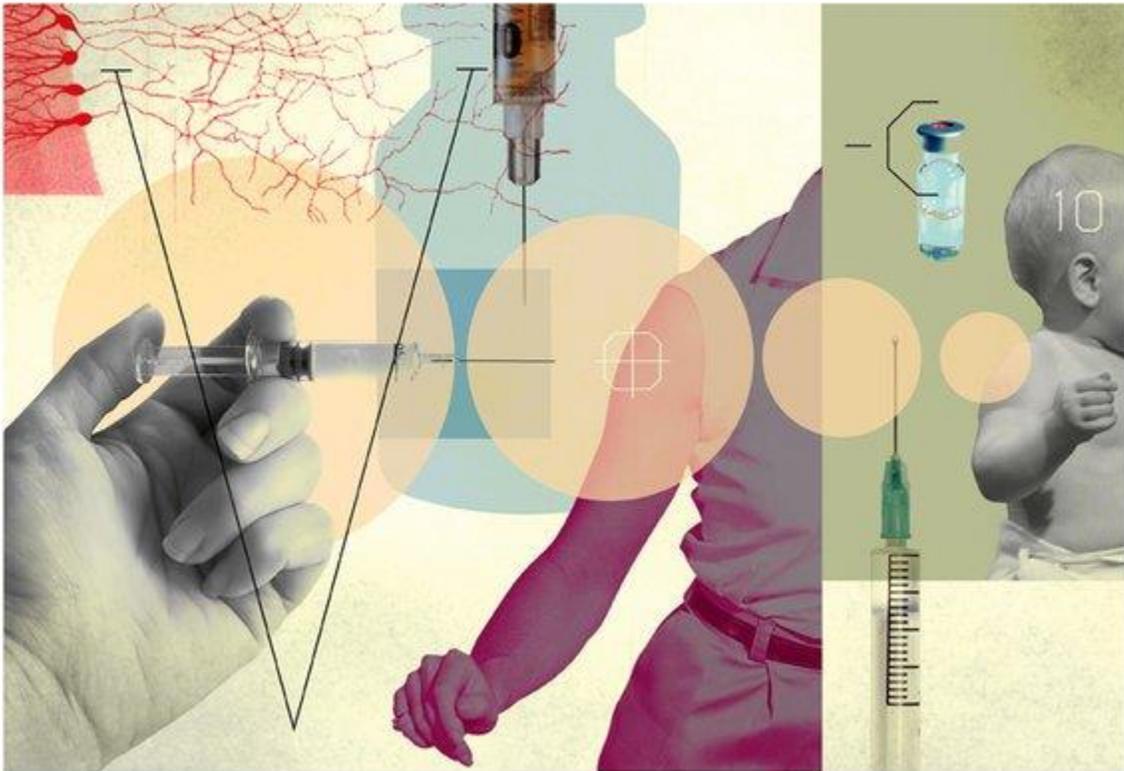


Ask Well: Playing With Unvaccinated Babies



By *PERRI KLASS, M.D.*

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Question:

How risky is it for me to allow my 8-month-old child (who is in the process of becoming fully vaccinated) to play with my friend's unvaccinated 8-month-old and 2-year-old children?

Answer:

There's a risk here — or a collection of risks — but the magnitude of the risk depends on what infectious diseases are circulating in your community. And that, in turn, may depend on how common it is for people in your area to make the choice that your friend is making.

But your 8-month-old is not yet fully protected against some diseases that are particularly dangerous — and can even be deadly — in children that young.

We start giving flu shots at 6 months; a baby needs two doses, one month apart, so your baby should be protected against flu, and an 8-month-old child should also have finished the series of vaccines against rotavirus, which causes diarrhea. That's important here, because both flu and

rotavirus are certainly still in circulation and could well turn up in children who have not been immunized — both diseases are highly contagious and can be very serious in infants.

Your 8-month-old will also have started the series of immunizations which will result in protection against several of the infectious diseases that still turn up regularly in the United States, including pertussis (whooping cough) and two bacteria, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Haemophilus influenzae* type B, which can cause a range of infections, from ear infections to pneumonia to meningitis. So there may be partial protection, but your baby still needs more doses.

Your baby won't have any immunity against [measles](#) and mumps or chickenpox, and there have been multiple outbreaks of all three in the United States in recent years. (The vaccines for those are recommended between 12 and 15 months.) If those are circulating in your community — which is more likely if there are a lot of vaccine refusers — your child's [playmates are at high risk](#), and that risk carries over to your child. A [new study in the Journal of the American Medical Association](#) found that large numbers of those who developed measles and pertussis during outbreaks were people who had refused vaccination.

It's also important to remember that no vaccine offers 100 percent protection; immunizing one child helps protect that child, but immunizing all children creates a much safer environment, through herd immunity, so that even children with incomplete immunity face reduced risk of exposure.

“Here's someone who's making a choice not just for their child but for your child,” said [Dr. Paul A. Offit](#), the director of the [Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital](#) of Philadelphia. He added that as more people within a community choose not to immunize, the risk of outbreaks in that population rises. “At the state level or city level or community level, where more people have chosen to exempt for nonmedical reasons, there's greater outbreaks of the diseases that are the most contagious.”