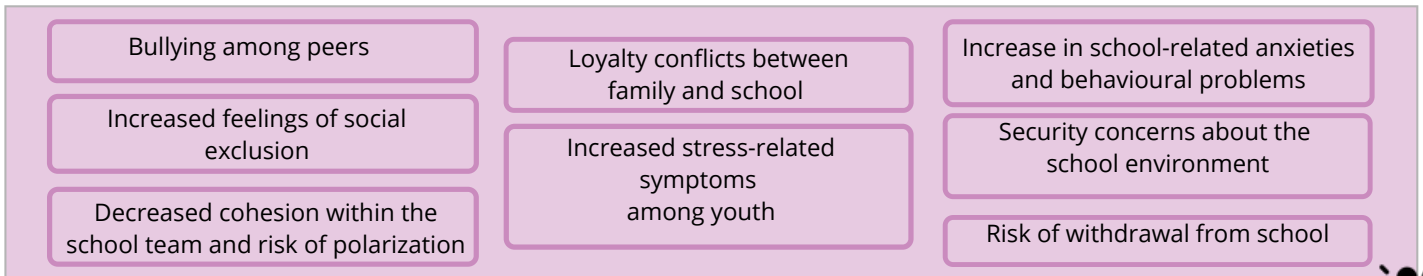




# Protecting the Well-being of Children and Adolescents: Easing Vaccine Tension Around Schools



## Vaccine Tension Impacts on Children and Adolescents



Illustrated in the appended document "The Relational and Emotional Consequences of the COVID-19 Vaccine Debate for Children and Youth"



### Why is there tension around schools?

Vaccination of youth (12 years +) against COVID-19 is justified by the available epidemiological data and requires parental consent for those under 14 years of age or from youth as of 14 years of age.

- **Vaccinating in schools** is a pragmatic choice but is **associated with problems in a polarized context** (loss of the protective aspect of the school environment for some, displacement of conflicts to the school environment).
- Youth carry an important **symbolic value** in our society and are at the heart of debates (for or against vaccination).
- Vaccination for 5-11 years of age **could accentuate these divisions** and must be planned with this context in mind.

### Escalation of Vaccine Tension Around Schools

- Different views, positions and decisions between supporters and opposers of vaccination or health measures (social duty versus individual right)
- Positions being moralized (blame, stigma)
- Generalizations and oversimplification of both groups
- Use of disqualifying language and insults
- Verbal violence from pro-vaccine advocates minimized
- Silence of some opposers who fear the consequences of their disagreement
- Public protests
- Virtual or direct violent acts



### Implementation of Measures that can be Constraining

Vaccination passport (13 years +) for activities deemed non-essential including extracurricular activities, mandatory vaccination in certain workplaces, ban on protests against vaccination within 50m of certain places including schools

### Unintended Effects of These Measures

- Vaccination perceived as quasi-mandatory
- Risk of decreased trust in the government, institutions, science, health professionals or vaccines, in the short or longer term
- Risks of discrimination and marginalization of already marginalized groups
- Social unrest, polarization and risk of social fracture

### Underneath These Tensions...

- Chronic stress caused by the pandemic and the challenge of learning to live with the virus
- Diminishing democratic spaces to express opinions and positions in a respectful manner
- Lack of recognition of the emotions (fear, frustration, anger) and the underlying distress that motivate positions
- Lack of awareness of the historical importance of vaccines
- Lack of understanding of the complexity and heterogeneity of vaccine hesitancy or refusal
- Lack of recognition of the contexts in which people do or do not choose to vaccinate, and of the structural barriers that exist - it is not all about individual will





# Preventing and Addressing Vaccine Tension in Schools



## Guiding Principles

- Prioritize relationships despite disagreements
- Encourage and facilitate dialogue and respectful exchanges despite differences
- Bring back the legitimacy and respect of the individual or parental choice and rhythm, even if this choice can be concerning
- Avoid confrontation and refuse escalation
- Condemn criminal acts (threats, vandalism, aggression)
- Foster transparent, caring and nuanced health communications :
  - Recognize that the science behind institutional choices about vaccination is still limited;
  - Follow government measures while allowing respectful criticism;
  - Avoid generalizations.



## Preventing Tensions at School

### School Administration

Send a message to parents that :

- Encourages reserve and kindness in discussions to maintain an atmosphere of tolerance and respect;
- Encourages vaccination but also respects individual and parental rhythm and choice while protecting youth and families from exclusion;
- Reassures parents and teachers that health measures are applied in the school.

### School Team

- Work to maintain cohesion and cooperation despite possible tensions

### In the Classroom

- Provide safe and respectful spaces for discussion, using e.g., the attached vignettes to initiate dialogue
- Provide age-appropriate information about vaccines in a caring and non-judgmental manner
- Familiarize youth with vaccine hesitancy so that they understand that it is normal, complex, dynamic and not just a matter of willingness
- Encourage youth to be empathetic and respectful of those who have different perspectives than themselves
- Offer inclusive activities that do not distinguish between vaccinated and unvaccinated youth



## Intervening

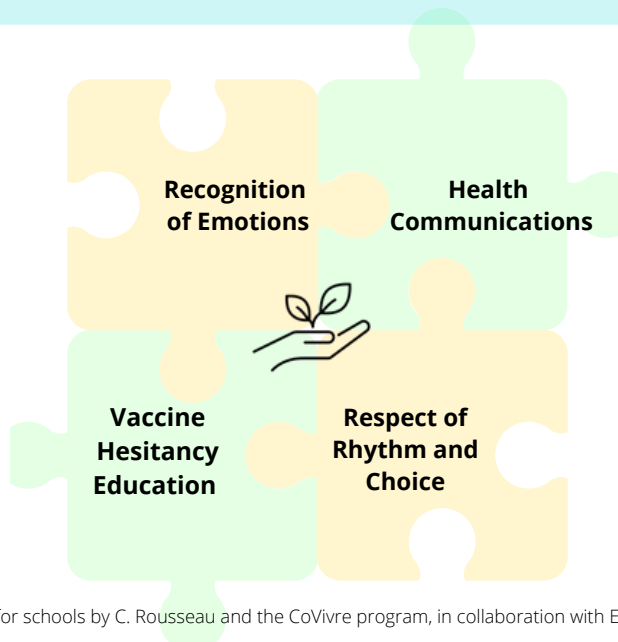
### Dealing with a Protest

- Reassure young people and explain to them what is happening in an age appropriate way
- Remind them that disagreement does not justify disrespect or violence
- Remain specific and avoid generalizations (do not say "anti-vaxxer")

### Dealing with an Incident at School

- Ensure school team cohesion around the response
- Implement appropriate consequences regardless of the position of the parties involved, minimizing exclusionary measures
- Mediate between the people involved rather than divide them and encourage the maintenance of the relationship

## In Brief



### Four Axes

1. Recognize the role of emotions
2. Discuss vaccines and health in a transparent, nuanced and caring manner
3. Raise awareness about vaccine hesitancy and vaccine refusal
4. Respect the rhythm and choice

### To Achieve This

- Create safe and respectful spaces for dialogue
- Protect relationships
- Promote school team cohesion
- Avoid confrontation
- Avoid exclusion