COVID vaccine for kids: My son's experience with Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH

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In today’s COVID-19 Update, on vaccinating his 3-year-old son: Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, a practicing anesthesiologist in Milwaukee and the AMA’s new president-elect, shares his family’s vaccine experience with AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger, as well as advice for parents of young kids and tips for doctors on answering questions from vaccine-hesitant parents.

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Speaker

- Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, president-elect, American Medical Association

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 Update. Today we’re talking about vaccinating kids under five—what to expect and why it's so important.

I'm joined today by the AMA's brand new president-elect, Dr. Jesse Ehrenfeld, a practicing anesthesiologist in Milwaukee. And he's going to share his own experience about getting his three-year-old son vaccinated. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. First, Dr. Ehrenfeld, congratulations on becoming the AMA's newest president-elect.

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Oh, thanks, Todd. I'm really excited to be in the role and look forward to seeing what's ahead.

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Unger: And so, it'll be the first of many of our conversations over the coming couple of years. So thanks for joining us today because you have some special experience in the particular topic, which is vaccinating children under five. Your own son recently received his COVID vaccination.

And I know a lot of parents out there are hesitant about vaccinating their own children. So I'd love to start with, in your own words, talk about your decision and what advice you have to parents out there that might be struggling with that same decision.

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Well, for us, at this point in time, it was a pretty easy decision because there's been so much data and experience accumulated with these vaccines that we felt really comfortable taking Ethan into our pediatrician's office and having him vaccinated against COVID-19.

That being said, when these vaccines were developed, like a lot of other parents, we wanted to understand, what did this mean. What are the risks and the benefits? Are there side effects or downsides?

And the answer is, there are things that you need to be aware of. But for us, in total, the protection afforded by this safe and effective vaccine made it a no-brainer. And so we were really thrilled when the FDA approval came through for our son Ethan to get his vaccine just this past week.

Unger: If you were talking to another group of parents that maybe weren't looking necessarily at the data, is there anything that you would talk to them about to overcome that hesitancy?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Yeah, so I think it starts with a conversation with your physician and your health care team to understand, is this a decision that's right for you and your family. For us, when COVID arrived, like the rest of the world, we went into a bit of isolation. We wanted to make sure that we protected our son and our family to the greatest degree possible.

And it's been hard over the last year or so. Even though I've been vaccinated, my husband's been vaccinated, we felt left behind as a family because our son was not. And we were reluctant to see the grandparents, go on planes, do the kinds of things that we were really hoping our young son would be able to do and explore in the world.

And so when this vaccine became available and we knew that he'd get some protection from it that would potentially prevent serious illness, we jumped at that chance.

Unger: It is an exciting opportunity to be back out there, especially for families with young children. I know this rollout is relatively new, of course. And I know that some parents out there are finding it difficult to schedule appointments. They're unsure of where to take their kids if their own pediatrician isn't offering the vaccine. Do you have any advice for parents that might be facing more basic logistical challenges?
Dr. Ehrenfeld: Yeah, so, definitely. Our pediatrician’s offices, took them a little bit of time to get the doses in stock and have their policies and scheduling ready to go. If your pediatrician isn’t offering it for kids who are under five or under three, you may be able to get them vaccinated at a local pharmacy.

You can also go to vaccines.gov. That's actually a real-time website that can show you providers near you that will have availability for kids under five. You just put your zip code in or you can even call them. There's an 800 number. That's a helpful source.

Also, local health departments are doing a lot of these vaccinations. They're offering a lot of vaccine clinics for kids. And so that's another place that you can go to.

Unger: Last night I was with some parents of a four-year-old. And I was listening to them talk about this and the choice between Moderna or Pfizer. This is the kind of decision that maybe parents haven't had to make in the past about different vaccines. Talk about your decision about which vaccine. How do you advise other parents who are wrestling with the same decision?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: Yeah, so it's a great question. Moderna, Pfizer—does it matter? And at this point, the CDC is not recommending one over the other but it's a question lots of parents have.

To be honest, we went to our pediatrician's office and asked what was available. And they had a choice. And we said that sounds great. Any vaccine works for us.

And so I don't think it's a decision, frankly, that probably makes a huge difference over time. Any vaccine, because they're both approved, is a good vaccine.

Unger: Just going back to taking Ethan in for his vaccine, did you have to prepare him in any way for this shot? It's obviously not his first vaccine. But for this particular thing, did you prepare in any different way than normal?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: We told Ethan that he was going to go see his doctor. He loves his pediatrician. So he actually sometimes runs around the house. He doesn't pretend to be me, Dr. Daddy. He pretends to be Dr. Paley and that's OK. But actually, he was more bothered by having his blood pressure taken and the cuff squeezing on his arm than he was, the actual vaccine.

Unger: Any advice for other parents about making the experience better?

Dr. Ehrenfeld: I think preparing a child for a vaccine, letting them know what's going to happen, not surprising them, is helpful. And then certainly helping them understand that this is something that keeps them healthy. And that's why we go to physician's offices, we get vaccinations, we take medicines. It's not because we want to cause undue pain to our children—it's because we want to
keep them safe and healthy.

**Unger:** I know some parents are worried also about potential side effects. Was this a concern for you? And did Ethan experience any?

**Dr. Ehrenfeld:** Ethan had very mild side effects. His arm was just a tiny bit sore the next day. But to be honest, it didn't stop him or slow him down one bit. And we've been seeing that in kids. Most kids actually are doing just fine with these vaccinations. And they haven't really reported much side effects across the board.

**Unger:** As AMA's president-elect and someone who's been a leader in medicine for many years, I know that you're often in a position to share your knowledge and expertise with other physicians. What's your advice to physicians on talking to vaccine-hesitant parents? And are there any specific points that they should be talking about as to why vaccinating this group of young kids is so, so important?

**Dr. Ehrenfeld:** Yeah, so one of the arguments I hear a lot is that COVID is not a serious illness in kids. Most of them do just fine. And the risk of them getting hospitalized or dying is low.

There is some truth to that but community spread is real. And because we have this large pool of unvaccinated kids who haven't been exposed to COVID, getting them vaccinated actually helps other groups by protecting the rest of the community around them.

And so there is an individual benefit to a child, protecting them from getting seriously ill. But there's a community benefit around them. And so, for our son, he's going to start school for the first time this fall. And we want to make sure that he can protect himself and his classmates.

We want to take him traveling. We'd like to be able to go and visit our grandparents and his grandparents, and all those kinds of things. And so there are important considerations that are about the greater societal benefit, not just the individual but also are an important component of the decision to vaccinate individuals.

**Unger:** When you think about this particular rollout, do you have any thoughts around what you'd like to see physicians doing in their role to participate and help this? We know that there hasn't been the hugest uptake on the vaccine in the five to 11-year-old group, even though it's been available for some time. How do we get physicians and leverage their voice to make sure that this entire range of children get the vaccine?

**Dr. Ehrenfeld:** Well, we've got to stand up in combating misinformation, dispel the myths and help people realize that this is such an important thing. We've been living with COVID for two-plus years. Now we now have tools and vaccines that can end this.
Help us manage through it. Keep our communities safe. But it requires people rolling up their arms and getting themselves and their families vaccinated.

And I know it's exhausting. Look, I have had so many, hundreds of conversations with patients about their decisions to be vaccinated or not being vaccinated. And I get it—it is tiring. But it is a conversation worth having every time because the degree that we as physicians, as trusted leaders of the health care team, as folks who are looked to because of the science behind what we've delivered to the public every day, we can have an impact.

**Unger:** Just listening to your story and many people like you out there, I've heard this sense of relief. This is something that many families have been waiting for a long time and just the freedom that it allows, those visits to special people like grandparents and other family members traveling.

When you think in summary, is there anything else that's personally meaningful to you about this moment?

**Dr. Ehrenfeld:** Well, these vaccines have been a long coming. And we've had our hopes dashed a couple of times when we thought that they were going to be approved and available, and then they weren't. Our son has not been on a plane since COVID started in 2020. And so we are so excited to be able to travel with him and take him places with the confidence knowing that he'll protection and is unlikely to become seriously ill if he gets COVID.

**Unger:** And that is a huge area of that kind of confidence and relief for a parent. Dr. Ehrenfeld, thank you so much for being here today and sharing your perspective as both a father and a physician. That's it for today's COVID-19 Update. We'll be back soon with another segment. In the meantime, for resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us today. Please take care.

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