Why are Vaccines Such a Stressful Part of My Parenting?

Parenting is currently a blizzard of information. Some of this noise is designed to provoke emotions and drive the commercial sales of health-related products. Other messaging is an attempt to find simplicity, order or comfort in a harsh and complex world. Finally, much of media is attempting to divide our communities and build political power. One of the joys of practicing Pediatrics is providing a safe harbor in this storm. It is gratifying to watch parents relax, regain confidence and feel good about their most important job: parenting. At Highland, we seek to be a place of patient, respectful and compassionate conversation about any concerning pediatric topic.

Why are we in this storm? One of the reasons is social media. Social media tends to promote overconfident declarations instead of nuanced discussion due to platform algorithms that favor emotional, confident rhetoric and a user bias where sharing content creates an *illusion* of expertise, even without deep understanding.

This dynamic creates a significant contrast:

SOCIAL MEDIA AND OVERCONFIDENCE

Illusion of Expertise: Sharing news articles or content makes individuals feel more knowledgeable about the topic than they actually are, a phenomenon linked to the "News-Finds-Me" effect, where people believe important information will reach them without active effort.

Validation Over Verification: The decision to share content is often driven by a desire for social validation (likes, shares) and to reinforce group beliefs, rather than a process of careful fact-checking or reflection.

Dunning-Kruger Effect: Overconfident users often know just enough to feel confident but not enough to recognize the limitations of their understanding. True experts, conversely, tend to approach complex topics with more caution and awareness of nuances.

Algorithm Prioritization: Platforms are designed to amplify emotionally extreme, uncivil, or hostile content, as this drives higher engagement, further discouraging neutral or complex perspectives.

Anonymity and Deniability: Online interactions often lack face-to-face consequences, allowing users to make bold claims without the same social liability they might face offline.

COMPLEX AND NUANCED TOPICS

Depth and Detail: Complex topics, such as scientific issues, public policy, or medicine, require in-depth knowledge, evidence-based reasoning, and an understanding of various interacting factors.

Intellectual Humility: Engaging with complex nuance requires an "actively open-minded thinking" (AOT) approach and intellectual humility, a willingness to seek out new information and reconsider one's stance, qualities often at odds with the fast pace of social media.

Lack of Authority: On social media, the fragmentation of knowledge and absence of clear authority can lead individuals to trust their "common sense" over expert opinions, as experts are sometimes summarily dismissed.

In essence, the environment of social media — with its design for rapid engagement, social validation, and the psychological bias of overconfidence — fundamentally clashes with the slow, careful, and humble approach required for a meaningful understanding and discussion of complex, nuanced topics. So, in the end, the best vaccination to protect your Joy of parenting is to unplug from social media.