

# Evaluation: Barriers and Facilitators to Preschool Flu Vaccination Uptake

This evaluation delves into the barriers and facilitators influencing parental decisions regarding seasonal influenza vaccinations for preschool-aged children in North East England. Through the lens of the COM-B model of health behavior change, we aim to unpack the complex interplay of capability, opportunity, and motivation that shapes parental choices. By dissecting these factors, this research seeks to illuminate potential pathways for targeted interventions to enhance vaccination uptake and ultimately safeguard the health of this vulnerable population.

## Theme 1: The Flu: Perception and Experience

This theme explores parents' understanding and experience of influenza, laying the groundwork for understanding their vaccination decisions. Parents' perception of flu severity and its potential impact on their children are crucial determinants of their willingness to vaccinate.

### 1.1: Flu as a Commonplace Illness

Many parents perceive flu as a commonplace and generally mild illness, especially for children. This perception often stems from a lack of personal experience with severe cases of influenza in children. As one parent articulated, "*I've never really thought of them having it, being you know, debilitated by the flu before. I've never really thought it's something children get.*" This lack of perceived threat diminishes the urgency to seek preventative measures like vaccination. Parents often equate flu to a "bad cold," minimizing its potential for serious complications.

This perspective is further reinforced by the common cultural narrative that downplays the severity of influenza. One participant noted, "*Flu, it just feels so common place that if I heard like one of my friends kids that had flu, I'd be like 'Aw that's really bad'.*" This normalization of flu as an expected childhood illness contributes to a sense of complacency regarding vaccination.

### 1.2: Fear of Serious Complications

While many parents view flu as a mild illness, some harbor fears about its potential for severe complications, particularly for vulnerable individuals. Experiences with serious illness, either personally or within their social circle, heighten parents' awareness of flu's potential dangers. One participant explained, "*I do get concerned about my kids getting the flu and particularly if my daughter got it 'cause I know, all her, she's not got a great immune system...Also, my husband and I both have an asthma.*" Past experiences with hospitalizations due to respiratory illnesses amplify these anxieties and motivate parents to prioritize preventative measures like vaccination.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has also added another layer of complexity to parents' perception of flu. While some parents express heightened anxiety about respiratory illnesses in general, others express a sense of "pandemic fatigue," leading to a decreased focus on other health threats like influenza. One participant observed, "*I think that the latest pandemic's probably made people even more concerned around kind of respiratory disease and issues and bugs and things like that.*" However, another participant suggested, "*I don't particularly think either of them, and this is probably a big mistake, but I don't particularly think either of them are the sort of kids that would end up in hospital.*" This divergence in perspectives highlights the diverse ways the pandemic has shaped parental anxieties around infectious diseases.

### 1.3: Uncertainty About Flu in Children

Many parents exhibit uncertainty regarding the specifics of influenza in children. They struggle to differentiate flu symptoms from those of common colds, and lack clarity on the severity and potential duration of flu in children. One participant expressed, "*I'm not, I'm not really sure whether I have an expectation of that...I don't particularly know anything really about how flu would affect a child versus how it would affect an adult.*" This uncertainty can hinder parents' ability to assess the necessity of vaccination, leading to indecision or reliance on external sources of information.

**Theme 1 Conclusion:** This theme reveals a complex and multifaceted understanding of influenza among parents. The interplay of normalized perceptions of flu as a common illness, fear of serious complications, and uncertainty about its manifestation in children creates a diverse landscape of parental perspectives. This diversity underscores the need for targeted communication strategies that address specific concerns and bridge knowledge gaps to facilitate informed decision-making regarding flu vaccination.

## **Theme 2: Navigating Information and Seeking Advice**

This theme analyzes the pathways parents utilize to gather information about the flu and flu vaccination. Understanding these sources of information is crucial for crafting effective interventions that resonate with parents' preferred channels.

### **2.1: The NHS Website: A Trusted Authority**

The NHS website emerges as a dominant source of information for parents seeking to learn about the flu and flu vaccination. Its perceived trustworthiness and accessibility make it a go-to resource. One participant stated, "*Just straight to the NHS. It's just, I'm fully confident in the information that will be on there and that things will be accurate.*" Parents value the NHS's authority and credibility, viewing it as a reliable and unbiased source of information, particularly when compared to the vast and often contradictory information available online.

### **2.2: Dr. Google and Beyond: Online Information Seeking**

While the NHS website holds a prominent position, many parents acknowledge utilizing "Dr. Google" for quick information gathering. However, they express concerns about the accuracy and reliability of online information, often cross-referencing multiple websites to verify information. One participant explained, "*NHS website is probably the first one I would go to because I think it's probably more reliable than anything else on the internet and but I've looked at this WebMD and that one comes up all the time and that one seems quite good.*" This highlights the need for clear and accessible information from reputable sources to counter misinformation and equip parents with accurate knowledge for informed decision-making.

### **2.3: Tapping into Expertise: Seeking Medical Advice**

While many parents utilize online resources, they also express a reliance on medical professionals for personalized advice and reassurance. Conversations with GPs, nurses, and health visitors provide opportunities for individualized guidance and address specific concerns. One participant explained, "*If I wasn't provided with information at the point of asking me to take a vaccination... I would probably again look at the NHS website, maybe or if I've been invited for vaccination for him at the practice, the GP practice, without any sort of supplementary information, then I would also request it from them.*" However, some parents express frustration with the lack of proactive communication from healthcare providers, highlighting a need for more consistent and readily available information regarding flu vaccination options.

### **2.4: The Power of Peer Networks**

Parents frequently turn to their social networks, including friends, family, and online parenting groups, for support and shared experiences. However, they often express a critical view of the information circulating within these networks, highlighting the need for a balance between peer support and reliable information from trusted sources. One participant described, *"And certainly when he was, he was little and he had vaccines I, because it was a schedule of vaccines and you'd be going in for one and then you'd be talking about when the next set were, I would talk with the nurse, probably, who was giving them. Occasionally the GP about the next set and what those were about, and, and, you know what they covered and sort of benefits or not of those."* This highlights the complex interplay between personal experience, peer influence, and professional guidance in shaping parental understanding of flu vaccination.

**Theme 2 Conclusion:** This theme underscores the importance of understanding parents' information-seeking behaviors. While the NHS website serves as a trusted cornerstone, parents navigate a complex web of online resources, peer networks, and medical professionals to gather information and shape their understanding of flu vaccination. To effectively promote vaccination, public health interventions must leverage these diverse information channels, ensuring the dissemination of consistent, accurate, and easily accessible information.

### **Theme 3: Vaccination: Benefits, Barriers, and the Decision-Making Process**

This theme examines parents' perceptions of the benefits and barriers associated with flu vaccination, and how these perceptions inform their decision-making process. Understanding these factors is crucial for designing targeted interventions that address specific concerns and promote informed choices.

#### **3.1: Vaccination: A Protective Shield**

Many parents view vaccination as a crucial tool for safeguarding their children's health and preventing potentially serious illness. This perspective aligns with the COM-B model's "motivation" component, with parents driven by a desire to protect their children from harm. As one parent stated, *"I would I would I would always advocate for vaccines."* The perceived benefits of vaccination outweigh any minor inconveniences or uncertainties associated with the process.

#### **3.2: The Collective Good: Herd Immunity and Community Protection**

A significant number of parents recognize the collective benefits of vaccination, emphasizing its role in protecting vulnerable individuals within the community. This aligns with the COM-B model's "opportunity" component, recognizing the external factors that influence vaccination decisions. One participant explained, *"It's not about just your child, it's about all the children, and I kind of get that that the kind of herd immunity or whatever is really important."* This awareness of the broader societal impact of vaccination fosters a sense of responsibility and motivates parents to contribute to the collective good.

#### **3.3: Navigating Barriers: Inconvenience and Accessibility**

Despite recognizing the benefits of vaccination, some parents encounter barriers that hinder their ability to vaccinate their children. Inconvenience, particularly related to scheduling appointments and navigating childcare arrangements, emerges as a significant obstacle. One participant described, *"It was more a logistic problem that we couldn't get there because it was on a day that I worked."* Limited access to clinics and inflexible appointment times present logistical challenges that can deter parents from pursuing vaccination.

#### **3.4: Vaccine Hesitancy: Concerns and Uncertainties**

While many parents express a strong pro-vaccination stance, a few voice concerns and uncertainties regarding flu vaccination. These concerns often stem from a lack of information or misinformation regarding vaccine safety and effectiveness. One participant explained, *"I am neither, I think it was towards, just a second...I got the letter towards the end of September, I think, and, and we were due to go away mid October I think. I rang the practice and said that I wanted to book him in for the vaccination and, and they told me that, although they sent the letters about saying that the vaccines were ready to be booked, they actually hadn't had them into the practice yet and to ring back in a week or so time."* This hesitancy underscores the need for clear and reassuring communication from healthcare providers to address parental concerns and instill confidence in vaccination.

### **3.5: Trust in Medical Authority: A Guiding Force**

A recurring theme throughout the interviews is parents' reliance on medical professionals as trusted sources of information and guidance regarding vaccination. This aligns with the COM-B model's "capability" component, acknowledging the influence of psychological factors on vaccination decisions. One parent stated, *"If the GP, if the NHS are telling me that this is a vaccine that they advise my child to have, then I'm pretty much okay with that."* This trust in medical authority plays a crucial role in shaping parental choices and underscores the importance of maintaining open communication and fostering strong patient-provider relationships.

**Theme 3 Conclusion:** This theme highlights the intricate balance of benefits, barriers, and decision-making processes that shape parental choices regarding flu vaccination. While the desire to protect their children and contribute to community health serve as powerful motivators, logistical challenges, vaccine hesitancy, and the influence of medical authority all play a role in shaping parental decisions. To effectively promote vaccination, public health interventions must address these multifaceted factors, ensuring accessibility, providing clear and reassuring information, and fostering trust in medical recommendations.