

Nature and fear: Two distinct mechanisms that shape pediatric vaccine-refusal in the US

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Statement of the Problem: Low childhood immunization rates and frequent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases threaten the health and well-being of our nation's children. While access to affordable vaccination plays a role in the current immunization state, most data point to parental vaccine-hesitancy and vaccine refusal. The United State and other countries have expended significant funding showcasing vaccine safety and disproving widely publicized links to health concerns such as autism. Despite these efforts, as many as 50% of parents consider themselves vaccine-hesitant. The purpose of this study is to describe parents' decision-making process as they choose to reject, delay or defer vaccination decisions for their children age 6 and under.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: In a qualitative field study, we elicited parents' vaccine associations as well as deep-rooted and complex vaccine stories to uncover the flawed causal knowledge parents possess about the safety and

need of vaccines, their reasoning biases, and main decision-making paths.

Findings: All parents were driven in their no-vaccine decisions by a strong desire to protect their children. However, two distinct decision-making paths emerged – a visceral fear mechanism that overrides or influences cognition and places parents in a state of anxiety and concern; and a rule-based, “nature knows best” mechanism, which veils parents in an unfounded optimism and perceived well-being.

Conclusion & Significance: Parents refusing or delaying vaccination represent a heterogeneous group, guided by distinct decision-making paths which instill different affective states. Effective communication of vaccine safety information should be affectively customized to the two groups of parents.

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