

Responses to stories illustrating COVID-19 transmission by unvaccinated young people

Message testing among vaccinated and unvaccinated Black youth and young adults in St. Louis
September 17, 2021

Background: Prior message testing (August 10, 2021) found that unvaccinated Black youth and young adults in St. Louis were more likely to consider getting vaccinated after learning that, on average, a person infected with the Delta variant of COVID-19 passed on the virus to five others. Based on this, we developed four stories of unvaccinated young people who transmitted the virus to someone in their life. We tested the stories among 40 youth and young adults, nearly all Black, who attended a Talent Showcase August 28th or a Dance Battle on September 11th in St. Louis.

Approach: Four stories aimed to describe plausible COVID-19 transmission by young people:

- Jaden’s story - causing a favorite cousin to *miss out* on important events;
- Mikayla’s story - being *shunned by friends* after bringing COVID-19 into their group;
- C.J.’s story - causing *health harm* to a family member; and,
- Jade’s story - causing job-related *financial hardship* to a roommate.

Stories varied in consequences experienced by those transmitting the virus and those infected by them, and in attributes of the infected person. We assessed perceived effectiveness of each story, reactions to each story, and whether each story made them think about anyone in their life.

Top-level findings

- Both vaccinated and unvaccinated participants rated the *health harm* story as most effective in making someone think about getting vaccinated. In this story, C.J. infects his grandmother. All participants reading the story reported that it made them think about someone in their life.
- Otherwise, vaccinated and unvaccinated young people reacted differently to the stories. Vaccinated participants consistently rated messages as more effective, often were critical of unvaccinated characters in the stories (“*very irresponsible*,” “*wasn’t considerate*,” “*should know better*,” “*your actions affect others*,” “*if not feeling well, stay home*,” “*downplay the seriousness of the virus*,” “*accountability is important*,” “*ignorant*”) and felt stories pointed out the need for precautions (“*exactly why you should be vaccinated*,” “*WEAR A MASK!*”).
- In contrast, unvaccinated participants objected to unvaccinated characters being judged (“*Ole girl F*** up for judging her friend*,” “*shouldn’t blame one person*,” “*It’s not Jaden’s fault*,” “*don’t feel the family should have been mad*”), raised doubts about or excused unvaccinated characters’ role in transmitting COVID-19 (“*It’s not really clear who spread it*,” “*she didn’t know she had it*”), defended individualism in COVID-19 prevention (“*it’s her choice*”), and dismissed its seriousness (“*It’s okay, life goes on*,” “*most people don’t care about covid*”).

Implications for action

Vaccinated participants harshly judged unvaccinated characters in the stories. Unvaccinated participants reacted strongly against unvaccinated characters being judged in the stories.

1. Illustrating the potential impact of a young person’s vaccination decision on older family members’ health could make some unvaccinated individuals consider getting vaccinated.
2. Many unvaccinated young people are unmoved by being blamed, shamed or shunned, or by claims of COVID-19’s seriousness. Avoid these, as they likely increase resistance.

How were the data collected?

Setting and attendees

Respondents were attendees at two outdoor events hosted by Story Stitchers at Strauss Park in the City of St. Louis: a *Talent Showcase* held Saturday, August 28 (7-8:30 pm), and a *Dance Battle* held Saturday, September 11 (6- 9:00 pm). Each event was attended by about 100 youth and young adults. Story Stitchers is a local artist collective of minority youth and young adults, ages 16-24. Participation was open to all event attendees, regardless of age or race. Because testing occurred at two events on different dates, attendees at the second event were asked if they completed message testing at the first event; if they did, they could not participate twice.

Methods

Members of the St. Louis CEAL team were on site and led the activities. Participants randomly selected an envelope that contained a single page with instructions, questions and one of four stories (see below). There were 40 envelopes and each story appeared 10 times. Participants first reported their vaccination status, next read the story on the page, then answered three questions about the story: (1) What is your reaction to the story? (open-ended text response); (2) Did the story make you think about anyone in your life? (yes/no); and (3) How effective would the story be in making someone think about getting vaccinated? (1-10, where 1 = not at all effective, 10 = very effective). Sample pages are in the Appendix. Participants returned the page in the envelope and selected a \$5 gift card to Target, Starbucks or McDonalds. The four messages were:

Jaden's story

“My cousin Antwon is a football star for his high school team. He’s been training hard all summer and now the season is finally here. He’s a senior and trying to earn a college scholarship. I’m his biggest fan and go to all his games. When he came over to play video games last week, I was so excited to see him I didn’t mention how tired I’d been feeling. We played Madden for hours. Three days later when Antwon’s team was tested for COVID-19, he was the only one that tested positive. He has to miss two games and can’t practice with the team. I feel terrible about it and everyone in the family is mad at me. I wasn’t vaccinated. What if I gave Antwon COVID-19?”

Mikayla's story

“I wasn’t feeling my best, but there was no way I would miss my friend Kaylin’s birthday dinner. I went to the birthday dinner with 15 other friends, and woke up the next day feeling worse with a fever and cough. I got tested and it was COVID. Then things got worse. Two days later, Kaylin and 5 other girls at the dinner tested positive, too. All 5 were sitting close to me at dinner. My friends all think I spread COVID to the group. They’re mad at me and don’t respond to my texts. I’m worried they may never forgive me.”

C.J.'s story

“Friday night I went to a concert with two friends. The concert required masks if you weren’t vaccinated, so we all brought masks. But no one was checking once you got inside, so we didn’t wear them. On Sunday, I went to my grandmother’s house for dinner. The next day at work, I started feeling sick. My boss sent me to get tested for COVID. I tested positive. Later that week my grandmother also tested positive. Then she started having a hard time breathing. She had to go to the hospital, and they put her on a ventilator to help her breathe. I can’t sleep because I feel responsible for passing COVID-19 to my grandmother.”

Jade's story

“I’ve been friends with Tiana since high school and we’ve been roommates for almost a year. We moved in together so we could split the rent. Tiana wears a mask at the grocery store where she works, but neither of us is vaccinated. Last week Tiana got tested by her job for COVID-19, and tested positive. She can’t work for two weeks. She blames me, because I’d been coughing and feeling sick the week before. Now Tiana won’t talk to me, and without her paycheck, we’re going to miss our rent payment. I worry that we won’t have a place to stay much longer, and that my friendship with Tiana might be over.”

Respondents

A total of 40 responses were collected at the two events. Participants were event attendees; nearly all were Black youth and young adults.

Analysis

Participant responses are shown in tables on the pages that follow. The authors of this report reviewed participant responses and identified recurring themes.

Report prepared by: Karen Skinner, Hannah Kinzer, Laura LaGesse, Andrea Chambers, Mikayla Johnson, Kally Xu, and Matthew Kreuter. **Questions?** Please contact Karen Skinner: Karen.Skinner@wustl.edu

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Table 1. COVID-19 vaccination status of message testing participants (n=40)

Vaccinated	26 (65%)
Not vaccinated	14 (35%)

Table 2. Proportion of participants reporting that a story made them think of anyone in their life, by story and participant vaccination status.

Message	Made you think about anyone in your life, % (n)		
	All participants	Vaccinated participants	Unvaccinated participants
Jaden's story (n=10)	60% (6/10)	67% (4/6)	50% (2/4)
Mikayla's story (n=10)	10% (1/10)	13% (1/8)	0% (0/2)
C.J.'s story (n=10*)	100% (9/9)	100% (6/6)	100% (3/3)
Jade's story (n=10)	50% (5/10)	50% (3/6)	50% (2/4)

* One participant responding "yes" and "no" was not included in final results.

Table 3. Mean perceived effectiveness score, by story and participant vaccination status.

Message	Mean perceived effectiveness (1-10)		
	All participants	Vaccinated participants	Unvaccinated participants
Jaden's story (n=10)	6.4	7.2	5.3
Mikayla's story (n=10)	6.7	7.1	5.0
C.J.'s story (n=10)	7.2	7.7	6.5
Jade's story (n=10)	6.1	6.7	5.3

Table 4. Qualitative reactions to stories, by story and participant vaccination status.

Jaden's story (n=10)

Vaccinated participants (n=6)

- *Guilt can try to overcome you but you can't allow it to. You weren't aware of your diagnosis. However accountability is important. If you weren't feeling good you could've considered yourself and postponed. But nonetheless pray and allow God to work it out what's meant for him. Nothing can stop it if it's God's will.*
- *This is exactly why you should be vaccinated. You will be less likely to contract the disease. Luckily it's someone young and healthy, but next time it could be your grandparents.*
- *I think it shows the active consequences of not being vaccinated*
- *I believe he was very irresponsible, if he felt sick he should have visited doctor, to check if he had contracted COVID, he wasn't considerate of his friend or team members*
- *I think if Antwon felt comfortable being around someone not vaccinated it was his choice. It is not Jaden's fault. I think no one should be forced to feel victim to COVID. Antwon should have been quarantining if he was worried about getting COVID.*
- *Not everyone always equates tiredness to COVID. It's more important to get tested and as an unvaccinated person, "WEAR A MASK!"*

Unvaccinated participants (n=4)

- *I think they shouldn't have played video games together and instead did a different activity or play together separate but online.*
- *If he got covid-19 the whole house would effected and everyone would be away for 14 days.*
- *Well I feel like Antwon's cousin should have passed on the hangout. I don't feel the family should have been mad that the cousin wasn't vaxxed cause he still could spread covid even if he is vaxxed. So they should've just been more mad that he didn't speak up about his symptoms.*
- *I'm not a fan of assumptions but had he known it would be different.*

Mikayla's story (n=10)

Vaccinated participants (n=8)

- *If you think you have COVID, tell everyone you been in contact with in the past 10 days. Don't delay.*
- *I think if not feeling well stay home, but who knows how it was contracted. Follow covid protocol. 15 is too much anyway. The more we practice safety rules I feel the less likely we are to become infected.*
- *My reaction to the story would be they shouldn't blame one person since they do not know it could have been any of them. Or none of the 5 at all!*
- *Makes me wanna share and encourage others to get the vaccine*
- *Sorry but you should know better than to go somewhere. Pray your friends live and one day forgive you!*
- *I feel empathy for Mckayla but she was irresponsible and should have stayed home*
- *That's ignorant of the friends, they could all have been the reason for getting others sick. They also made the choice to go, suffer the consequences.*
- *Seems like a nightmare with breakthrough SARS-COV-2 resulting in COVID-19. I feel very uncomfortable without mask, which has to happen when eating. It's not really clear who spread it.*

Unvaccinated participants (n=2)

- *They is not her friend because she didn't know that she had it.*
- *It's ok, life goes on.*

Table 4. (cont'd.)

C.J.'s story (n=10)

Vaccinated participants (n=6)

- *I feel like this is exactly why I think everyone should be vaccinated to protect our elders, kids, and each other*
- *Wow, sounds about right. I would feel the same way.*
- *I think they could have been more responsible by not going over their grandmother's house since they went to a large event unmasked AND unvaccinated. Your actions affect others with this virus.*
- *No Response*
- *They are irresponsible, they knew the consequence and still didn't wear a mask*
- *My reaction is numb, because I'm used to this very scenario at my job. There are some real ignorant individuals out here.*

Unvaccinated participants (n=4)

- *I can sympathize because I have older people in my family*
 - *Not surprised most people don't care about covid but it's their choice but it is her fault for not caring.*
 - *They should have kept the mask on even if no one was checking, the virus didn't disappear once vaccines were given out so always take measures*
 - *CJ was very irresponsible*
-

Jade's story (n=10)

Vaccinated participants (n=8)

- *It's better to get the shot*
- *I feel sorry for everyone involved. But it begs the question; the friend never mentioned what precautionary methods they were taking. No one should be blamed but it's unfortunate.*
- *Lesson learned for you both, pray you will not die then if you live get vaccinated!*
- *None really because people I know are vaccinated.*
- *My reaction to this story is that it was likely to take place in most people's lives if they continue to downplay the seriousness of the virus*
- *Both should've gotten vaccinated*

Unvaccinated participants (n=2)

- *Tiana isn't a good friend cause she could've caught covid from anywhere*
 - *Ole girl F*** up for judging her friend off her being sick thinking she got covid. She might as well have a back up plan because that friendship is over.*
 - *My reaction is that its sad that COVID-19 is testing our relationships with each other and trust*
 - *I feel it is more of a blame game between them.*
-

Appendix 1.

Thank you for sharing your opinion!

1. Are you vaccinated for COVID-19? YES NO

2. Please read the story below and answer the questions that follow.

Jaden's story

My cousin Antwon is a football star for his high school team. He's been training hard all summer and now the season is finally here. He's a senior and trying to earn a college scholarship. I'm his biggest fan and go to all his games. When he came over to play video games last week, I was so excited to see him I didn't mention how tired I'd been feeling. We played Madden for hours. Three days later when Antwon's team was tested for COVID-19, he was the only one that tested positive. He has to miss two games and can't practice with the team. I feel terrible about it and everyone in the family is mad at me. I wasn't vaccinated. What if I gave Antwon COVID-19?

A. What is your reaction to the story? _____

B. Did the story make you think about anyone in your life? YES NO

C. How effective would the story be in making someone think about getting vaccinated?

Not at all effective											Very effective
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

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