Talking to Your Children About HPV Vaccine

by Linda Klepacki, RN, MPH

To gain a basic understanding about HPV and the vaccines, we invite you to read our companion fact sheet, “HPV Vaccine: What Parents Need to Know” (FX450) and Focus on the Family’s position statement on Human Papillomavirus Vaccines (MS006).

Introduction
After reading “HPV Vaccine: What Parents Need to Know,” you hopefully feel more confident in your understanding of the basic facts about human papilloma virus (HPV) and the vaccine that is now available to help protect young people from becoming infected. However, talking to children and appropriately educating them about this topic is still a challenge.

The unique and novel issue raised by the HPV vaccine is that it is the first developed to protect against an infection that is exclusively sexually transmitted. Therefore, talking to children about it involves talking about sexuality. We should not shy away from this process, which can provide a teachable moment (or several) to reinforce the values and information regarding sexuality that we have given our children. It may also serve as an opportunity to correct any misconceptions that they may have regarding this important subject.

That being said, children have different temperaments and may have a variety of reactions when hearing about HPV vaccine. Some may simply accept the idea that this is a shot they may (or may not) receive. Others who are more inquisitive will want to learn more about it, and why it has been recommended. Some children may hear information from their friends that could be inaccurate or even alarming, and will need to have their concerns appropriately addressed. However your child may react, you will need to prepare for an age-appropriate conversation about sexuality, as this topic is at the very center of any discussion about an immunization against a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

When do I begin to talk to my child about sexuality?
We begin to teach children about relationships the first time we hold them in our arms. This may be immediately after birth or it may be when the child is older at the time they are adopted. Whenever this first embrace is offered, the child begins to learn to trust or distrust. Ideally we begin to answer questions about gender and sexuality as soon as our child asks. We should answer these questions briefly and in an age-appropriate manner.
All behavior, not just direct conversation, transmits messages about our maleness, femaleness and sexuality. We begin to teach our children about this vital area of their lives from the time they are very young. When our children reach 9 to 12 years of age, we usually have a sense of how they will react to new information — especially that of a private nature — and can prepare accordingly. Furthermore, by this developmental stage, we are beginning to observe our children as blossoming adolescents who are becoming interested in relationships and sexuality. This can present great “conversation starters” with youth of this age. But remember that pre-teens are normally concrete thinkers. We need to use direct language and simple concepts, since most children at this stage will not fully understand nuance, sarcasm or vague symbolism.

**What do our children need to know about this vaccine?**

The following are some basic statements that may be helpful in talking to your kids about the HPV vaccine. Child-friendly wording is used in order to simplify the language to the conceptual level for 9- to 12-year-olds.

- It’s clearly written in the Bible that God wants us to save all kinds of sex for marriage. There are many good reasons for this, and one of them is so that you will be protected from diseases that are spread from one person to another through sexual contact. By keeping your eyes on God you will be more likely to make good behavior choices that will keep you safe from sexually transmitted infections, and allow you to enjoy fully God’s plan for your life.

- HPV or human papillomavirus is a virus that causes an infection which, in some cases, can lead to some forms of cancer.

- HPV is an infection that is given to one person from another who is already infected. It is passed on through sexual contact — that means any type of touching that involves private sexual parts.

- A vaccine is a shot that is given to prevent certain types of infections, and there is now a vaccine that can help prevent you from getting some types of HPV.

- This vaccine will protect people who receive it from some forms of HPV but not all forms. People still take the shot, though, to protect against the types of this virus that are most likely to cause cancer and genital warts.

- No vaccination is always effective.

- The shot is given to children at your age because it is most effective if it’s given at a young age, and it will be more likely to provide long-term protection.

- Some people and your friends at school may say wrong things to you about this vaccine, such as, “Having HPV vaccine means that it’s now safe and okay for you to have sex.” That’s not the case, and I want you to hear the truth from me. Ask me if you have questions about things you hear from other people.
• This shot will not protect you from any other sexually transmitted infection or other types of HPV. It will not protect a girl from getting pregnant. Not having sex is the only choice that offers full protection against STIs and pregnancy.

• In addition to not having sex, some people choose to add the protection of this shot because we can’t always predict what will happen in the future and how we might be unexpectedly exposed to this virus.

• You avoid HPV and other STIs by the decisions you make to stay away from sexual contact before you are married. This is better protection than any vaccine.

Take this opportunity to talk
Remember that 9- to 12-year-olds are usually quite open to talking about sexuality with their parents. They listen well and ask direct questions. This most likely will change as they enter the teen years. Typically middle school-age children begin to feel increasingly less comfortable talking about sexuality with their parents. Seize this moment to talk with your child about your family’s values and God’s plan for sexuality. This may be one of the best opportunities you have to speak truth about this vital topic into your child’s life, and you should take advantage of it.