[about 2% of parents](#) reject all vaccines for their children. [A larger group](#), or about 20% of parents, can more accurately be described as vaccine hesitant, which means they are undecided about having their children receive vaccines [as recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention](#).

When it comes to COVID-19 shots, as of May 2022 about 20% of parents with children ages six months to five years said they would [get their child vaccinated right away](#). Another 25% said they would wait to see how the vaccine is working, and 35% said they would definitely not get their child vaccinated.

It can be difficult for parents to sort through the large amount of information available about COVID-19 vaccines—both true and untrue. In their search for answers, [some parents turn to social media platforms](#). The problem is, these parents are often targeted by anti-vaccine activists who are better organized and [more skilled at tailoring their messages](#) to the [varied concerns of people who are vaccine hesitant](#) than are pro-vaccine activists.

Social media, in particular, has been [a primary vehicle](#) for the spread of misinformation. Although sometimes misinformation is blatantly false, [other times it is more like a game of telephone](#). A kernel of truth gets modified slightly as it is retold, which ends up becoming something untrue. Unfortunately, exposure to COVID-19 misinformation has been shown to [reduce people's intent to get vaccinated](#).

Addressing parents' vaccine concerns

So how can pediatricians and other [health care professionals](#) empower parents to feel confident in the choice to get their children vaccinated for COVID-19?

The answer may lie in working with communities to promote the vaccine as trustworthy instead of simply asking communities to trust it. We are part of the Pittsburgh Community Vaccine Collaborative, which is a community-academic partnership that seeks to ensure equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccines. Through that effort, we have focused on [building trustworthiness of the vaccines](#) and of the providers and health systems that are offering the vaccines in their communities.

[Health care providers are a trusted source of information](#) for COVID-19 vaccine information, but they are not the only sources. [Research has found](#) that it is important to lean on the expertise and voices of [community partners](#), community health workers and religious leaders.

Our research suggests that pediatricians and public health professionals [can effectively use social media](#) to promote vaccination and provide families with reputable scientific information to address their questions and concerns. Results of a survey that was [published in Academic Pediatrics](#) found that 96% of parents used social media. Of those, 68% reported using it for health information.

For example, [a pediatric group](#) we partner with [uses comedy combined with information](#) to combat myths and answer questions about the COVID-19 vaccines.

[Research shows](#) that parents who report high COVID-19 vaccine intention for themselves also report high COVID-19 vaccine intention for their children. Therefore, talking about vaccines as a family may be helpful in combating misinformation around the COVID-19 vaccine. In addition, parents who have had their children vaccinated can use social media to share their experiences and [make it feel more normal](#) and accepted among their peers.

We have also learned that promoting [media literacy](#), which encourages

people to question the media information they come into contact with, can empower [parents](#) to sift through the "[infodemic](#)" of COVID-19 vaccine information.

While [social media](#) platforms have announced policies of removing vaccine misinformation, [research suggests](#) this is not always effective at reducing the influence of such misinformation. Learning how to find the source of a piece of information and thinking about who are the intended targets may help people determine whether the information is true or distorted.

Next steps

Addressing COVID-19 vaccine misinformation can feel overwhelming. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has [helpful information for parents](#) to support making decisions around the COVID-19 vaccine. Parents can also have conversations with their children about media literacy and evaluating information. And they can talk to their children—especially adolescent-age children—about how getting the COVID-19 vaccine can protect them and others.

For questions around COVID-19 vaccines for children of all ages, we recommend you talk with your pediatrician or another health care provider. During that visit, you can also make sure your child is up to date on other vaccines, as [studies have shown](#) that vaccine rates for routine childhood vaccines have decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increasing COVID-19 vaccine rates for [children](#) is important to promote their health and wellness, as well as to move closer to ending the pandemic.

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