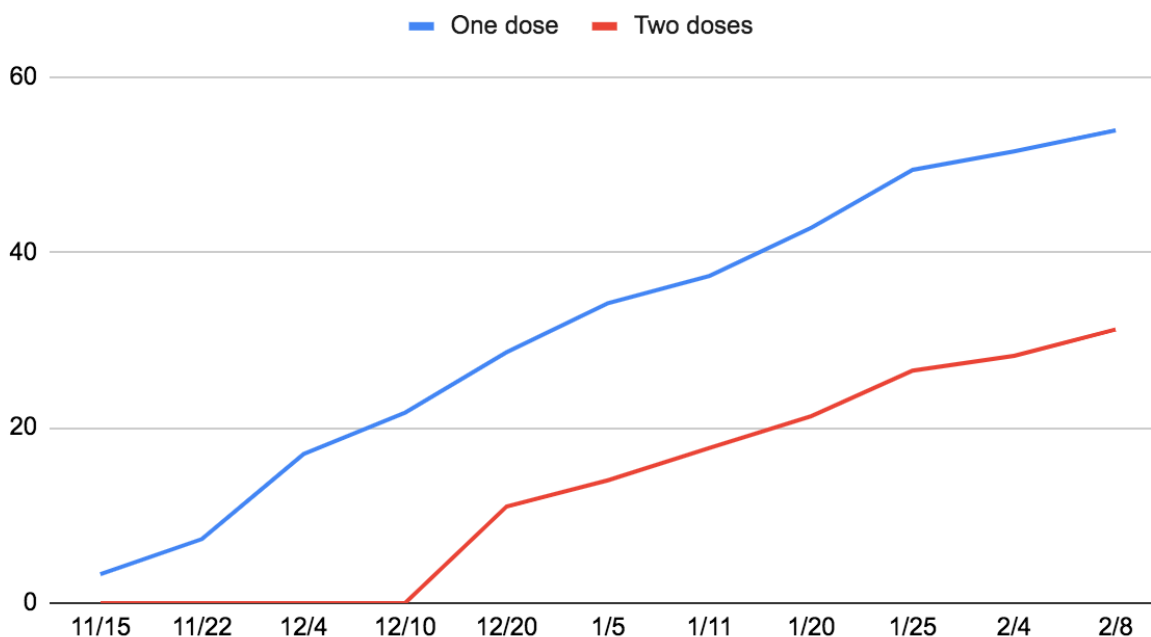




Qualitative Research: Feelings and concerns around pediatric vaccination among mothers in Chelsea, MA

Project Rationale: After being the epicenter of the pandemic during 2020, Chelsea, MA has spearheaded COVID response in the region. Through a series of partnerships with local community based organizations, local and state government and academic institutions, Chelsea turned its response capacity around and by February 2022 had reached a population vaccination rate of 89%. While most adult cohorts have adult vaccination rates of over 95%, children from 5-11 still have low uptake rates. For February 14 2022, 54% of children had received a first dose and 31% had received a second dose. The following graph shows the uptake in child vaccination over time in Chelsea:

Percentage of vaccinated children in Chelsea (5-11)



In response to the low uptake in child vaccination, La Colaborativa has partnered with East Boston Neighborhood Health Center to improve access to childhood vaccines. A pediatric clinic will operate from Thursday 17 February to Tuesday March 15.

Project Goal: In order to better understand barriers and concerns around vaccinating children, La Colaborativa Health Equity department conducted three focus groups with mothers of children ages 5-11 in February 2022.



Target group: Mothers of children 5-11 years old who live in Chelsea, MA and are not vaccinated.

Recruitment strategies: Recruitment was carried out through Whatsapp social networks, through the food line and through an announcement made on Facebook Live on La Colaborativa's page. Participants were given a \$40 gift card in exchange for their time.

Participation: 19 mothers participated in three focus groups conducted at La Colaborativa in February 2022. Focus groups were facilitated by Health Equity staff.

Methods: After obtaining written consent to participate and record the sessions, questions were asked by the Health Equity staff to guide the discussion. The question guide (annex 1) included questions around personal experience with the COVID virus, sources of information on COVID and vaccines, trusted sources of information, reasons for not vaccinating, and whether or not they would vaccinate children 6 months to 5 years.

Sessions were recorded and thematic analysis was conducted after the sessions.



Image description: A health promoter posts information about the Pediatric clinic at La Colaborativa



Results:

1. Waiting for enough children to be vaccinated to make sure it is safe

The majority of mothers had been vaccinated themselves and in general felt that they had made the correct decision. Mothers understood that being vaccinated decreased the impact of the COVID virus and some reflected on having had COVID after their vaccine and noting lesser symptoms.

However, mothers were concerned about whether or not the vaccine had enough evidence to be deemed safe for young children. In all focus groups, mothers noted that they had heard stories of children dying of the vaccine (specifically in Somerville). They also noted that when their children had had COVID, it was not as severe as in adults.

The majority of mothers therefore stated that while they fully intend to vaccinate their children, they are waiting until they believe it is safe. They were unable to pin-point a specific marker of time or number of people vaccinated that would be enough for them to decide on the vaccine's safety.

In addition, the articulation of safety through the lens of personal stories, highlights the importance of using storytelling to convey messages of safety. While data may be important, it seems that mothers make their decisions based on local stories of vaccine experiences among children.

Key Message: Vaccines are safe for children

Over 12 million children have tested positive for COVID since the start of the pandemic (in the US). 700 children under 11 have died of COVID. No children have died of the vaccine. Vaccinating children reduced their risk of hospitalization and death from COVID.

Messaging methods: Use storytelling to highlight children's well being after the vaccine.

2. Fear of the impact of short term side effects of the vaccine on children

As seen in previous research (Vaccine Hesitancy Survey, May 2021), moms are afraid of their children suffering the short term effects of the vaccine including fever, body pain, headache etc. Moms reflected on how difficult these first few days were for them, stating that they are adults who can manage those levels of discomfort. As children are more vulnerable and therefore weaker, they will suffer more in the immediate aftermath of the vaccine. Mothers feel like they are protecting their children from suffering by avoiding the vaccine.

At the same time, mothers who had had COVID also reflected on the fact that they seemed to have suffered symptoms much more than their children did. While this did not make them reflect that perhaps the vaccine side effects would be less severe in children, it did make them consider that maybe COVID isn't too severe in children and therefore they might not need the vaccine.



Key messages: The side effects of the vaccine are temporary and much less severe than COVID.

Vaccination protects all of us by reducing the amount of the COVID virus in a community.

3. Fear of unknown long term effects such as fertility, that are still unknown.

Again, this reflects similar findings from the vaccine hesitancy survey conducted in May 2021. Women stated that because the vaccine is new, we don't really know what might be the unknown long term effects of the vaccine. In particular, they are concerned that their daughters might have fertility problems when they grow up.

These reflections show we need to do a better job at explaining how the vaccine works and the long term effects of COVID (including long COVID). These reflections also portray a poor understanding of women's fertility and a reaction to previous campaigns of forced sterilization and IUDs that have impacted Latinx communities.

Key messages: Even though the vaccines are new, the only long term effect will be that we will need a booster in the future.

COVID vaccines don't have any impact on fertility. However, getting COVID can impact male fertility.

4. The use of alternative ways of healing as sufficient to prevent and treat COVID

In every focus group mothers talked about treating themselves and their families with teas, herbs and vitamins during COVID. Moms also gave each other advice on how to prevent COVID by keeping their kids strong through vitamin supplementation. While they were clear that alternative ways of healing do not replace medical care they are critical to preventing and overcoming sickness.

Moms trust pediatricians for COVID vaccine information. They believe these professionals are best suited to give advice and answer questions.

Messaging methods: Pediatricians and physicians should be engaged to deliver key messages about vaccine safety.

5. Some mothers are ready to vaccinate their children, but their husband disagree

In some cases, women reflected on conflict between themselves and their husbands. While they were convinced their children needed a vaccine, their husbands were much more likely to believe conspiracy theories such as the belief that pharmaceutical companies are only developing vaccines for the money.

It is important to remember that Latino families are often characterized as “patriarchal matriarchies”, where women make the day to day decisions and manage the home, while men have final say on important decisions and financial investments.

Key messages: While women may be primary decision makers in children's health, key messaging should also target fathers.



Image description: A health promoter and volunteer Pediatrician talk to a mother and her child about the importance and safety of vaccines.



Summary of key message conclusions:

- Vaccines are safe for children
- Over 12 million children have tested positive for COVID since the start of the pandemic (in the US). 700 children under 11 have died of COVID.
- No children have died of the vaccine. Vaccinating children reduced their risk of hospitalization and death from COVID.
- The side effects of the vaccine are temporary and much less severe than COVID.
- Vaccination protects all of us by reducing the amount of virus in a community.
- Even though the vaccines are new, the only long term effect will be that we will need a booster in the future.
- COVID vaccines don't have any impact on fertility. However, getting COVID can impact male fertility.
- Use storytelling to highlight children's well being after the vaccine.
- Pediatricians and physicians should be engaged to deliver key messages about vaccine safety.
- While women may be primary decision makers in children's health, key messaging should also target fathers.