

COMMENTARY
FROM THE COMMUNITY

Countering vaccine skepticism



Illustration by Susan Santola, *Advance Local*

Addressing head-on the tsunami of opposition keeping kids from being vaccinated.

Richard M. Perloff

This is a battle America cannot afford to lose.

American childhood vaccination rates, long a marker of the nation's success in preventing the spread of contagious diseases, have dropped over the past four years. Less than 93% of kindergarteners received the measles vaccine last year, compared to about 95% before the pandemic, paralleling similar declines in immunization against chickenpox and polio, diseases that were long presumed to be scourges of the past. This may not seem to be a large drop, but epidemiologists emphasize that when vaccination rates fall to under 90% for measles, outbreaks are harder to control.

Indeed, as significantly fewer Americans consider childhood immunization to be important, and the proportion of religious or related exemptions from school vaccines have increased, the drops in vaccinations have led to worrisome outbreaks. That's what occurred recently with a dramatic spread of measles cases in Texas and New Mexico among the unvaccinated.

While most American parents believe it is important to vaccinate their children, the rise in religious exemptions and unwarranted skepticism about vaccines, one of the great success stories of 20th-century medicine, have created pockets of children who remain unvaccinated. That poses potential risks of reducing herd immunity, the level at which contagious diseases cannot spread because the vast majority are protected through vaccination.

This vaccine skepticism received a psychologically contagious boost with the selection of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as U.S.

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Secretary of Health and Human Services. Kennedy is a disinformation disseminator who has long spread falsehoods about vaccines, claiming they are neither safe nor effective. But there are other systemic roots of vaccine skepticism, including increased populist distrust of medical scientists, vast amounts of misinformation about vaccines fueled by fears and anxieties, and the growth of a medical freedom movement that prizes individual rights over the collective duty to protect society's most vulnerable from deadly diseases.

Medical experts are increasingly concerned about the risks posed by vaccine skepticism and the likelihood it can lead to worrisome flare-ups, particularly among the unvaccinated.

As one who is pained by the outbreak of preventable diseases in fellow Americans, I am alarmed by these developments. As a persuasion scholar, I recognize that we can reduce dangerous skepticism about vaccines if we apply tried-and-true principles of attitude change that capitalize on the

maxim that a persuasive message is more likely to be effective if it connects with the mind of the individual who is the target of influence.

Persuasion research points to several strategies. The American Academy of Pediatrics, a respected medical group, should launch a full-court-press media campaign to emphasize the importance of childhood vaccinations, calling on suggestions carefully developed by medical experts. This pediatric professional group should also encourage their doctors, whose advice about vaccinations parents trust, to talk with patients, taking special pains to listen to their concerns, as empathy can help parents overcome resistance to vaccines. As Abraham Lincoln said, "If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend."

Medical communicators should gently employ two-sided messages, which are most likely to be effective if they acknowledge reasons why parents are skeptical about vaccines, but use evidence and personal experiences to rebut these views.

What's more, medical persuaders should turn to an unusual, but potentially powerful source to persuade individuals who have spiritual or religious objections to vaccinations: religious leaders. Faith leaders, who have the trust of more conservative Americans who frequently oppose vaccination, reduced resistance to COVID vaccines by emphasizing that trusted clergy members had themselves gotten vaccinated.

We will never totally eliminate hostility to vaccines among our increasingly restive, populist public, but with persuasive messages we can cut outbreaks and save kids' lives.

Perloff, a distinguished professor of communication and psychology at the Levin College of Public Affairs and Education at Cleveland State University, is author of "The Dynamics of Persuasion," 8th edition.