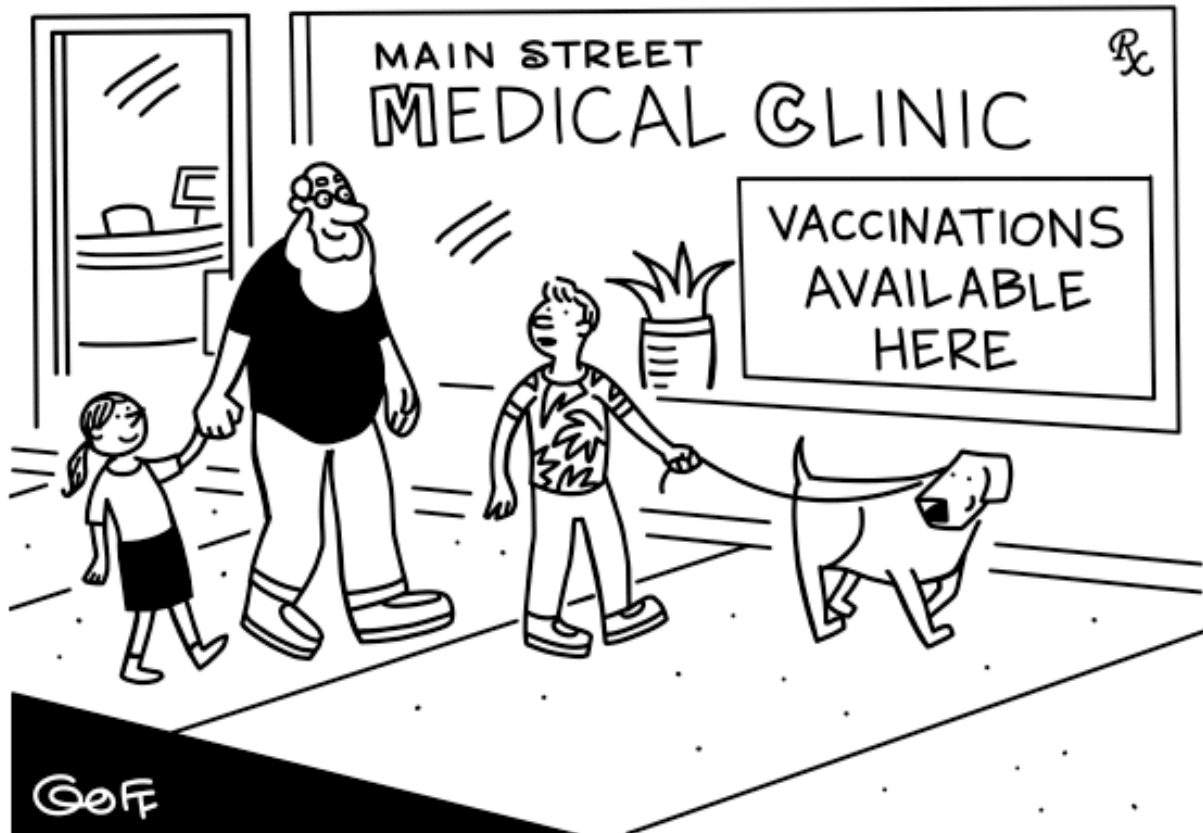


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“Grandpa, why didn’t you ever catch polio or smallpox or shingles?”



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The Grand Ally

Grandparents: A Neglected Asset of Vax Decision Making

By Dale Dauten

*“Nobody can do for little children what grandparents do.
Grandparents sort of sprinkle stardust over the lives of little children.”*

Alex Haley

Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today.

Robert McKee

Take the power of story and the stardust of grandparenting, put them together, and what do you get? An influence beam to shine on vaccination decisions.

We recently learned of a new non-profit advocacy group, Grandparents for Vaccines, just launched on Grandparents Day last year. (In case you don't remember, Grandparents Day is first Sunday after Labor Day. And, for you trivia fans, we just learned the day even has an official flower: it's the forget-me-not – cute and/or poignant, right? -- giving us an excuse to include a flower photo by Karolina Kolodziejczak.)



The group was founded by retired pediatrician Arthur Lavin, with a stated goal of ensuring that *“..all grandparents, and all those who care for our grandchildren, let America know, we stand to protect them, and keep them from being hurt the way we saw so many children hurt before the vaccines were available, when we were kids.”* And there it is, in that statement, the call to remember, the call to take hold of cultural memory and shake it.

There are plenty of memories to shake, given that there are (as of 2021) over 63 million grandparents in the U.S., with almost 7 million living with their grandkids, and over 2 million who are the primary caregivers.

“THE HIERARCHY OF LOVE”

We spoke with one of the volunteer leaders of the new group, Teri Mills, a retired RN and nurse educator (shown in a photo with her granddaughter, Olivia). We began by asking her how grandparents can best influence vax decisions, and she said, “We want to tell our stories. Within our own family, we're trusted messengers, and nobody can really argue with our own lived experience.”



Speaking of arguing, when we wondered if the group had encountered pushback from anti-vaxxers, Teri reported, “Not yet,” before reflecting on the nature of the relationship: “Maybe it’s the power of the grandparent. Everybody has a grandparent whether they’re alive or not. Most people have a memory of their grandparents and there’s something about that relationship. Once you have a grandchild -- at least, this has been my experience -- the kids kind of go off the wayside and the grandkids take over in the hierarchy of love. It’s the bond that asks, why would a grandparent ever put their grandchild in harm’s way? Would we ever recommend something that we knew would be harmful to a grandchild? There’s no way. Maybe that’s a reason they haven’t argued against us yet despite the tons of media, locally and nationally.”

Yes, there’s something to that “hierarchy of love,” magnifying the “lived experience,” and the power of story. At the Grandparents for Vaccines website, there’s a collection of stories and we asked Teri if she had a favorite. She had several, but the first to come to mind was the one (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shVxFcVpCT0>) where Jan Flood Nichols reflected on the “bad old days” before most of the modern vaccines. She says,

“My twin brother and I were rambunctious healthy children. My parents did everything imaginable to protect us, but nothing was going to protect us if polio found our community.” Indeed, polio found their community, and found Jan and her twin. She survived but watched her twin brother die, despite an iron lung. She also recalls a friend who was deaf from measles and an acquaintance who lost a sister to pneumonia. Who could question her when she tells you the importance of vaccinating for all of the childhood diseases and adds, “Do not believe it when people tell you that these diseases are just simple rites of passage -- they have the ability to kill and maim.”

Teri co-authored with Arthur Lavin a recent op-ed in *Common Dreams* where they retold Jan’s story and then made a case for a broader definition of “freedom” when assessing individual rights and vax decisions: “*When we advocate for polio vaccination, we are not dismissing freedom—we are defending a broader, deeper version of it.*

The freedom for a child to grow up walking.

The freedom for families to trust public spaces.

The freedom for future generations to know polio only as a chapter in history books, not a living threat.”

THE GRAND ALLY

Given that grandparents have the power of story and the credibility of caring, how best to engage them? Teri describes the outcome when Grandparents for Vaccines founders met to decide their first targets: “We started out with eight state leaders. We were looking at the MMR rates around the country, how they've really slipped, and we took the top eight states with the worst rates. We have grown to 62 state leaders now, and the grandparents are on fire -- there are groups connecting with churches and senior retirement centers to go in and focus on the grandparents’ stories.”

If you’re doing a vax campaign and would like to inquire about the possible connection with some “grand” allies, Teri suggests you connect via hello@grandparentsforvaccines.com.

A FINAL NOTE

One other suggestion that the group offers on its website is starting a “Grand” Book Club, with the idea that books on vaccines are a great addition, offering possible titles. Coincidentally, or not, a couple of the books feature Jonas Salk, and on the website is an interview with Jonas Salk’s son, Dr. Peter Salk. Here’s one brief statement from that conversation, where the son describes his father’s approach to work and to making a difference...

“For whatever reason, early on he would pray that he would be able to do something good for humanity. That was just part of his makeup. His initial thought had been, well, perhaps he would go into law and help, or go to Congress and make laws that would be beneficial for society. Then, when he started college, he had the opportunity to take a

chemistry class which was rather a conflict in the sense that it met on Saturdays and he was brought up in a Jewish family and that was the Sabbath. He had to make a difficult decision: he chose the chemistry class and everything else unfolded from there. So that's just to say that he knew even early on that he was attracted to the notion of going into research and he wanted to have an effect that would be beneficial for people on a large scale.”

In an age where so many young, ambitious people want to be an “influencer,” Salk prayed for something more worthy, to influence humanity for its betterment -- something else for grandparents to pass along.

CONNECTIONS

Teri asked us to pass along the link for Grandparents for Vaccines, which we are happy to do, and also to share her invitation for grandparents and allies of children to join the group and its work (there's no cost/fee).

<https://grandparentsforvaccines.org>