

The Importance of Vaccines and Flu in Particular

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start! Dr. B here, excited to be with you today to talk about something very important and very timely: vaccines. We know Head Start is a school readiness program, gets our kiddos ready for that first day of kindergarten. But we don't do that just by getting them ready to read and write and count. We do that by keeping them healthy in all respects, and vaccines are a great measure to ensure healthiness. So let's talk about vaccines. It's – it's an interesting time as we – as we round out summer, we're coming back into a new school year. By the time you see this, we'll be well into a new school year. And what we know is fewer kids have gone in for well-checks... throughout the summer where parents were afraid to take their children out. Some doctor's offices weren't available, and some parents have lost their connection with their medical home. So, Head Start needs to rally here. We need to make sure that number one, our parents have their medical home identified. That they are connected to their doctor's offices. Most are open now – in most communities – they've done so with incredible safety measures in place. So we need to be the liaison between the parents and the doctor's office, ensuring the parent that it's okay to take their child to the doctor. Let's build that confidence up in them, and make sure that they've got that connection and they know – they understand why this is so important.

If we can get children in for well-visits, that's our best-case scenario. Through that well-visit, they'll make sure to get the vaccines. But if a well-visit isn't something that's available, if – if parents are struggling with – with that connection or not comfortable with that, one thing we can fall back on is – in early September the Trump Administration, through the Public Readiness and Emergency Prepared – Preparedness Act, is now allowing licensed pharmacists to administer vaccines to children three and above. So that's going to get some of our Early Head Start folks, and then our Head Start folks... and a pharmacy... I mean, it could be located in a local drug store or grocery store. Much more easily accessible, than perhaps a doctor. And if that's the best we can do right now, let's do that. And – and then long-term, we do want to make that connection with the doctor's office so that – so the parents can create that relationship. But we know that children who are vaccinated before two – before age two are protected from 14 major childhood illnesses. So let's make sure, I mean, things like whooping cough... we hardly hear about it. But that's because we've got children who are vaccinated, so this is extremely important.

And, you know, as – as such good stewards to our parents, it isn't just we connect parents with the doctor's office or – or that kind of thing. We educate parents, and we want them to understand why this is so important so that they are their child's best advocate. Their best health advocate, not just their best education advocate. So, let's take some extra steps this year. We've – we've seen folks get more disconnected. Some of us are still just doing virtual outreach. It's really challenging, but we can't let this fall to the wayside. Now I want to shift a little bit, we were talking about general childhood vaccines, but equally as important – perhaps more important this year is that flu vaccine. We have heard from the CDC that they are extremely... they're encouraging folks to get the flu vaccine this year, because the idea is if you

can prevent yourself from getting the flu, or for having an extreme case of the flu, you're that much better off if, in fact, you were to be exposed to COVID. Keeping a healthy body is really important during this time.

So, this is the charge. Think about Head Start: we're a million children and families strong, we have a quarter of a million staff. Among all of those folks, if we can get everybody to get out there and get a flu vaccine, we have covered a nice big chunk of the country. So, let's see what we can do here. We want you, we want your staff, your staff's family, your children, your children's families, to all get the flu vaccine. And you know, a lot of folks think that flu vaccines just for adults, but it is not. Children six months and older can get the flu vaccine. And it is so important to protect ourselves as we enter into this season where we know folks get sick more often. So let's do what we can. Head Start has this unique opportunity to reach directly into communities and have an impact. This is a – this is a place where we can have an impact that – that makes such a big difference right now, keeping people healthy and strong as we enter into flu season and the winter. Where we spend more time in doors and – and are more exposed. So, do what you can... remember, Head Start is the access to the American dream, but we want to charge into that American dream healthy. So get out there, connect your parents to resources so their children are vaccinated. Encourage your staff, your parents, your families – everyone – to get a flu vaccine, and have a healthy, healthy fall and a healthy, healthy winter.