



Keeping Vaccination Conversations on Track

Use the bridge-and-pivot technique to keep conversations from going off track.

If a face-to-face conversation about immunization with a community member starts getting derailed, don't worry—you can steer it back on track by following a simple three-step formula. (If you're responding publicly to a vocal vaccine denier who is actively spreading misinformation, seek advice tailored to that specific scenario.)

Step 1: Analyze

Figure out what you're responding to. Good-faith, everyday pushback to immunization tends to rely on patterned, predictable mental models. Be on the lookout for the most common:

Personal choice.

This mental model involves the assumption that because people have bodily autonomy, the decision to vaccinate is a highly personal one.

Natural > artificial.

This model contrasts nature with human society. Nature is seen as pure, safe, and healthy. Human intervention is viewed as "artificial" and inherently risky, because humans make mistakes.

Risk > reward.

This model assumes that tangible risks should drive people's decision-making, because the rewards of vaccination are less observable.

Step 2: Bridge

When someone says something that might take the conversation off course, you first need a "bridge" between what they said and what you want to say. Acknowledge the person you are engaged in conversation with, but don't restate or try to rebut the assumptions in their message.

Use an innocuous bridging phrase to redirect the conversation:

- "Let me answer you by saying ..."
- "Another way to look at this is ..."
- "What's really at stake here is ..."
- "That speaks to a bigger point ..."

Step 3: Pivot

Select and introduce the framing strategy that will get the conversation back on track.

When You Encounter This Mental Model	Pivot to This Framing Strategy
Personal choice	Our communities are safer and healthier when "community immunity" makes it harder for contagious diseases to spread.
Natural > artificial	Our immune systems respond to a vaccine by learning to "read" a disease, so our bodies can react and resist right away.
Risk > reward	Widespread immunization leads to an immediate, concrete benefit: Children who stay healthy stay focused on growing, playing, and learning.

Here's What It Looks Like

Scenario A

Community Member

"I'm not taking any more vaccines, and I only do the bare minimum for my kids. That's my right as a person and as a parent."

Voice for Public Health (Thinking)

That sounds like the "personal choice" mindset, so I should respond by emphasizing the idea of community.

Voice for Public Health (Response)

"I hear you. Another way of looking at it is from the perspective of the community. When enough people are immunized, it's harder for a disease to spread. This 'community immunity' benefits our loved ones, our neighbors, and community members who can't be vaccinated."

Scenario B

Community Member

"Some of my friends and family have stopped vaccines because of the ingredients in them. They say they're toxic, and who knows how long they are wreaking havoc in our bodies?"

Voice for Public Health (Thinking)

That sounds like the "natural is better than artificial" mindset, so I should respond by emphasizing the immune system's response.

Voice for Public Health (Response)

"I'd be happy to talk with your friends and family if they have questions. For now, let me answer you by saying a little bit about how our immune systems respond to vaccines. Our bodies learn from immunizations like children learn to read from simple beginner books. Just like we remember how to read long after we've given up the ABC books, our immune systems can remember a virus long after the vaccine has left the body. By giving our bodies an early start in reading a virus, we help our immune systems get ready to spring into action when we encounter a disease."

Scenario C

Community Member

"With the side effects of these vaccines, plus unknown risks, I don't think the government should be mandating any vaccines to enroll in school."

Voice for Public Health (Thinking)

That sounds like the person is working from a mindset that assumes "the risks outweigh the rewards," so I should respond by emphasizing the concrete rewards for children.

Voice for Public Health (Response)

"What's really at stake here is making sure our schools and childcare centers are safe, healthy places for kids to learn and grow. Contagious diseases spread quickly in a closed network like a school, to kids and teachers and their families. When we can prevent a disease through immunization, it helps children stay on track with their learning, their development, and all the activities kids love to do."

Keep in Mind

The bridge-and-pivot technique is often the most strategic option available, but it doesn't always lead to an immediate breakthrough. Remember that success comes in many forms. An effective interaction may mean that you change your conversation partner's opinion, but it may also mean that you provide a new perspective for others listening in. Sometimes, success may simply mean preventing a disagreement from escalating into an argument, leaving the door open for future conversations.

Dig Deeper

For more on communicating publicly about immunization, see FrameWorks research and resources created in partnership with the American Academy of Pediatrics:

[Boosting Public Discourse: Reframing Childhood Immunization](#)

[Valuing Community: Framing Childhood Vaccines in Rural America](#)

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