

Case 7 | Family Disagreement About Vaccines

Case developed in Collaboration with the [Bridge Research Consortium](#).

Imagine you are having dinner with your extended family when they start arguing about vaccine mandates. One uncle claims the authorities are overreacting and should not be able to require citizens to get vaccines that he has heard may have been hastily approved. He argues: “If the evidence is so unclear, why is the government telling us how to protect our kids? They are crossing a line!” In response, another uncle at the table argues strongly in the other direction: “When people are unvaccinated, they threaten everyone’s health. Anyone who refuses to get vaccinated for the sake of public health should be barred from public places, fined, maybe even jailed!”

Should someone with an informed view about health risks speak up and debate family members around the dinner table, in spite of potential relational conflicts? We do not just disagree about health measures, of course: our relationships can sometimes become strained by serious disagreements about values, politics, religion, and more. But public health discussions regularly involve challenging and intersecting issues of personal safety, social responsibility, care for others, public authority and trust in expertise. Individual choices regarding collective risks and responsibilities can heighten the stakes. Individuals might, on the one hand, try to uphold values such as tolerance and open-mindedness, but on the other hand, try to maintain other priorities like safety or autonomy. Does this unique context make disagreeing about vaccine mandates more difficult, or more necessary, than other controversial discussions?

The people at the table may experience either this conflict or the public health risks under discussion quite differently. Maybe one or both uncles is imposing, intimidating, or seems unlikely to listen. Maybe someone is immunocompromised. Some at the table, including younger people, may feel less confident that they will be heard and taken seriously. Do these different experiences, needs, and positions affect their responsibilities here?

Discussion Questions

1. Under what circumstances should we aim to use non-confrontational approaches to serious disagreement?
2. Do our responsibilities for engaging others on serious issues depend on the nature or quality of our relationships, or the stakes involved in the subject of disagreement?
3. Is it easier to disagree about facts or values?
4. Do experts and non-experts have different roles to play when discussing public health issues?

Further Explorations

“Talking Politics at the Holidays Without Ruining Dinner.” Pamela B. Paresky. *Psychology Today*. December 23, 2024.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/happiness-and-the-pursuit-of-leadership/202412/talking-politics-at-the-holidays-without>

“Ask the expert: five ways to approach political conversations with family over the holidays.” Elizabeth Dorrance Hall. *MSU Today*. November 14, 2024.

<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2024/ask-the-expert-five-ways-to-approach-political-conversations-with-family-over-the-holidays>

“To End Science Denial, Admit That Policymaking Is Not All Science.” Tim Brennan. *The Regulatory Review*. June 14, 2021.

<https://www.theregreview.org/2021/06/14/brennan-end-science-denial-admit-policymaking-is-not-all-science/>