

INFORMATION

from Focus on the Family

Talking to Your Children About HPV Vaccine

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To gain preliminary understanding about HPV and the vaccines, we invite you to read our companion fact sheet, “[HPV Vaccine: What Parents Need to Know](#)”(FX450) and Focus on the Family’s [position statement on Human Papillomavirus Vaccines \(MS006\)](#).

Introduction

After reading “HPV Vaccine: What Parents Need to Know,” you hopefully feel more confident in your knowledge of the basic facts about HPV and the vaccine. However, talking to children and appropriately educating them is still a challenge.

The most unique and new aspect of this issue is that the HPV vaccine is the first developed for an infection that is exclusively sexually transmitted. Therefore, talking to children about its availability involves talking about sexuality. We need not fear this process. This can be a wonderful opportunity and teachable moment to build upon, or even correct, the previous values and sexual education that we have given our child.

All children are different in personality and will have varied reactions to the news of this vaccine. Some may simply ignore it and accept that it’s a shot they may or may not receive. Some children will hear various forms of information from their friends. This information is often not reliable and parents must make sure children know the truth. Other children, who are normally more inquisitive, will want to talk more about this subject. Every reaction will necessitate talking about sexuality at an age-appropriate level, as this topic is at the very center of any discussion on sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

When do I begin to talk to my child about sexuality?

We begin to teach children about relationships the first time we hold them in our arms. This may be immediately after birth or it may be when the child is older at the time they are adopted. Whenever this first embrace is offered, the child begins to learn to trust or distrust. Ideally we begin to answer questions about gender and sexuality as soon as our child asks. This can be as young as 18 months for some children! We should answer these questions briefly and in an age-appropriate manner.

All behavior, not just direct conversation, transmits messages about our maleness, femaleness and sexuality. We begin to teach our children about this vital area of their lives from the time they are tiny tots. When our children reach 9 to 12 years-old, we know how they will react to new information – especially that of a private nature – and can prepare accordingly. Further, by this developmental stage, we are beginning to observe our children as blossoming adolescents who are becoming interested in relationships and sexuality. This presents great “conversation starters” with youth of this age. But remember, pre-teens are normally concrete thinkers! We need to use direct language and simple concepts with the realization that most children at this stage will not fully understand nuance, sarcasm or vague symbolism.

What do our children need to know about this vaccine?

The following are some basic statements that may be helpful in talking to your kids about the HPV vaccine. Child-friendly wording is used in order to simplify the language to the conceptual level for 9 to 12 year-olds.

- It's clearly written in the Bible that God wants us to save *all* kinds of sex for marriage. This is so that you will be protected from diseases that are spread from one person to another through sexual contact and so that you can fully enjoy God's plan for your life. By keeping your eyes on God you will more likely make good behavior choices that will keep you safe from sexually transmitted infections.
- HPV is an infection that is given to one person from another who is already infected. It is passed on through sexual contact – that means any type of touching that involves private sexual parts.
- HPV or Human Papillomavirus is a virus that causes an infection which, in some cases, can lead to some forms of cancer.
- You cannot become infected with this virus from holding hands, hugging or kissing.
- A vaccine is a shot that is given to you to prevent diseases.
- There is now a shot that can be given to help prevent you from getting some types of HPV.
- This vaccine will protect people who receive it from *some* forms of HPV but *not all* forms. People still take the shot, though, to protect against the types of this virus that are most likely to cause cancer and genital warts.
- No vaccination is *always* effective.
- The shot is given to children at your age because it is most effective if it's given at a young age and it will, most likely, protect you all of your adult life.
- Some people and your friends at school may say wrong things to you about this vaccine, like, "It's safe and okay now to have sex." That's not the case and I want you to hear the truth from me. Ask *me* if you have questions about things you hear from other people.
- This shot will not protect you from any other sexually transmitted infection or other types of HPV. It will not protect you from pregnancy. Not having sex is the only choice that offers full protection against STIs and pregnancy.
- In addition to not having sex, some people choose to add the protection of this shot because we can't always predict what will happen in the future and how we might be unexpectedly exposed to this virus.
- You avoid HPV and other STIs by the decisions you make to stay away from sexual contact. This is better protection than any vaccine because it's God's plan for people before they are married.

Take this opportunity to talk

Remember that 9 to 12 year-olds are usually quite open to talking about sexuality with their parents. They listen well and ask direct questions. This, most likely, will change. Typically middle school age children begin to feel increasingly less comfortable talking about sexuality with their parents. *Seize this moment* to talk with your child about your family's values and God's plan for sexuality. This may be one of the best opportunities you have to speak truth into your child's life. Take advantage of this teachable moment.

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