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When it comes to vaccinations, public health, schools and faith communities share the responsibility of speaking up for our children's health, Brian H. Cameron writes.

The Golden Rule and vaccinations

BRIAN H. CAMERON

Have you found it difficult to discuss vaccines with someone in your faith community?

Routine vaccine rates are decreasing and sometimes science and faith seem to contradict. They shouldn't have to. Public health, schools and faith communities share the responsibility of speaking up for our children's health.

Our children have access to a full slate of vaccines, including against measles and polio (both Canadian child-killers in my parents' generation). Today, children can be protected against cancer caused by HPV, and against meningitis and chickenpox. Vaccines are a modern miracle.

However, a recent Spec article reported that an increasing number of students are opting out of routine vaccines for religious or philosophical reasons. Vaccine-hesitancy in Ontario has led to more than 2,000 cases of measles, an infectious disease we thought our children would never see. One Ontario baby died, and another Alberta mother is speaking out after measles nearly killed her baby.

Vaccines are most effective in protecting each child if everyone around them is also vaccinated. That's called herd immunity – the Golden Rule of vaccines.

Herd immunity against measles happens when over 96 per cent of a

community is vaccinated. Imagine a herd of buffalo gathering together to protect their calves from the wolves. When the community vaccination rate for measles drops below 95 per cent, outbreaks can happen, and we are seeing this happen in real time.

Why are parents hesitant to get their children vaccinated?

No one wants to harm their own child. Studies have shown at least three reasons that start with C: complacency, convenience and lack of confidence in the experts. Have you heard, "It won't happen to my child," "It's too difficult to arrange, I'll do it later" or "I don't trust the public health recommendation?" Online misinformation can contribute to vaccine hesitancy, leading to serious childhood disease or a preventable death.

Some faith communities are skeptical of science, but most faith communities, including mine, advise consulting your doctor and the scientific consensus when deciding to get vaccinated. There is one other "C" that faith communities can call on to improve vaccination rates: community-mindedness.

Which brings me to the Golden Rule. According to a 2022 HWDSB survey, more than 56 per cent of Hamilton's public-school students belong to a religious community. Many of us learned about the Golden Rule or variation at church, synagogue, mosque or temple because

it is a core principle of every faith: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" is one version. My grandson can recite it from his school's motto: "Treat others as you want to be treated." It is a moral message where science and faith align.

There need not be a conflict between science and faith. Many scientists, according to Dr. Francis Collins, leader of the Human Genome Project and former director of the National Institutes of Health, believe in a higher power. We can view this wonderful world through the eye of science to learn how things work, and through the eye of faith to understand why things work. With binocular vision we are more fully informed. Like two wings of a bird, we need both science and faith to fly.

Our whole community needs to work together to protect our children from measles. The city's board of health includes citizen members and an education representative in addition to councillors, providing an opportunity for wider community vaccine advocacy. Alongside public health experts and our schools, trusted faith communities are a third collaborator to promote positive vaccine messages. Talking about the Golden Rule in school is a way to remind children, and their parents, that getting vaccinated protects others around them, not just themselves.

Faith is not a reason to avoid vaccination, it is a reason to get vaccinated. It's what we would want others to do for us, and for our children.

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