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COVID-19: Vaccine Conflict and Holiday Gatherings

The holidays, by tradition, are a time to be together with family. These gatherings can be opportunities to strengthen family bonds and celebrate the joy of the season. Sometimes, they can also bring differences and conflicts to the surface. This year, a new source of potential conflict has emerged around the perceived risks of COVID-19 and the protective value of vaccinations.

If you have been vaccinated against COVID-19 but other family members have chosen not to be, how should you approach holiday gatherings this year? How can you plan for gatherings without divisive arguments and come together safely?

Balancing Health and Safety with Close Family Relationships

The tension in this new conflict is between the desire to protect yourself and the people you love from the harms of COVID-19 and the desire to maintain close and happy family relationships.

In other types of conflict—over political differences, for example—the risks in coming together as an extended family lay in the possibility of heated arguments and hurt feelings. Those could be avoided, in many families, by steering the conversation in another direction, agreeing to disagree, or simply going into another room when a conversation became uncomfortable. In disagreements over the risks of COVID-19 and the value of vaccinations, the stakes feel higher. People who are afraid of the vaccine see risks to their health in getting vaccinated. At the same time, if care is not taken to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 at a family gathering, people could get sick or even die—and unvaccinated people may put others at greater risk.

Nobody wants to cause another family member harm, so the question becomes how to navigate differences in belief to create a gathering that is safe while preserving family harmony. Here's a framework that may help you find a comfortable solution.

1. Decide on your boundaries.

As a first step, take some time to consider your family's risk from COVID-19 and your values when it comes to protecting the people you love from potential harm. Do you have children who are too young to be vaccinated? Are you or another family member at a higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 because of age or an underlying health condition? How worried are you about the risk to vulnerable family members from COVID-19?

Consider, too, the emotional benefit of getting together with family for the holidays. How much joy and strength will you, your children, your older relatives, or other family members draw from being together?

With those considerations in mind, decide on your boundaries—for this holiday season, at this stage in the COVID-19 pandemic, and with your particular family relationships.

2. Consider your options.

As a next step, consider your options for celebrating the holidays this year. For each of the ways you might celebrate the holidays, think about the ways you might make the experience more enjoyable and less risky. You have a wide range of options when you include all of these factors. You and your extended family might do any of the following:

- Celebrate the holidays in your own households, connecting with others by phone or video. To make a virtual celebration feel closer, you could try these ideas:
 - Prepare and eat your traditional holiday meal at the same time.
 - Share a holiday activity, like decorating cookies, while you are on the phone or video.
 - Share pictures of the ways you have decorated your home.
- Get together outdoors, if the weather is nice, for a meal, a walk, or another family activity. The risk of transmitting COVID-19 is much lower outdoors than it is indoors.

- Get together indoors with agreed-on measures to minimize the risk of spreading the virus. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one of the most effective ways to protect yourself and others from COVID-19 at an indoor gathering is by getting vaccinated when you are eligible. However, there are additional ways to make the gathering safer. Here are some examples (these measures are most effective if everyone at the gathering follows them):
 - Keep windows open to maximize ventilation.
 - Test for COVID-19 the day before the gathering, and stay home if the results are positive.
 - Wear masks.
 - Do not use public transportation (planes, trains, or buses) to travel to the gathering.
 - Keep the gathering small.
 - Keep the gathering short.
- Combine virtual and in-person gatherings. Celebrate together in different locations, with one group gathering in one place and other households or individuals joining by phone or video.

3. Talk about your plans well ahead of time.

With your boundaries in mind, and considering the many options for gathering safely, talk with other members of your family about plans for the gathering well ahead of time. That will give everyone a chance to come to terms with differing concerns and priorities and make decisions about their own choices. As you have the conversations, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Be clear about your values and boundaries. Be open and honest in explaining what you'd prefer, what you'd be comfortable with, and what you'd consider to be unsafe for yourself and other members of your household. Use "I" statements ("I'm not comfortable with..." "I'd be happy if...") rather than "you" statements ("You don't..." or "You never...").
- Don't judge. If others have different boundaries, priorities, and beliefs about the risks of COVID-19 and vaccination, don't judge them. Accept that good people can have strongly held beliefs and opinions that differ from yours.
- Stick to the matter at hand. You're trying to figure out how to spend the holidays. Don't take on the added mission of trying to change other people's thinking about COVID-19 and vaccinations if their beliefs are deeply held.
- Avoid the trap of all-or-nothing choices. You and your family have a wide range of options for celebrating the holidays together this year. If you find people insisting on only one way of getting together, remind them of the many different ways they might do that safely and ways the family might include everyone, even people who aren't able or willing to attend an indoor gathering.
- Listen with an open mind. In conversations that cross wide differences of opinion, it's always a good idea to listen more and talk less. Don't be dismissive of other views. Listen and ask questions to understand, even if you disagree.
- Remember that you can't control other people. You are free to make your own decisions about how you spend the holidays and how you keep yourself and your immediate household safe from COVID-19, and others are too. Don't waste energy trying to change what's out of your control.
- Show that you care. You may end up agreeing to disagree about the risks of COVID-19 and the benefits of vaccination, but make it clear that you agree on the importance of close family relationships. Show respect, and be kind. Tell your family members that you love them and care about them, and that you want to spend time with them, even if it's not in the way they would prefer. Then do your best to make it a happy holiday, however you decide to spend it.

Source: Morgan, H. (2021, October). *COVID-19: Vaccine conflict and holiday gatherings* (C. Meeker, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Communicating With Relatives Who Provide Child Care

Many families find that when a relative cares for children, it's a positive experience for everyone: Children and family members get to know each other and parents have someone they really trust looking after the kids—someone with babysitting rates they can afford! However, things can get tricky when it comes to the down-and-dirty business of who's in charge and what kind of care a child receives. Even though you're related, every family member will not agree about everything that child care involves. Following these steps for healthy communication may help families find their way together.

Step 1: Set ground rules.

Grandma or Grandpa (or whomever) may have been caring for your child for awhile now, but it's never too late to make sure you're on the same page about expectations. Either in writing or verbally, take the time to address things like the following:

- **Payment**—What money will be paid and when, or other compensation agreed upon.
- **Schedules**—When kids will get dropped off, picked up, and what the day will look like when it comes to meals, games, naps, and so forth.
- **Food**—What gets eaten for snacks and meals, and who'll provide the food.
- **Behavior**—What the kids are and aren't allowed to do while under the relative's care. For extra insurance, it can also be helpful to discuss what sorts of behavior you expect from your relatives while your children are with them (i.e., no swearing, no smoking, etc.).

Step 2: Make sure everyone's heard.

Communicating clearly is sometimes harder than it seems, particularly with close family members. It can take a little extra effort, but try to:

- **Check in regularly** to see how things are going, and set aside a time at least every month to let your relative know they're appreciated and loved.
- **Listen to your children** so that you can share in their experiences; you may find yourself getting to know your relative in a whole new light!
- **Don't be afraid to be specific** about what you do and don't want to happen when you're gone, and bring up any concerns right away.
- **Encourage your relative to be honest** with you about whether they need extra help, or support such as training or current child care information. This is especially important with elders.

Step 3: Find a way to get your way.

Along the road, there will probably be times when you and your relative disagree about what's best for your children. The bottom line is that you are the parent. However, if you also want to keep your family intact and avoid major warfare, remember the following:

- **It's about your kid.** Try to phrase things in a way that includes your child's viewpoint ("Sarah gets confused when...") rather than making an accusation ("You're never consistent!"). Stress that your concerns are on behalf of your child, not because of any personal agenda.
- **Timing is everything.** Don't talk about any problems with the kids around. Pick a time to chat when both you and your relative aren't under stress or in a hurry. Going out together for coffee, lunch, or even just a walk can be a nice way to find private time to discuss your thoughts.
- **Disagree with love.** Even in the middle of a fight, remind yourself that you love this person you're trusting to care for your children. Make sure that they know it, too.
- **Pick your battles.** Decide what really matters to you and let go of the small stuff!

Step 4: Know when enough is enough.

Family members are often the best child care providers for any number of reasons, and things may work out beautifully for a long, long time. However, children grow and situations change; no one has to be at fault. Sooner or later, you might need to look into other child care options. However, staying open and observant should tell you when your relative—or your child—has simply had enough.

Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2019). Communicating with relatives who provide child care. Raleigh, NC: Author.

The Sandwich Years (Part 1): Tackling Finances

Globally, the number of people age 60 and older is growing faster than all other age groups, bringing new attention to the challenges faced by today's "sandwich generation." A term coined in the 1980s, the sandwich generation refers to working adults between the ages of 40 and 60 who are caring for older parents in some capacity while also raising a family. Often referred to in Europe as "the squeezed middle," this generation is dealing with multiple stressors related to balancing work and family.

One area of potential stress involves helping aging parents with financial matters. Darlette McCormick, Accredited Financial Counselor (AFC), Certified in Healthcare Compliance (CHC), is a financial counselor at Workplace Options, the world's largest independent provider of employee support solutions. Workplace Options has dedicated work-life consultants who help participants navigate a variety of elder care issues, including finances. According to McCormick, it is important to have financial conversations with parents, but both children and parents are often reluctant to start the conversation.

"Even though it is challenging, I encourage people to begin opening the lines of communication about finances with their parents sooner rather than later," says McCormick. "Unfortunately, I've worked with many clients who waited too late, and as a result, spent years trying to piece together loose ends. By working through some uncomfortable conversations now, while a parent's mind is strong, the entire family will be better prepared to manage the road ahead."

Below are some suggestions from Darlette on discussing financial matters with aging parents.

Start with casual conversations.

Begin opening the lines of communication with short, casual, financial conversations. As an example, Sarah recently mentioned to her mother that she switched banks and shared some of the reasons for the switch. Then, she asked her mom where she was currently banking and why. By having a nonthreatening conversation about her own place of banking, Sarah was setting the groundwork for longer conversations down the road. In addition, Sarah now knows where her mom is currently banking, should a situation arise.

Help parents pull a credit report.

A growing number of scam artists are targeting seniors. On an annual basis, offer to help your parents pull their credit report to look for red flags or suspicious activity. If they are willing to review the report with you, check to see if they are paying their bills on time or accumulating debt. This also opens the door to a more in-depth conversation about their overall financial wellbeing.

Bring in outside help.

If parents are reluctant to share their financial details with you or your sibling, offer to help them find a bookkeeper. This can be a less threatening step and allows parents to maintain their privacy and autonomy.

Discuss housing options.

The biggest expense for senior citizens is housing when they are no longer able to live independently. You need to know if your parents have savings set aside or if they qualify for any assistance. Are they willing to move in with you or a sibling when they are no longer able to live on their own?

Allison Harris, a work-life team lead who specializes in senior care, shares that in the United States there is a lot of misunderstanding about Medicare and Medicaid benefits, particularly when it comes to assisted living and nursing homes. In addition, the type of assistance varies significantly by state.

Alec Guan, a work-life consultant in the Shanghai office, says in China elderly parents traditionally move in with their adult children or live in a nearby apartment, although assisted living facilities are becoming more popular.

Involve key family members.

Difficulties arise when siblings and key family members are left in the dark, especially when it involves money. As much as possible, keep siblings and other important family members in the loop. A family meeting or conference call goes a long way in preventing miscommunication.

Source: Workplace Options. (2019). The sandwich years part I – Tackling finances. Raleigh: Author. Retrieved December 9, 2020, from <https://www.workplaceoptions.com>