

What doctors want parents to know about COVID-19 vaccination



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As soon as [Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine was OK'd for ages 12–15](#), appointment slots were quick to fill with at least 600,000 having received their first dose. But while many parents have jumped at the opportunity to get their children vaccinated, some are still hesitant.

A survey from Kaiser Family Foundation found that 32% of parents said they would wait to see how the vaccine works before getting their child vaccinated. The survey also found that 19% of parents would not get their child vaccinated.

Three AMA members took time to discuss what they want parents to know about COVID-19 vaccination for their kids. They are:

- [Joanna Bisgrove, MD](#), a family physician in Madison, Wisconsin.
- [Frank Clark, MD](#), a psychiatrist in Greenville, South Carolina.
- Christopher Garofalo, MD, a family physician in Attleboro, Massachusetts.

Drs. Bisgrove, Clark and Garofalo are also members of the AMA Ambassador Program, which equips individuals with the skills and knowledge to confidently speak to the AMA's initiatives and the value of membership. The program also increases overall awareness about what the AMA does for physicians and their patients.

Here is what these physician parents had to say.

This protects your child

"This may seem scary. There are quite a few people who are OK with vaccines for themselves, but this is their child. That's even more of a reason to do this because this protects your child," said Dr. Bisgrove, who took her 14-year-old daughter, Caitlyn, for her Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine the first day it was available. Both were together during this interview. "This protects my girl with asthma, and she's been the one I have been worried about for this entire year-plus of the pandemic."

"For me being a physician, working in the offices and being potentially exposed to COVID every single day, my biggest fear was getting one of my family members sick and that fear lessened when I got the shot," she added. "But it's even better now that she's getting vaccinated."

Share the decision with your children

"At the end of the day, talk with your child about getting vaccinated," said Dr. Clark, an American Psychiatric Association Delegate to the AMA Section Council on Psychiatry. This means asking "how they feel about getting vaccinated and what their fears are."

"Sometimes as parents we often assume we know what our child is going to say or what they think, but 12- to 15-year-olds have a voice and their fears may be different than their parents," he said, emphasizing that "it is important to make sure that when those conversations are happening, that child is involved."

"A silver lining for this age range getting this vaccine is that we want people to be involved in their health at an early age," said Dr. Clark. "If they can start asking questions like this about a vaccine, imagine what that looks like long-term for them as they grow—it empowers this generation to be more informed and more knowledgeable about their bodies."

Dr. Bisgrove saw this shared decision-making firsthand with her daughter. While at her vaccination appointment, "they talked to her about the vaccine. They asked her all the questions directly and even asked more than once," she said. "They know that there are a lot of parents who are overeager, and they want to make sure this is what the kid wants."

“The only thing they really needed from me as a parent was my signature and to physically be there. Otherwise, they directed everything at Caitlyn,” explained Dr. Bisgrove, adding that “we’ve talked about it quite a bit and she’s been excited.”

Talk with your child’s physician

“I don’t expect everybody to go on the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] website or read the research studies,” explained Dr. Clark, “but it’s important to be knowledgeable about the benefits versus risk associated with the COVID vaccines.”

Also vital, he said, is “for parents who are having trepidation in regards to whether or not they should take their child to get vaccinated to talk to their child’s physician.”

Kids are affected more often

“Given the fact that older people have been vaccinated, the case numbers are really dropping in the older population,” said Dr. Garofalo. “And although the cases are dropping overall in everybody, the numbers” during the week of May 16 showed “that about 22% of the new infections are coming from kids.

“And that’s higher by about one-third from what it had been previously, so clearly the kids are being affected more often,” he added. “At a time when we’re trying to get everybody taken care of, this is now the time to focus on the kids. It’s really important for parents to understand this.”

One step closer to normal

For Dr. Garofalo’s 15-year-old son, getting the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine meant being able to return to the normalcy of attending Red Sox games. “We didn’t go last year, so he was really bummed about that and this year we will be able to go,” explained Dr. Garofalo.

“Parents need to realize that this is the way to get the kids back into their sports. This is also the way to get kids back into having sleepovers with their friends,” he said. “You get

this done and next fall will be just like any other fall that we've had previously—it'll be as normal as it can get."

"Caitlyn is so excited to be able to actually get back together with a few more people," said Dr. Bisgrove, adding that her daughter was bouncing up and down in the back seat of the car because she was so happy that she received her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

By getting vaccinated, "that's one more layer of protection for her," she said.

"When Pfizer was approved for ages 12 to 15, if I had a daughter and she was that age, I would absolutely get her vaccinated," said Dr. Clark whose daughter is 2. The Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine is now being studied for ages 11 and younger. "And if we think about it, summertime is coming up, so there will be a multitude of opportunities for kids to fellowship.

"These include summer camp and vacationing with family and friends—it is impeccable timing, in a lot of ways, to have the vaccine be approved for this age range," he added.

Discover [what doctors want patients to know about life after vaccination](https://patients.ama-assn.org/public-health/infectious-diseases/what-doctors-want-parents-know-about-covid-19-vaccination).

It's good for their mental health

Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 "will definitely help the kids who clearly have suffered during the pandemic," said Dr. Garofalo. "These adolescent kids, they need to have that connection with their peers and their friends."

"We've all seen the numbers of mental health issues—depression and anxiety—going up," he added. "It's really important to help those kids get back to a normal routine."

While Caitlyn "and her friends have been so resilient and so awesome, this has been a super tough year for them," said Dr. Bisgrove. "I've seen plenty enough of the data to feel confident that this is safe, but, to me, the most important thing in the world is that my child, her friends and our family have peace of mind."

“A huge key for the kids’ mental health is to be able to get back to normalcy, get back to safety and get back to being able to have the kids together, even if they have to still wear masks for a bit,” she said.

“12 to 15 is that age where you are building your sense of identity and fostering relationships that are important to you,” Dr. Clark explained. But “strengthening those current relationships you have and building new ones has been hard for all of us, but especially for our child-and-adolescent population because they have been so isolated.”

There are concerns that “the suicide rates in our child-and-adolescent population have unfortunately risen during this pandemic,” he said. But “having the vaccine approved for this age range will help quell some of that anxiety and decrease that isolation.”

Discover [how to combat COVID-19's disparate mental health impact](#).

The side effects are similar

“We have not seen any specific side effects for children that we have not necessarily seen in adults,” said Dr. Garofalo, adding that common side effects include pain, redness and swelling at the injection site as well as tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, fever and nausea. While these side effects may affect a child’s ability to do daily activities, they typically go away in 24–48 hours.

Additionally, “when we look at the evidence on the vaccines in all of the 12- to 15-year-olds that Pfizer evaluated, there was 100% response in terms of protection,” said Dr. Bisgrove, adding that “the side effects were the same as adults have been getting ... and a number of reactions we’ve seen across the board have been minimal and occur within 15 minutes almost exclusively.”

While Dr. Bisgrove’s daughter was nervous, “the moment it was done, the nurse asked her how she felt and she goes, ‘Yay! It’s over!’”

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices’ COVID-19 Vaccine Safety Technical (VaST) Work Group reviews post-authorization COVID-19 vaccine safety data weekly. On May 17, the VaST session included several presentations on myocarditis following mRNA

vaccines.

VaST found there were relatively few reports of myocarditis to date. These cases have occurred in adolescents and young adults, more often in males than females following the second dose and within four days after vaccination. Most cases of myocarditis appear to be mild, says the CDC.

The CDC has published [clinical considerations](#) for myocarditis and pericarditis following COVID-19 vaccination as well as [resources for the public](#).

Learn more from the CDC about [COVID-19 vaccines for children and teens](#).