AAP, White House encourage clinicians to combat COVID vaccine misinformation

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Roughly 2.6 million children ages 5-11 years — about 10% of this age group — have gotten a COVID-19 vaccine in the first two weeks of eligibility, according to federal officials.

“Our challenge is not just to handle this initial surge in the younger children but to sustain our outreach, make the vaccine more accessible and counsel those with questions,” said AAP President-elect Moira A. Szilagyi, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP.

Dr. Szilagyi and Anthony Fauci, M.D., chief medical adviser for President Joe Biden, teamed up to answer questions from clinicians as part of a ThisIsOurShot/VacunateYa coalition.

While the pace of vaccination for ages 5-11 years is accelerating since gaining final approval on Nov. 2, experts fear it will level off as it has for adolescents. About 50% of children ages 12-17 years are fully vaccinated.

Dr. Fauci called online misinformation and disinformation “a formidable problem.” He encouraged clinicians to share factual data on social media and not to let the opposition
deter them.

“The fact is you really do need to focus like a laser beam on what your goal and what your mission is,” he said. “There’s so much noise today with misinformation, disinformation and all the things we all go through. ... Just focus on the importance of what you’re doing. We have lives to save.”

The AAP is helping spread the facts via social media, traditional media, HealthyChildren.org, biweekly town hall meetings, interim guidance, vaccine resources for pediatricians and a free PediaLink course on communicating with families about vaccines.

Dr. Szilagyi also gave advice Wednesday about counseling hesitant families in pediatric practices. She suggested asking them to share their concerns and emphasizing the rigorous testing the vaccines have undergone.

“It’s probably the most rigorous in history of any immunization,” she said. “It’s been found over and over again to be safe and highly effective.”

While myocarditis after vaccination has grabbed headlines, it is extremely rare. It also is less common and less severe after vaccination than it is after COVID-19 infection, Dr. Szilagyi said.

While COVID-19 in children often is mild, that is not always the case. More than 67,000 children have been hospitalized, and more than 900 have died, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In clinical trials, efficacy of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine was nearly 91% for ages 5-11 years and 100% for ages 12-15 years.

“COVID-19 vaccines can and do protect children and they enable the resumption of regular activities,” Dr. Fauci said.

For parents whose children are too young to be vaccinated before the holidays, Dr. Fauci suggests surrounding them with vaccinated adults.

“We’re not living in a vacuum,” he said. “You get vaccinated, not only do you protect yourself, you protect your family, and you also fulfill your societal responsibility because the lower the level of dynamics in the community, the less chance anybody has of getting infected.”

Resources

- Watch the ThisIsOurShot event via Facebook.
- AAP News story “Answers to lingering questions about vaccinating 5- to 11-year-olds”
- CDC interim clinical considerations for COVID-19 vaccines
- AAP resources on becoming a vaccinator, preparing a pediatric practice for COVID-19 vaccination and getting paid
- Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on vaccines for children