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Parents Ask: Am I Risking Autism if I Vaccinate my Children?

Rhea Paul

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There is *no evidence* that autism is caused by any vaccine or any additive or preservative ever used in one. There have been large, well-controlled studies done all over the Western world that have confirmed this finding over and over again. There is no reason for any parent to deny a child the crucial protection today's vaccines offer out of misguided fear that doing so would increase the risk for autism. Although science can never absolutely prove that something will not happen—we can't be absolutely 100% sure that it will never snow on Jan. 1 in Kinsangani in the equatorial Congo, for instance—science can reassure us that the likelihood of certain events is vanishingly small. But apart from thinking about how tiny the risk of an action like providing children with vaccinations might be, we also need to think about the risk of taking the opposite action. What are the risks of NOT vaccinating your children?

Most parents of children today never experienced any of the classic childhood diseases because they themselves were vaccinated. But I am old enough to remember when things were different. Although I did receive some of the first polio vaccines, immunizations for the other then-common childhood diseases were not available when I was a kid. Let me tell you about these diseases. Between the time I was about four and about seven, I contracted measles, mumps, what we then called German measles or rubella, what we called whooping cough or pertussis, chicken pox, and scarlet fever. So did my younger brother and sister, but I always seemed to get the most severe case. When I got chicken pox I developed severe scarring, particularly on my forehead, and for my whole life I have

always felt I had to wear my hair in a certain way to hide the scars. If you have never seen a child with whooping cough, I hope you never have to, because even though I was only four when I had it, I still remember how painful that cough was, and how scary it was to feel I couldn't breathe. I can hardly imagine what my parents must have felt hearing me cough and gasp for breath like that for weeks on end. My parents were shopkeepers. They had no employees; they ran their store together and when we kids were sick, my father had to run it alone. Although my brother and sister usually recovered in a week or two, I was down for weeks with each infection. As a complication of one of these bouts, I developed rheumatic fever. I was hospitalized, then when I developed heart complications, transferred from our local hospital to Children's in Philadelphia, 3 hours from my home. With a toddler and an infant at home and a store to run, my parents weren't at the hospital much. I was five, and I can still see myself in that hospital bed; still feel the fierce loneliness I experienced during my time there. I developed a chronic heart murmur. I wasn't allowed to participate in any sports or vigorous activities during my childhood. The murmur had to be monitored during each of children's births. I still have to take antibiotics whenever I have any kind of potential bleeding, even in a procedure as simple as a dental cleaning. Given the choice, I would never have opted to risk that my own children would suffer as I did. I'm deeply grateful that I was able to protect them from these illnesses.

But really, I was lucky. My complications were relatively limited. Anyone who has seen the movie *The Miracle Worker*, knows that Helen Keller was a precocious 18 month old who had already started to talk when she was struck with measles, which was accompanied by encephalitis, leaving her blind and deaf for life. In the 1960s there was an epidemic of rubella, which infected pregnant

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women, causing damage to their not-yet-born children. There is a cohort of people who are now adults living with severe disabilities—deafness, blindness, and mental retardation—as a result of this epidemic. And children die from these diseases, too. They didn't in Western countries for quite a while because immunization was virtually universal. But they did before the advent of vaccines, and they are again now that parents are abstaining from them. Seven unvaccinated children died last year in the UK from these diseases.

If we were to compare risks mathematically, the risk of death or disability as a result of not vaccinating a child, while small, is significantly larger than the (probably near zero) risk of causing an autism spectrum disorder by immunizing. Some parents may say, “I don't care how small the risk is, I don't want to take it with my child.” But the truth is if you refuse to take one immensely small risk, you are exposing your child to a much larger one; the risk of contracting and suffering severe complications of a disease from which protection is readily, cheaply, and almost painlessly available.

Maybe you have heard that the reason the “establishment” is in favor of vaccination is because it makes money for the drug companies. Maybe you've been told there is a conspiracy to suppress the risks of vaccination to keep money flowing to the pharmaceutical houses and their stock holders; or that government officials worked with drug firms to keep risks quiet because they were “on the take.” Although drug companies do make some money

from vaccines, no one has ever been able to establish that there has been financial malfeasance of any kind among supporters of vaccination. In fact, the opposite is true. Dr. Paul Offit has shown how many of the most vocal vaccine critics are in league with, and receive funds from lawyers who want to get big settlements from drug companies and the government by suing for alleged damage to children.

We live in complex times; yes, there are many difficult choices and real risks that parents need to weigh in making sure our children grow up safe, healthy, and prepared for the demands of this fast-changing world. But deciding whether or not to vaccinate is not one of these difficult choices. The benefits are clear and inarguable. The risks are miniscule. On the other hand, the risks of not vaccinating are sizable and getting larger. As more people refuse vaccination, these diseases have increased opportunities to take hold, spread, and infect a larger proportion of the unprotected. Vaccines for childhood illnesses are a blessing we ought to celebrate. Not only do they save lives and protect against serious disability, they reduce suffering for children and their families, who won't have to face as many challenges as my parents did in dealing with children who are very sick for a lot of their childhood. This argument ought to be long over. There are so many more pressing needs for children with autism and their families to confront. We ought to work together to overcome those, and not waste any more time and treasure on this dead horse.