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Project studying best ways to communicate with parents about vaccines

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, studies documented low vaccine confidence among some parents, with pockets of under-immunization leading to outbreaks of measles and other diseases. The pandemic has brought these concerns into sharper focus, as global vaccine hesitancy threatens the ability of public health leaders to control the spread of the virus.

Due to the importance of vaccines to the pediatric population, the Academy has embarked on a research project in vaccine communications and messaging to shift public attitudes toward greater vaccine acceptance.

The AAP commissioned the FrameWorks Institute, a social science and communications research firm, to conduct formative research and develop and test a message framework for childhood and adolescent immunizations.

FrameWorks will synthesize the information that pediatricians and other medical experts want the public to know about immunizations and compare these messages with an analysis of public thinking and beliefs about vaccines. Taking the gaps between the experts' and public's views into consideration, FrameWorks will suggest strategies to frame

conversations about immunizations. These strategies will be tested in interviews, surveys and other research methods.

Upon completion, the recommended communications strategies will be offered to AAP members and partner organizations. FrameWorks has completed similar projects on topics such as immigration, child and adolescent development, and climate change.

As part of its project with the AAP, FrameWorks recently completed an extensive literature review (<https://bit.ly/2SURo2I>) that provides an overview of public thinking about vaccinations and on communication strategies that have been suggested or tested.

Among the findings:

- It's important to reach people early in their information-seeking process because they tend to be more open to information at that stage.
- Personalized interactions like motivational interviewing or two-way online feedback can help parents with concerns about vaccines feel greater trust in their child's health care provider.
- Explaining how vaccines work and the risks of diseases can help build understanding and shift attitudes about immunizations, especially with the use of examples or conceptual metaphors.
- Stressing the individual health benefits of vaccination may be more effective at shifting behaviors than focusing on herd immunity.
- Employing personal narratives and values-driven messages may increase the effectiveness of messages.

Additional phases will be published this fall, with work continuing into 2022.

A group of stakeholders has been meeting since January to provide insights and feedback on the research project as well as other activities related to vaccine communications. The group includes the chairs of more than 15 committees, councils, sections and other AAP groups that are concerned with various aspects of immunizations.

"Effectively communicating with families about the COVID-19 vaccines as well as all childhood and adolescent immunizations is crucial to our success as pediatricians," said AAP President Lee Savio Beers, M.D., FAAP. "This work should provide a strong, evidence-based foundation for all of the conversations we have with parents, other advocates and policymakers."

The AAP Friends of Children Fund provided financial support for the first phase of the project.