

## **What 20 Years of Listening to Vaccine-Hesitant Parents Has Taught Me**

**Jennifer Reich, The New York Times, September 30, 2025**

In the 20 years I've spent researching vaccine decisions, I have spoken to plenty of parents who reject shots for their children. Some say vaccines are never safe or necessary or that polio went away on its own and the vaccine wrongly got credit. I've heard comparisons of vaccines to snake venom. In reality, however, the number of people who reject all vaccines is quite small — so small that they are unlikely to compromise public health.

The greater issue, the one we don't discuss often enough, is the many parents who don't identify as being opposed to vaccines but don't always consent to them.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, one-quarter to one-third of American parents were delaying vaccines or picking and choosing them cafeteria-style, deciding certain vaccines weren't relevant to their family because they believed the risk for the disease was low. [...]

Often, these families don't consider themselves anti-vaccine. They just trust their own judgment more than expert recommendations. But the outcome is the same: Their children are not immunized at the ages when they're most vulnerable to the worst outcomes of infection and can spread disease to others.

The growth of vaccine hesitance in America may feel inexplicable, ignorant or irrational to those who feel confident in their decisions to vaccinate. Yet my research suggests that this approach to vaccines is entirely logical in a culture that insists that health is the result of hard work and informed consumer decisions and too often sees illness as a personal failure.

In many ways, especially now, parents who reject vaccines are following expert advice. Myriad parenting books and specialists have encouraged women, starting during pregnancy, to see themselves as experts on their children and to trust their instincts. This matches public health messaging, which over the past several decades moved away from collective aims like improving the quality of air and water toward a focus on behavior modifications, like diet and exercise. It also echoes the recommendations of the health and human services secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose Make America Healthy Again campaign insists Americans can take control of their own health with wider use of wearable technology and more focus on nutrition.[...]

Parents who refuse vaccines don't necessarily deny the seriousness of some vaccine-preventable diseases. Polio, they know, was a serious disease but hasn't spread in the United States since 1979. Chickenpox they remember as uncomfortable, but most recall recovering without incident. Vaccines, they reason, should feel relevant to their lives — and when they don't, universal recommendations and mandates for school attendance can feel unnecessary or even oppressive. The impact of their vaccine choices on others is not necessarily part of their calculation. And why should it be? There are few other arenas in which parents are asked to consider the effects of their choices on other children.

But collective investments make personal choice possible. High-quality food is possible because of public investment in food inspection and testing. Crosswalks and traffic rules, maintained and enforced collectively, make it possible for kids to walk safely to school. Vaccines are often taken for granted, and their widespread use has prevented countless miscarriages, serious illnesses and child deaths.[...]

Most parents choose to vaccinate their children. Yet the growing unease with vaccines reflects how many parents now feel they must trust their own judgment rather than expert advice that feels generic, impersonal or politicized. What leaders should be communicating is that while a healthy lifestyle and good parenting are important, they are not adequate protection against infectious disease. This was made tragically clear when one unvaccinated child died of measles this year while her siblings in the same house recovered.

The current administration is unlikely to offer clarity here. But other health leaders — including individual doctors, researchers and health care organizations — should. Americans have a long history of facing challenges together. Vaccine science, often paid for by the people for the people, is part of that story. Rather than leave parents to mitigate risks beyond their control, real leadership would remind us that we need one another to ensure all our children are safe and healthy.

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