

## 6. What to do if caregiver refuses immunization

### Key Messages

- If a caregiver refuses immunization for their child, the first and most important thing is to understand the reason why the caregiver does not want to have their child immunized.
- Once you understand the caregiver's specific concerns, then you can determine the most appropriate response, which may include:
  - Providing additional facts and information about immunization or about specific vaccinations
  - Referring caregivers to people whom they trust to discuss their concerns
  - Engaging community or religious leaders in conversation
  - Making improvements to service delivery to make vaccination sessions more convenient and to help caregivers feel that they can count on the quality of vaccination services
- When engaging with caregivers who are refusing to immunize their children, it is essential to practice key interpersonal communication (IPC) skills, particularly showing respect, exercising empathy, listening carefully, acknowledging the caregiver's feelings and taking time to respond appropriately and thoroughly.

### Corresponding FAQs

- *N/A*

### Characters

FLW

**Layla**

FLW

**Ahmed**

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**Narrator:** Thank you for joining me for Audio Job Aid number six. In this Audio Job Aid we will hear two frontline workers, Layla and Ahmed, who are helping each other think about what to say to caregivers who refuse to have their children immunized. I'm sure you have faced this situation in your work, so while you are listening, think about how you deal with similar situations and maybe you will learn some new skills and messages too!

**Layla:** Hello Ahmed, you seem tired. What is the matter?

**Ahmed:** Hi, Layla. I'm just exhausted. I've just returned from doing community outreach and many parents with small children are hesitant to bring their children in for immunization. I worry about the fate of their children.

**Layla:** Of course, it's something we all worry about. I know that most parents start the vaccine schedule but then they may have concerns with later doses, or certain vaccines, or with giving multiple injections in the same visit. This trend among some caregivers can be worrying because we both know the importance of completing the immunization schedule. Would you like me to help you think through some ideas of how to counsel parents who hesitate?

**Ahmed:** Sure. Although when I have talked to hesitant parents before, I usually focus on telling them that vaccinations are necessary for their children's health because they prevent very serious diseases. I always thought that should surely be enough to convince them.

**Layla:** That's very good to start with the benefits, but in the case of some caregivers just providing information alone won't be enough. Many caregivers have heard that information many times already... just think of all the times you have given health talks or counseled caregivers.

**Ahmed:** If people already have the key information, then why do they still refuse some vaccinations for their children, and what more can I do to convince them to accept immunization?

**Layla:** The question that you ask is exactly where you need to start with a caregiver who is refusing immunization. The first thing you should do Ahmed, is engage in a conversation with the caregiver and really listen to them to try to understand WHY they are refusing immunization. Only when you understand the reasons, can you address them.

**Ahmed:** Oh, do you mean like if they are concerned about the side effects?

**Layla:** Exactly! Sometimes caregivers are concerned about side effects, or the ingredients in a vaccine. Or they may fear effects like sterility. In that case you can address them positively by talking about safety of vaccines, how vaccines go through a lot of testing, and how millions of children all around the world receive these vaccines safely.

**Ahmed:** I see what you're saying. In some cases the mothers say they are convinced but that their husbands are the problem and that the husbands are refusing immunization for their children.

**Layla:** Then you can empathize with the caregiver, try to find out her husband's concerns and then advise her on how to convince her husband. Many times husbands find it more persuasive to hear from a community or religious leader whom he trusts, or if you explain the long-term cost savings of immunization.

**Ahmed:** Ok, I understand now... it is my job to identify their personal concern and then decide the best way to respond. Got it!

**Layla:** That is correct! Although, be sure to also ask about other people who may be influencing their rejection. We already talked about the husband, but it could be that the caregiver is a member of a religious group with a leader that rejects immunization. Their religious leader might be telling them that health is in God's hands.

**Ahmed:** Ah yes, I have heard that before in our community, but it's such a tricky and sensitive issue. What do I do in that case?

**Layla:** I agree, that's a sensitive issue in some cultures and some communities. One thing you can do is try to meet with the religious group leader and help them understand the benefits of immunization. If there is one religious leader who is more supportive of vaccination, they could help talk with other religious leaders who are not convinced, and they can also participate in community health talks.

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**Ahmed:** That's a good suggestion. But what if the hesitation is due to a personal bad experience at the health facility or if they heard about poor treatment at the health facility?

**Layla:** That's another important concern. In that case you can work with your supervisors to improve the quality of the care and treatment and then let people know it has been improved. If the issue is the inconvenience of where or when services are offered, you can try to change those and then let people know about the changes.

**Ahmed:** Great point. So, I should focus on first understanding what the caregiver's concern is and why they are refusing to get their children vaccinated, and then try and address that rather than providing them with more general information about the benefits and safety of immunization.

**Layla:** That's exactly right. Just remember that when you are trying to find out the reason for their refusal, you should practice good interpersonal communication, such as showing respect and empathy, listening carefully, acknowledge their feelings and take your time to respond to their questions or concerns. This helps to build trust, which is essential to encouraging caregivers to accept immunization.

**Ahmed:** Of course! Thank you so much, Layla, you've opened my eyes. I feel much more confident about it now. I am ready to carry on our important work with more home visits tomorrow.

**Layla:** Let me know how it goes, Ahmed. Good luck!

**Narrator:** There are many reasons why caregivers may be hesitant or resistant to immunizing their children. Maybe you and do as Layla and Ahmed did, and talk with your fellow frontline workers about how to respond to the reasons for refusal that you have come across in your community. And when you are talking to caregivers who have these feelings or beliefs, you should try to understand their concerns the best that you can and make sure you address their concerns in a way that validates them rather than criticizing them.