



# PREVIEW

## IMMUNIZATION: MYTHS, MISCONCEPTIONS, AND MISINFORMATION



WOMEN THINKING, INC. (WT) AND THE JAMES RANDI EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION (JREF)

In 2011, Women Thinking, inc. and the James Randi Educational Foundation, as part of the Hug Me! I'm Vaccinated campaign, set out to determine what real parents thought about immunization. By distributing surveys (253 in total) at baby and parenting-themed expos that took place in three distinct areas of the country, we got a sense of people's feelings on vaccine safety, their beliefs about disease risk, and the media sources they turn to when they need an answer about these subjects. Here are some of the results we found.

### **Even anti-vaccination advocates know that vaccines protect against disease.**

By tailoring our early questions to determine who trusted vaccines and who didn't, we were able to divide the participants into three groups, which we dubbed pro-vaccine, vaccine-averse, and vaccine-unsure. When we asked them to agree or disagree with the statement

"Vaccines provide protection from contracting infectious diseases," 82% of participants agreed including 47% of the most vaccine-averse responders. Almost half of those choosing not to immunize are doing so despite the understanding that vaccines protect, not because of a lack of understanding or a rejection of that point.

Even when reading a statement about vaccines being victims of their own success—i.e., disease rates are now so low that we no longer need to immunize against the rarer ones—most the participants didn't buy it, including 41% of those who sincerely distrust vaccines.

Vaccine advocates spend a lot of time and energy spreading the message that immunizing protects against disease, and that even the ones you've never heard of can still come back if we get lax on vaccinations. It's clear that people already know that. We should shift our focus.

### **Parents really do think that vaccines cause autism.**

With the answers about disease protection looking so optimistic, it almost started to look like vaccine advocates were happily wrong on all fronts when it came to parental knowledge. Unfortunately, only 37% disagreed when faced with the statement that vaccines cause autism. Even a whopping 39% of the pro-vaccine respondents—those who shouldn't need convincing—said they were unsure. What's more, our statement recounting the tale of Andrew Wakefield and his single fraudulent study proved to be the least persuasive argument we posed in our survey. It's beginning to look like vaccine advocates' repeated exclamations that vaccines do not cause autism are just leading parents to wonder if they might. In short, the vaccine-autism myth is one we'll

have to spend time fighting, but we shouldn't make it our focus to avoid giving it too much weight in parents' minds.

### **Parents don't trust the government or the pharmaceutical industry.**

It might seem obvious, but it was a question worth asking. When they encountered statements declaring that the WHO and CDC downplay vaccine risks, that vaccines contain large doses of toxic chemicals, or that the government was in the pocket of Big Pharma, the parents who disagreed were in the minority. Vaccine advocates have often been quick to brush off these concerns. In contrast to what many think, the people who believe these things are not fringe extremists; rather, they make up a large majority of parents with children. Perhaps the best strategy is for organizations that are not affiliated with the government or the pharmaceutical industry to play up that fact to help gain the trust of their target audience.

### **Most people aren't aware they need immunization boosters.**

Diseases like whooping cough are making a comeback in this country. The Tdap vaccine protects against whooping cough, and though most people got this vaccine as a child, it needs to be renewed every 10 years (and given as soon as possible to anyone whose last tetanus shot was in 2007 or earlier) in order to maintain the body's immunity. We found that even among the most pro-vaccine respondents, more than a third didn't know that some vaccines required boosters. Because persuading an anti-vaccine advocate that vaccines are safe is harder than educating someone who's already pro-vaccine about the need for boosters, the latter is one of the most efficient and effective ways to make sure as many people as possible are up-to-date on all their vaccinations.

### **Parents pay attention when not vaccinating is turned into an active choice.**

"I wouldn't put my child into a car without a safety belt or a car seat. I won't put my child at risk by leaving him/her without immunizations, either. It's my responsibility to make sure my child is protected from dangerous illnesses." This argument turns the act of passively failing to vaccinate one's child into a voluntary action, and it convinces two thirds of our survey respondents. Because it frames a simple lack of action as presenting their children with a real threat akin to a car crash, parents can visualize the harm that can result from their unwillingness to act. This is an uncommon strategy, but it has proven to be an effective one.

*This is a sample of the survey report. Full results will be released August 2012.*

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