



National
Council of
Ethics for the
Life Sciences

**ETHICAL DELIBERATION ON SARS-COV-2
VACCINATION IN CHILDREN AGED 5 TO 11 YEARS**

Position Statement

December 2021



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Executive Summary

The CNECV adopted on its own initiative, on 20 December 2021, a Position Statement on the ethical considerations regarding the vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 of children between 5 and 11 years of age.

The Council considers that decisions on matters of high social importance should be based on processes of careful ethical deliberation, in order to promote the well-being of the population, build trust and ensure the adherence to recommended health measures, with a view to the protection of all citizens. Public health measures also have a strong ethical dimension, even more so in a pandemic context and involving particularly vulnerable segments of the population, such as minors. In this sense, the rigorous identification of the ethical principles involved, their correct interpretation and the application to reality are vital.

Two prior ethical requirements should be mentioned: the first, concerning the need for scientific evidence that objectively justifies an advantage of the expected benefits over the possible risks; the second, regarding the consideration of the best or superior interests of the child, or of the paediatric population, as a decisive criterion in all decisions concerning their health.

In the specific consideration of ethical principles, the CNECV highlights the classical bioethical principles - beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice - particularly those of beneficence and autonomy.

The principle of beneficence should be adopted in its broadest sense, which includes not only physical health, but also mental health and psychological well-being, along with the harmonious development of the child in its relational and affective dimension, which isolation and quarantines may harm.

The principle of autonomy, sometimes dismissed as irrelevant or not applicable in the context of the paediatric population, is in fact essential. Involving children in the decision-making process, through dialogue adapted to their age and maturity, is relevant and promotes their progressive empowerment to exercise



autonomy. It is also an excellent opportunity to develop health and citizenship education, as well as to promote scientific literacy and social responsibility.

In case of disagreement between minors and parents/legal guardians, or even between parents, the CNECV recommends the creation of a wide space of communication between the parties, where appropriate information is made available to help find answers to all questions and misgivings. Compulsory vaccination should always be avoided.

The CNECV also stresses the importance of the precautionary principle (in formulating a reasonable and prudent forecast of the effects of vaccination compared to inaction), the principle of vulnerability (in adopting exceptional measures to protect the most vulnerable in society, such as children) and the principle of proportionality (in the appropriateness of the proposed health measures, in this case vaccination, compared to the risks of non-vaccination and compared to other protective measures).

The ethical principles expressed in the CNECV's deliberation are assumed as relevant contributions to maintain and reinforce the confidence of the general population in the vaccination process, which has been running in an exemplary manner in Portugal, and in particular of families, regarding the health value of vaccines for children between 5 and 11 years of age.

Lisbon, 20th December 2021.

For the National Ethics Council for Life Sciences,

The President, Maria do Céu Patrão Neves.