

The New York Times

Flu Vaccine for Preschoolers

New Jersey's new mandate that all children in preschools or licensed child-care centers must be vaccinated against influenza has generated intense opposition from parents who fear the vaccines will harm their children. Hundreds of protesters rallied at the State House in Trenton in support of a bill that would allow parents to opt out of the mandate and all vaccine requirements.

That would be a serious mistake for children and their parents.

Both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that children from the ages of 6 months through 18 years be vaccinated annually against the flu.

Children are much more likely than adults to get sick with influenza; some 20,000 under 5 years old are hospitalized with influenza or its complications every year and nearly 100 of them die.

Beyond that, young children regularly spread the flu virus to their families and the wider community. Pre-

schoolers are typically the first to see the doctor for flu-related illnesses in any community, with adults trailing along about a month later.

It seems likely that if influenza could be greatly suppressed among young children it would also decline among adults and vulnerable senior citizens.

The vaccines are deemed safe and effective by federal health authorities. For parents who are still worried about thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative, there are flu vaccines that do not contain it.

New Jersey already allows children to be exempted from vaccination for religious or medical reasons. The pending bill would add a "conscientious exemption" so broad that any parent could opt out based on a "sincerely held" objection to the immunization.

Although no other state yet requires flu vaccination for preschoolers, New Jersey is on the right track. Vaccinations for infectious diseases are most effective when coverage is near universal.