

Policy for Management of Unvaccinated Pediatric Patients Being Referred for Care by UAB Department of Pediatrics Faculty

Immunizations have had an enormous impact on the health of children, and the prevention of disease by vaccination is one of the seminal public health achievements of the last century. However, over the past decade, as the incidence of many vaccine-preventable diseases has markedly declined, vaccine acceptance has been challenged by individuals and groups who question their benefit.¹ Increasing numbers of people are requesting alternative vaccination schedules^{2,3} or postponing or declining vaccination.⁴ In some parts of the country, the use of "personal belief exemptions" from vaccinations has grown to rates in excess of 5% of the school age population.⁵ While vaccine hesitancy is not a new phenomenon, it may have a greater impact on public health today since the ease of global travel allows vaccine preventable diseases to spread more quickly, potentially appearing in areas where professionals are unfamiliar with their clinical presentation.

The position of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is that, after acknowledging the varied concerns of vaccine-hesitant parents, the pediatrician needs to optimize the strategy used to communicate with the parents about the development and safety testing of vaccines, the reasons for immunizing, and the risks of not doing so. The single most important aspect of communication with vaccine hesitant parents is to clearly articulate the message that "vaccines are safe and effective, and serious disease can occur if your child and family are not immunized." The safety of the currently recommended vaccines administered according to their established schedules was strongly affirmed by the Institute of Medicine in 2013.⁶ It is important to present this safety information in a non-confrontational dialogue with the parents, while listening to and validating their concerns. Misconceptions should be corrected, but it is important to remember that parents, just as pediatricians, ultimately are concerned for their child's health and well-being.⁷

The University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Pediatrics strongly supports the AAP in its advocacy of vaccines as life-saving medicines. The Department's position is that all children should be fully immunized utilizing the current vaccine schedule (http://redbook.solutions.aap.org/SS/Immunization_Schedules.aspx). The "on time" delivery of vaccines is the only effective way to prevent what have in the past been severe and often fatal childhood illnesses, and delaying of any vaccine past the recommended administration date greatly increases the period of time that a child remains susceptible to disease.⁸

The Department's Policy on Vaccination is summarized as follows:

- All children should be immunized according to the current vaccine schedule, unless there is a valid medical reason to not do so (a "medical exemption").
- For parents who are known to not follow the current vaccine schedule for their child/children, materials on the [UAB Department of Pediatrics website](#) can be provided to the parent during the healthcare encounter. This will occur even if the encounter is for a medical reason other than a vaccine preventable illness.
- If a child who is unimmunized and without medical exemption is referred to a subspecialist within the UAB Department of Pediatrics, it is requested that physicians from the Pediatric Infectious Diseases division see the patient initially in the Infectious

Diseases Clinic to discuss with the parent(s) the positive impact afforded by vaccines both to individual children and to society as a whole. This is designed to be mechanism to collaborate with the referring primary care physician to advocate for vaccination. While we request such a visit, we will not require it, and it is up to the primary care physician to determine who might benefit from such a referral. Appointments may be made by calling 205-934-2441. We will work to coordinate this visit with the other subspecialty referral appointment to minimize inconvenience for the family.

References

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