

My name is Amy Unfred, and I am an early childhood educator at Lane Child and Family Center preschool at Lane Community College. The children at our center are between the ages of two-and-a-half and five years old, and they frequently suffer from common childhood illnesses.

When we learn that one of our children has contracted a common illness, we put out an information sheet letting other parents know that the illness is going around, and giving information about typical symptoms and how the disease is communicated to others. Some common illnesses we post information about are fifth disease, hand-foot-mouth disease, gastroenteritis, strep throat, respiratory syncytial virus, and others. Some of these diseases can be very unpleasant, but most of the time they are not serious and run their course without complications.

Do you know what illnesses we do NOT typically have to give information about? Diseases like whooping cough, mumps, measles, chicken pox, and polio. That's because we have vaccines for these diseases, and the majority of children have immunity against them. This is important, because these viruses have the potential for serious complications, such as blindness, deafness, sterility, paralysis, and even death. Some of these diseases can also damage the immune system and increase susceptibility to other diseases later in life. Because such illnesses are rare, we often forget how serious they can be.

We do keep information on hand for some of these illnesses, of course, because outbreaks of diseases such as whooping cough and measles have been reported in Oregon multiple times in recent years. This is because our vaccination rates are not as high as they could be, due to non-medical exemptions. While medical exemptions are crucial for some, that makes it all the more important for others to get vaccinated, to help build the herd immunity that protects the most vulnerable in our society.

Many argue for the exemptions as a matter of personal freedom, but when one parent's personal freedom exposes many other children to potentially deadly diseases, it's time we re-examine our non-medical exemption laws. Parents are still free to choose not to vaccinate, but if they make that choice, their children should not attend schools and child care centers with other children and thereby put them at risk.

Our schools are healthier than they used to be due to vaccinations, and they can be even safer if we improve our vaccination rates and increase herd immunity by reducing the numbers of unvaccinated children who attend school. By eliminating non-medical exemptions, we can protect the most vulnerable young members of our community.

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