

The shot that needles parents

"Don't ask, don't tell" is the only effective inoculation against the bad blood between vaxers and nonvaxers.

BY MELANIE HAIKEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SUGRUE



Amy Pine had her 2-year-old daughter, Frances, vaccinated—and thinks we'll all be in trouble if too many parents decide not to do the same.

Catherine, a 35-year-old Berkeley parent, has a secret she wants to keep from getting around: her two daughters, ages 4 and 1, haven't been fully immunized. She doesn't even want us to use her last name, for fear that she and her children will be kicked off the playground or not invited to birthday parties. "It's such a hot-button topic. I've heard of parents who pulled their child out of a playgroup when they found out another child in the group wasn't vaccinated," says Catherine. "We have friends who didn't vaccinate at all and friends whose son got really sick and are very pro-vaccination. People get so upset and angry that they just agree not to talk about it."

The decision to immunize your child may seem like a no-brainer, but it has become one of the most divisive topics among Bay Area parents and parents-to-be. ▶

Books with titles such as *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Children's Vaccinations* as well as similar seminars like one held at the Nurture Center in Lafayette have fed the flames among the well-educated and authority-questioning population of Bay Area parents. And these are not your stereotypical Waldorf-school hippie parents but a cross section of mainstream folks. "At least a third of the parents I see are questioning the vaccine schedule and choosing to cut out or put off at least some vaccines," says Janet Perlman, a popular East Bay pediatrician with offices in Berkeley and Oakland.

And it's hard to know who is and who isn't going this route. Since both public and private schools require immunization records at registration, most parents assume that the children who share the classroom with theirs have had their shots. But the fact is, vaccines are not legally required in California; parents can simply turn the form over and sign a line that says they don't believe in vaccinating. "We've yet to hear of any case of a child being refused admission to school for not being vaccinated," say Eileen Karpfinger and Aaron Rosselle, who teach a seminar about child vaccinations.

Some parents don't vaccinate because they are still spooked by thimerosal, the mercury-based preservative that commonly used to be added to vaccines and has been blamed for the alarming rise in autism rates in the late nineties. It's no longer in most vaccines, and most studies have failed to prove the link, but many parents remain skeptical and fear other chemicals that are often used in its place. The sheer number of vaccines kids get also worries some moms and dads. By age two, the average child will have had 27 shots, which can cause various short- and long-term health problems. "I used to be one of those parents who said, 'What, you're not vaccinating your child, are you crazy?'" says Sharma Hendel, a Berkeley mom who is delaying most vaccines for her two young sons. "But when I started researching what vaccines actually do to the brain and the immune system, I got really concerned."

Still, those who go the no-vax route often find themselves challenged by friends and fellow parents who don't share their views. Even just posting a question about vaccinations on parenting websites is enough to elicit a barrage of heated responses. "It's not easy to find other people who share your concern," says Kim (who also doesn't want her last name used), a Palo Alto mother of a one-year-old girl who hasn't been vaccinated. "A woman sitting next to me at a playgroup looked totally shocked when I mentioned I wasn't vaccinating my little girl. After that, she distanced herself from us and would sit on the other side of the room." Kim felt so besieged that she created a "Slow and No Vax Moms" group on Yahoo. The group, which began last January, has more than 100 members, many of whom have had similar experiences, says Kim. "People look at you in shock and horror, worrying, 'Will your kid give me or my kid a disease?'"

The answer is not as simple as you may think. While a

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child who is vaccinated is generally protected from another child with whooping cough or measles, most vaccines are ineffective in 5 to 15 percent of people. Moreover, some vaccinations wear off and there aren't always boosters. Those who can't be vaccinated, including some adults and children with severely compromised immune systems, are the real losers in this whole thing. And in the Bay Area, where HIV is prevalent, a significant number of people fall into this category.

Amy Pine, director of the Communicable Disease Prevention Unit at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, has seen what happens when not enough people are immunized. "I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali and saw the ravages of polio and other infectious diseases on the children there," she says. Of course, this is America, where things are better, but even here we are at risk. Last year there were 4 reported cases of measles and 26 of whooping cough in San Francisco. And the numbers are inching up: as of August 2005, San Francisco had already seen 24 cases of whooping cough.

"I vaccinated my daughter to protect her but also to protect others," says Pine. "If enough people don't vaccinate, then the whole community is at risk. I would hate to be responsible for making another child sick."

In fact, that is the claim often made against nonvaxers—that they are acting selfishly. While all parents want the best for their kids, some think it's wrong not to abide by a social contract that could keep everyone safe. Of course, nonvaxers don't see it that way; they question the threat from these now-rare diseases and believe that even if all parents chose not to vaccinate, we'd still all be better off.

The ultimate irony, perhaps, is that the nonvaxers, who stick together, should actually be wary of one another. After all, their kids are the ones who are more likely to infect each other. Even if parents try to take a "boy in the bubble" approach, limiting travel and keeping their kids out of day care, the system is hardly foolproof. One trip to the store at the wrong time could mean trouble, especially since with some diseases, people can be contagious before they develop symptoms.

However, for all the infighting among parents, many who are wary of vaccines are actually taking a moderate stance. Instead of saying no to all vaccines, they pare down the schedule or reject the shots they feel are the least crucial, such as those for chicken pox and hepatitis B. "I asked my pediatrician which illnesses he felt were a serious risk, and after doing more research, I went with some of those vaccines," says Mila Zelkha, an architect in Palo Alto whose specialization in green design has made her wary of chemicals of all kinds. Other parents ask to unbundle vaccines that are typically given in clusters, such as the controversial MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccine, so their children have to withstand only one immune system assault at a time.

Like many slow-vax parents, Zelkha strongly defends her stance, even if she stays quiet about her decision. "People have such violent reactions," she says. "But I don't think I'm doing anything radical." ■