

MARKET RESEARCH: When schools communicate about vaccines required for attendance, which messages and messengers do parents and caregivers prefer?

In fall 2024, Healthier Generation surveyed parents and caregivers about messages related to vaccines required for school attendance. A total of 767 adults responded to the online survey.ⁱ We surveyed approximately equal numbers of adults from different geographic regions and racial/ethnic groups; the majority of respondents were women. Participants answered questions about vaccine requirements, trusted sources of medical advice, and sample school messages.

Key Findings

- **Doctors are by far the most trusted source of advice when it comes to making health care decisions like vaccines.** Over 80% of parents and caregivers cited family doctors or pediatricians as a trusted source. This high level of trust did not vary significantly across regions and racial/ethnic groups and is consistent with the findings of similar research.
- **By a margin of 7 to 1, parents and caregivers agreed that there are vaccines that should be necessary for school entry.** This result was also consistent across geographic regions and racial/ethnic groups.
- **Within the school system, communications from a school nurse are more highly trusted about healthcare options like vaccines** than communications from a principal or other staff member.
- **When asked to compare sample vaccine-related messages, 44% of respondents preferred a Q&A from school nurse, 34% chose a reminder from a school principal, and 22% selected an appeal from the president of a Parent-Teacher Association.**

Message Testing

A message from the school principal:

Dear families,

We are excited to welcome your children back to school in a few short weeks! As a reminder, students are required by state law to receive certain routine vaccinations, such as DTaP and MMR, in order to attend school.

If you have any questions about the requirements or need help obtaining vaccinations for your child, please call or email the school nurse. Students who do not meet the requirements at the start of school year may not be allowed to attend school until they are vaccinated.

34% of respondents preferred this message. Those who selected this message appreciated its brevity, respectful tone, and clear call to action, though some questioned whether parents would take the time to contact the school nurse as suggested. Some respondents felt this type of communication was beyond the scope and expertise of school personnel without a clinical background.

Sample response: *“I like that a message as important as this is coming directly from the principal of the school, who is also the head of the school. That builds confidence.”*

A message from the school nurse:

With many families scheduling check-ups before we return to school, I want to share some information from the CDC to answer common questions parents may have about vaccines.

Q: Are vaccines safe?

A: Yes. Vaccines are safe. The United States' long-standing vaccine safety system ensures that vaccines are as safe as possible. Millions of children safely receive vaccines each year. The most common side effects are mild, such as pain or swelling at the injection site.

Q: What are the risks and benefits of vaccines?

A: Vaccines can prevent infectious diseases that once killed or harmed many infants, children, and adults. Without vaccines, your child is at risk for getting seriously ill and suffering pain, disability, and even death from diseases like measles and whooping cough. The main risks associated with getting vaccines are side effects, which are almost always mild (redness and swelling at the injection site) and go away within a few days. Serious side effects after vaccination, such as a severe allergic reaction, are very rare and doctors and clinic staff are trained to treat them.

Q: Is there a link between vaccines and autism?

A: No. Scientific studies and reviews continue to show no relationship between vaccines and autism.

Please reach out if you have any questions. For more information about childhood vaccines, visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines

44% of parents and caregivers preferred this message. They liked the Q&A format and remarked that it was good information prepared thoughtfully. They also appreciated hearing from someone with a medical background.

Sample response: *"I love that you asked all the proper questions that a parent would normally be asking. I love that you thought about things that I wouldn't normally think about. That's what a nurse does, of course. And I would rather go to the nurse than the principal because sometimes nurses just think like parents."*

A message from the president of the Parent-Teacher Association:

Dear fellow parents,

As we prepare to return to school, I am reaching out on behalf of the PTA with a reminder about the importance of ensuring that all children are up to date on required vaccinations. Routine vaccinations protect your child, family, and everyone in the school community from life-threatening, preventable diseases. By ensuring that your child is up to date, you can play a critical role in keeping students safe and in school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to our school nurse.

22% of respondents preferred this message. They liked the tone of the communication and appreciated that the PTA was concerned about protecting the health of all children.

Sample response: *"I like how the letter is polite and to the point. I like how the PTA addresses the importance of vaccinations and how they protect everyone from illness and diseases."*

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Schools and school nurses play a key role in encouraging vaccine uptake.
- By a wide margin, parents and caregivers agree that children should be required to receive some vaccines to attend school.
- Parents and caregivers trust and value school nurses as a source of vaccine information.
- In school communications related to vaccines, parents and caregivers appreciate brevity, a respectful tone, and an information-sharing approach.
- To effectively reach the greatest number of families, we recommend that schools share communications related to vaccines from multiple messengers.

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