

# Responding to vaccine correspondence

Tuesday 7 September 2021

Many schools have received enquiries from parents relating to COVID-19 vaccine programs for students. Some are simple requests for information; others appear to be based on a misunderstanding about the programs.

A significant number of written enquiries seen by ISV have similarities, suggesting a degree of coordination among letter writers. Some of these are factually incorrect, claiming the vaccines are untested or experimental, and citing research and legislation that is either non-existent, or not relevant to Australia.

The following messages have been drafted to assist Principals in responding to these enquiries. In any response, you could:

- Thank the parent for raising their concerns.
- Highlight the school's primary commitment to the safety and wellbeing of the entire school community, including students. This includes taking every possible precaution in response to COVID-19.
- Suggest parents with concerns or seeking advice about vaccines or health issues in general, contact their GP.
- Vaccines are not mandatory. The current program for schools is focussed on final year students who are encouraged to be vaccinated for their safety and the safety of the wider community. We can not force students to get vaccinated.
- All students, vaccinated or not, can sit the GAT and other exams.
- School staff are being strongly encouraged to be vaccinated, for their safety and the safety of the wider community.
- We need to recognise the unique nature of the school environment, in which staff and students gather in large groups, working face-to-face, where social distancing is not possible. The more people who are vaccinated, the more protected our community and our school will be.

Engaging in correspondence about the safety or otherwise of vaccines, and the dangers posed by COVID-19, risks becoming protracted, time consuming, and ultimately futile. To avoid this, you might simply refer correspondents to the websites of relevant health authorities (see list of resources below).

Parents might also make assertions or ask questions about issues of consent or schools' legal obligations.

Some of the letters ISV has seen cite legislation or constitutional provisions which are purported to apply to vaccination programs. In examples we have seen, the claimed legislation and constitution provisions do not exist or do not apply in Australia.

In response you could draw on the following information:

- The vaccination program for students is entirely voluntary. Consent is required from a parent (or where applicable, from a student) before the student can receive a COVID-19 vaccination.
- The age at which a person becomes an 'adult' in Australia is 18, the 'legal age of consent'. By that age, people are presumed to have capacity to consent to their own medical treatment, including vaccinations. Consent for the medical treatment of people under 18 is generally provided by parents; however, there are circumstances where people under 18 years can legally consent to being vaccinated despite their parents' objection. If a child is eligible to be vaccinated and a health professional assesses them to be a 'mature minor', they can consent to their own vaccination.

## Additional resources

### Government sources

- Victorian Department of Health: <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/about-covid-19-vaccines>
- Australian Department of Health: <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/learn-about-covid-19-vaccines>

Both sites include accessible information in plain English on how vaccines are tested, approved and regulated.

### Other sources

- The Australian Medical Association: <https://www.ama.com.au/media>
- The Medical Journal of Australia: <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2021/215/4/effectiveness-covid-19-vaccines-findings-real-world-studies>
- RMIT/ABC Fact Check regularly produces articles debunking myths, misinformation and fake news about COVID-19 and vaccines: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/>