

Evaluation Section: Perceived Threat of Influenza and Vaccination Benefits

This section delves into the theme of "Perceived Threat of Influenza and Vaccination Benefits," a critical aspect influencing parental decisions regarding preschool influenza vaccination. This theme explores the interplay between parents' understanding of influenza's severity, their perceptions of the vaccine's effectiveness, and their evaluation of the potential benefits for their child and the wider community. Understanding these perceptions is essential as they underpin the motivation behind parental choices and can significantly impact vaccine uptake.

Subtheme 1: Flu as a Common and Manageable Illness

This subtheme explores the common parental perception of influenza as a typical childhood illness, often likened to a severe cold, which can be managed effectively at home. This perception, while acknowledging influenza as a seasonal ailment, often minimizes its potential severity and reduces the perceived need for vaccination.

Many parents described influenza in preschool-aged children as presenting with symptoms akin to a common cold, such as a runny nose, cough, and mild fever. For instance, one parent shared, "Yeah, I expect it to be a seasonal thing really hearin the UK and symptoms like a bad headache, maybe cough-like maybe sinus kind of congestion..." [2:2.1]. This perception of shared symptomology with a common cold contributes to the belief that influenza can be managed effectively at home with over-the-counter medication and rest. This was evident in a statement from another parent who said, "...if you get if you get it its something that we can manage. We can care for him at home I know what I would need to do in terms of like paracetamol and plenty of rest and hydration" [2:2.11]. Interestingly, some parents struggled to differentiate between a common cold and influenza in their children. One parent stated, "But I've never, you know when they've been unwell I've never considered it to be flu, just been unwell normally or been something else viral, not the flu" [4:2.6]. This lack of clear distinction further contributes to downplaying the potential seriousness of influenza and the need for preventative measures like vaccination. However, it is worth noting that this perspective was not universally shared. Some parents, while acknowledging influenza as a common ailment, expressed concern over its potential severity, particularly in vulnerable populations.

This subtheme highlights a critical challenge in promoting influenza vaccination: the need to effectively communicate the potential severity of the illness, particularly to parents who perceive it as a benign childhood disease. Educational interventions should focus on differentiating influenza from the common cold, highlighting its potential complications, and emphasizing the benefits of vaccination in mitigating these risks.

Subtheme 2: Flu as a Serious Threat for Vulnerable Individuals

While some parents downplayed the severity of influenza, others recognized its potential to cause serious complications, particularly in vulnerable individuals like the elderly, those with pre-existing health conditions, and infants. This heightened awareness of the risks associated with influenza, particularly for vulnerable groups, influenced their perception of the importance of vaccination not just for their child but also for the wider social circle.

This understanding of influenza's differential impact fueled a sense of responsibility to protect vulnerable individuals within their social network. This was evident in a parent's statement, "We've got elderly relatives that we live nearby and if [CHILD] were ill equally I wouldn't expose him to those relatives, for fear of him passing it on to them" [2:2.16]. Another parent echoed this

sentiment, stating, "Now if one of mine have flu, I would not give them to my parents to look after because they're elderly..." [4:2.26]. This awareness of the potential for transmission and serious consequences in vulnerable populations emerged as a key driver for considering and opting for influenza vaccination.

This subtheme highlights the importance of framing influenza vaccination not just as individual protection but also as a collective responsibility. Highlighting the potential risks to vulnerable populations and emphasizing the role of vaccination in reducing disease spread can be powerful motivators, particularly for parents concerned about protecting their loved ones.

Subtheme 3: Confidence in Vaccine Effectiveness and Safety

A significant facilitator for influenza vaccine uptake was the strong confidence parents expressed in its effectiveness and safety. They viewed the vaccine as a valuable tool to reduce the risk of their child contracting influenza and potentially mitigating the severity of symptoms should infection occur.

Across the interviews, parents consistently highlighted their belief in the flu vaccine's ability to offer protection against influenza. One parent stated, "pretty much the same as every other vaccine out there, it's you know it's, it's they wouldn't use vaccines if there was no benefit..." [1:2.1]. This trust in the scientific basis and rigorous testing of vaccines contributed to a positive perception of their effectiveness. Parents recognized that while the vaccine might not guarantee complete immunity, it significantly reduced the likelihood of contracting the flu. This understanding was evident in a parent's comment, "Um, so I do understand that when they get the vaccine, it's not necessarily a guarantee they won't get flu, but it vastly reduces the possibility that they will..." [4:2.21]. This acceptance of the vaccine's efficacy in reducing, rather than completely eliminating, the risk of infection, reflects a nuanced understanding of vaccine mechanisms.

This subtheme underscores the crucial role of trust in healthcare providers and scientific consensus in influencing vaccine uptake. Maintaining and strengthening this trust is essential for ensuring continued confidence in influenza vaccination.

Subtheme 4: Collective Benefit and Community Protection

Beyond individual benefits, some parents recognized the collective good associated with influenza vaccination, emphasizing the importance of herd immunity and protecting vulnerable individuals within the community. This awareness of the broader societal implications of vaccination emerged as a significant motivator for vaccine uptake.

Parents who understood the concept of herd immunity viewed vaccination as a civic duty that extended beyond protecting their child. They acknowledged that widespread vaccination contributed to a safer and healthier community, particularly for those more susceptible to influenza's severe effects. This sentiment is exemplified by a parent who said, "...without wanting to get too, like it's kind of almost a civic duty to get your child immunized" [3:2.26]. Another parent emphasized the importance of protecting vulnerable groups, stating, "...this extra protection for the most vulnerable people" [9:2.21]. These statements highlight a sense of social responsibility and a willingness to contribute to the collective good through vaccination.

This subtheme emphasizes the potential of leveraging social responsibility as a motivator for influenza vaccination. Highlighting the role of vaccination in protecting vulnerable populations and contributing to herd immunity can resonate with parents who prioritize the well-being of their community.

Overall Conclusion

The theme "Perceived Threat of Influenza and Vaccination Benefits" revealed a complex interplay of factors influencing parental decisions regarding preschool influenza vaccination. While some parents minimized the severity of influenza, likening it to a manageable childhood illness, others recognized its potential to cause serious complications, particularly for vulnerable individuals. This difference in risk perception significantly impacted their willingness to vaccinate. However, a shared confidence in the vaccine's effectiveness and safety emerged as a key facilitator for uptake. Furthermore, recognizing the collective benefits of vaccination, particularly for protecting vulnerable community members, motivated some parents to choose vaccination.

These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that address the diversity of parental perceptions and motivations. Effective communication strategies should focus on differentiating influenza from the common cold, highlighting its potential severity, particularly for at-risk groups, and emphasizing the individual and collective benefits of vaccination. By addressing knowledge gaps and promoting trust in vaccine safety and efficacy, public health interventions can effectively encourage influenza vaccination and contribute to a healthier community.

Evaluation: Access and Practical Considerations Related to Vaccination

This theme explores the practical aspects of seasonal influenza vaccinations for preschool-aged children in North East England, particularly focusing on how parents navigate the vaccination process and what factors influence their decisions. Understanding the practical barriers and facilitators is crucial for developing targeted interventions to improve vaccination uptake. This section delves into the subthemes within this theme, drawing on the experiences and perspectives shared by parents.

Subtheme 5: Reliance on GP-Initiated Vaccination Process

This subtheme examines the pivotal role of General Practitioners (GPs) in shaping parents' decisions about vaccinating their preschool-aged children against influenza. The analysis reveals a heavy reliance on GPs to initiate and provide information about the flu vaccine. Parents often adopt a passive approach, waiting for invitations or reminders from their GPs rather than actively seeking out information or appointments. For instance, one parent [1:1.14] stated, "And do you know we got it rather than from the GP, but from the health visitor," highlighting the expectation of receiving prompts from healthcare providers. This reliance on GP-led communication is further reinforced by another parent [2:2.7] who expressed, "Well, I would expect information really to be provided and when the vaccination was offered," emphasizing the implicit expectation for GPs to initiate the process and furnish necessary details. This reliance on GPs, while understandable, can become a barrier to vaccination if communication is inconsistent, unclear, or untimely.

However, while the dominant trend showcases reliance on GP-led initiation, a subset of parents demonstrates proactive behavior. These parents, driven by a sense of responsibility and concern for their children's well-being, actively engage in information seeking and appointment scheduling. One parent [3:2.3] shared, "So I rang, to kind of check, you know, 'is she going to be on the list to get it?' because I was very keen for her to get it." This proactive stance underscores the importance of parental initiative in navigating the vaccination process, even within a system largely driven by GP-led communication. Another parent [5:2.10] revealed, "Yes, so we were

invited in for the first time that we, I think, I can't remember, but we got an invitation, invitation for my son to have the flu vaccine." This instance further emphasizes how proactive engagement with healthcare providers can facilitate timely access to vaccination information and appointments. This finding highlights a potential area for intervention, suggesting a need for campaigns encouraging parental proactiveness in seeking flu vaccine information and scheduling appointments for their children, potentially reducing reliance on sometimes inconsistent GP-led communication.

In conclusion, while GPs are pivotal in initiating the flu vaccination process for preschoolers, over-reliance on their prompts can create a passive dynamic among some parents. Encouraging parents to actively engage with healthcare providers and seek information independently could be crucial in ensuring timely vaccination.

Subtheme 6: Challenges with Appointment Scheduling and Availability

This subtheme brings to light the significant logistical hurdles that parents face when trying to schedule flu vaccinations for their children. Limited clinic availability and inflexible appointment timings emerge as major pain points. Parents described experiencing frustration and inconvenience due to restricted time slots often clashing with work commitments. One parent [5:2.4] expressed, "That's where this comes in because the GP had, they'd organized, and it was quite a short window of clinics that they had available, and they only were available at certain times on Friday." Another parent [10:2.27] echoed this sentiment, stating, "Occasionally, it's just a case of rescheduling appointments because they assume all of us are free to the whim of their child and don't have employment." This underscores how inflexible scheduling disregards the realities of working parents, potentially contributing to missed vaccination opportunities.

Despite the prevailing challenges, a contrasting experience emerged from a parent [4:2.8] who recounted, "Oh, that was exactly it. We just rang up and explained that we were taking her in for vaccination, and they just gave us an appointment. It was a very easy process." This example, though not representative of the majority, hints at the potential for positive experiences when scheduling processes are streamlined and accommodating. It underscores the need for healthcare providers to prioritize appointment flexibility, extending hours, offering weekend slots, and exploring alternative vaccination venues to accommodate the needs of working parents and ultimately increase vaccination rates.

In essence, while parents generally endorse the importance of flu vaccination, logistical barriers related to appointment scheduling and availability can derail their best intentions. Addressing these issues through flexible scheduling options, extended clinic hours, and clear communication about scheduling procedures could significantly reduce practical barriers and facilitate increased vaccination uptake.

Subtheme 7: Preference for Nasal Spray over Injection

The analysis reveals a clear and consistent preference among parents for the nasal spray flu vaccine over the traditional injectable form. This preference is deeply rooted in concerns about minimizing discomfort for their children. Parents perceive the nasal spray as a less invasive, less painful, and overall less distressing experience compared to injections. A parent [4:2.24] articulated this sentiment, stating, "Because I would have thought all children, maybe would have had the nasal and inhale, inhale it, rather than have a vaccine, but I don't know why they do it that way." The nasal spray's non-invasive nature appears to alleviate parental anxieties associated with injections, potentially making them more receptive to vaccination. Another parent [8:2.21] pointed out, "It's obviously just the nasal, nasal spray. So there's no inconvenience there. Kids whine afterward a bit, you know, someone sticking something up their nose, but aside from that, no, there's no, no, no side effects, anything I'd worry about or anything like that." This

emphasizes how the absence of needles and the associated pain contributes to a more positive vaccination experience for both the child and the parent.

The strong parental preference for the nasal spray represents a significant facilitator for vaccine uptake. Recognizing and leveraging this preference in communication and outreach efforts could be key to addressing vaccine hesitancy and increasing vaccination rates among preschool-aged children.

Subtheme 8: Limited Awareness of Private Vaccination Options

This subtheme uncovers a notable gap in parents' awareness and understanding of private flu vaccination options. While some parents are open to exploring private avenues, particularly when facing difficulties accessing the NHS program, a lack of information about the availability, cost, and process surrounding private vaccinations persists. One parent [7:2.17] shared, "That's basically, I think I vaguely entertained the idea and then thought they would, if it was really dangerous for his age group." This statement underscores the prevailing uncertainty and lack of clear information surrounding private vaccination options for children. Another parent [10:2.15] revealed, "So I then rang up other pharmacies locally and said, 'Do you do it privately?'" highlighting how information about private vaccination often surfaces incidentally rather than through readily available resources.

The findings suggest a need for greater transparency and accessibility of information regarding private flu vaccination options. Raising awareness about these alternatives could empower parents seeking vaccination outside the NHS framework, especially when encountering barriers within the public healthcare system.

Subtheme 9: Frustration with Bureaucracy and Communication Issues

This subtheme underscores the frustration experienced by parents due to inconsistent communication and cumbersome bureaucratic processes within the flu vaccination system. Parents reported instances of receiving appointment booking letters before vaccines were available at their GP practices, leading to confusion and wasted time. One parent [2:2.3] expressed their discontent, stating, "When I got the letter I rang the practice and then it was a bit frustrated by the fact that they sent the letter when they hadn't got the vaccine." The experience of another parent [10:2.13] further reinforces this frustration: "So I rung up the GP and they said that they had a shortage and so they weren't, they would contact me as soon as they had some medication. I find it very difficult talking to my GP practice because it's like getting blood out of a stone sometimes, and you're just like, 'Well, do you have any idea how long it's going to be?' because I was trying to judge whether it was worth just holding out." Such experiences point to communication gaps and bureaucratic inefficiencies that breed mistrust and act as deterrents to vaccination.

These findings strongly emphasize the need for clear, consistent, and timely communication between healthcare providers and parents. Streamlining appointment scheduling processes, providing transparent information about vaccine availability, and ensuring prompt updates can enhance trust and alleviate parental frustration, ultimately contributing to a smoother vaccination experience.

Overall Conclusion

The theme "Access and Practical Considerations Related to Vaccination" provides crucial insights into the parental decision-making process regarding preschool flu vaccination. While parents acknowledge the importance of vaccination, navigating the system presents various practical

hurdles. Reliance on GP-led communication, coupled with challenges in appointment scheduling, limited awareness of private options, and bureaucratic frustrations, collectively hinder optimal vaccination uptake.

The findings strongly advocate for a multi-pronged approach to improve vaccination rates. This includes empowering parents to be proactive in seeking information and scheduling appointments, enhancing communication strategies to ensure clarity and consistency, optimizing clinic availability and appointment flexibility, and raising awareness about private vaccination options. By addressing these practical barriers, healthcare providers can create a more parent-centric approach, fostering trust and ultimately contributing to increased flu vaccination uptake among preschool-aged children in North East England.

Evaluation: Trust in Healthcare Professionals and Information Sources

This theme explores the pivotal role of trust in shaping parental decisions regarding seasonal influenza vaccinations for their preschool-aged children. It delves into parents' confidence in healthcare providers, preferred information sources, and approaches to seeking and evaluating information about influenza and vaccination. By examining the influence of personal experiences, familial backgrounds, and perceptions of expertise, this theme highlights the multifaceted nature of trust and its significant influence on vaccine uptake.

Subtheme 10: Deference to Medical Authority and Recommendations

This subtheme explores the profound influence of medical authority on parental decision-making regarding childhood vaccinations. The analysis reveals a strong tendency among parents to defer to the expertise of healthcare professionals, particularly general practitioners (GPs) and the National Health Service (NHS), viewing them as trusted sources of medical advice. This deference stems from a deep-seated belief that these professionals possess superior medical knowledge and prioritize the well-being of children.

For many parents, a recommendation from their GP or the NHS is sufficient to motivate vaccine uptake. They readily accept this guidance without feeling the need to conduct extensive independent research or question the advice given. For instance, one parent stated, "I would ask my GP and say, 'Is it recommended?'" [1:1.21]. This reliance on medical professionals highlights the weight of their recommendations and the trust parents place in their expertise. Another parent echoed this sentiment, stating, "Um, I probably have an inherent trust of vaccinations and if, if the health community are advising me to have a vaccination for my child, then it's it's not it's not really something I'd look a great deal further into, I don't think" [6:1.31]. This trust appears to stem from a belief that the complex decisions surrounding vaccination schedules have been thoroughly considered by experts with a deeper understanding of the medical and ethical implications. This trust-based approach simplifies the decision-making process for parents and often leads to increased vaccine acceptance.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not all parents adhere to this unquestioning acceptance of medical authority. Some individuals, while still valuing professional medical advice, demonstrate a more proactive approach to information gathering. They may seek clarification or second opinions, demonstrating a desire to be actively involved in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the pervasive influence of medical authority and the high level of trust placed in healthcare providers remain prominent themes, highlighting their crucial role in shaping parental attitudes towards vaccination.

Subtheme 11: Reliance on Trusted Websites and Professional Sources

This subtheme examines the role of online resources and professional sources in shaping parental understanding and decisions about influenza vaccination. The analysis reveals a clear preference for reputable websites, particularly the NHS website, and information provided by healthcare professionals. Parents perceive these sources as trustworthy and reliable, providing evidence-based information that empowers them to make informed decisions.

The NHS website emerges as a cornerstone of trust for parents seeking information about influenza and vaccinations. It is often their first point of reference, considered more reliable and user-friendly than general search engines or parenting forums. One parent emphasized this, stating, "If I wasn't provided with information at the point of asking me to taking a vaccination and I would probably again look at the NHS website, maybe" [2:2.5]. This reliance on the NHS website underscores its perceived credibility and accessibility as a source of accurate and trustworthy information. However, while valuing the NHS website's comprehensiveness, some parents find its navigation less intuitive compared to the immediacy and familiarity of search engines like Google. This suggests a need to balance the trustworthiness of information with ease of access and user experience, particularly in the digital age where information overload is common.

While the NHS website serves as a primary source, parents often engage in a multifaceted information-seeking process. They consult various sources, including general practitioners, reputable medical websites (e.g., Mayo Clinic), and even vaccine manufacturers' websites, to make informed decisions. This multi-source approach is particularly evident when parents are concerned about potential side effects. For instance, one parent shared, "It's not and sometimes they're sort of, maybe not for the flu, but for other things I've looked at before kind of specialist charities websites, I think, a really useful source of information" [7:2.43]. This proactive information gathering demonstrates a desire to weigh different perspectives and gain a comprehensive understanding before making decisions about their children's health.

Subtheme 12: Seeking Second Opinions and Peer Support

This subtheme explores how parents navigate the complexities of vaccination decisions by seeking second opinions from trusted individuals within their social networks and online communities. This behavior reflects a desire to validate information received from healthcare professionals, address personal concerns, and gain a broader perspective on vaccination.

Parents place significant value on the insights and experiences shared by trusted individuals, especially those with medical backgrounds. Family members, particularly those working in healthcare, emerge as influential figures whose opinions hold considerable weight in shaping vaccination decisions. This highlights the importance of personal connections and the role of familial knowledge in navigating health-related choices. For example, one participant stated, "No, there was no concerns My wife is a PhD So she does, she's a research scientist She did a lot of research, previous to any a vaccine that my kids get anyway And she was more than happy and by that and so am I Yeah" [8:2.50] This example illustrates how parents rely on the expertise of family members, trusting their judgment and research to guide their own decisions.

Beyond family networks, parents also turn to online support groups and communities for additional information and peer support. These online platforms offer a space for parents to connect with others, share experiences, and seek advice on various parenting challenges, including vaccination. One parent shared, "I'm thinking he looks like he's in the ineligible bit and I have a support group of NCT" [7:2.38] This demonstrates how parents leverage online communities to clarify eligibility criteria, access shared knowledge, and potentially alleviate

anxiety associated with making healthcare decisions. These interactions can either reinforce existing beliefs or introduce new perspectives, potentially influencing vaccination decisions.

Subtheme 13: Limited Engagement with GP for Vaccine-Related Information

This subtheme reveals a seeming paradox within parental approaches to influenza vaccination: despite their strong reliance on general practitioners (GPs) for the vaccination service itself, parents often exhibit limited proactive engagement with these professionals when seeking specific vaccine-related information. This finding suggests a passive information-seeking behavior, relying heavily on materials or prompts provided during the vaccination appointment rather than actively seeking detailed information beforehand.

Parents often enter vaccination appointments with limited prior research or a prepared list of questions. One parent described this, stating, "It was provided a standard course, I didn't, because I've read, you know, read around it before I took her in and I didn't really have any additional questions" [4:2.21]. This suggests that parents may perceive the information provided during the appointment as sufficient, or they may assume that the healthcare professional will address all relevant aspects without prompting. While this approach may stem from trust in the healthcare provider's expertise, it raises concerns about potential missed opportunities for addressing parental concerns or anxieties proactively.

The lack of proactive information-seeking could be attributed to various factors, including time constraints, limited awareness about the availability of detailed information, or a perception that basic information provided during the appointment suffices. However, it underscores the need for healthcare providers to adopt a more proactive communication style. By anticipating common questions, initiating discussions about potential concerns, and encouraging open dialogue, GPs can empower parents to make more informed and confident decisions regarding their children's health.

Subtheme 14: Erosion of Trust Due to Negative Experiences

This subtheme explores the detrimental impact of negative experiences within healthcare settings on parental trust, potentially creating a significant barrier to vaccine uptake. It reveals how encounters with dismissive attitudes, conflicting information from healthcare providers, or a perceived lack of empathy can erode trust and discourage parents from seeking medical advice or adhering to vaccination recommendations.

Parents who perceive healthcare professionals as dismissive or unreceptive to their questions often experience a decline in trust. This erosion of trust can lead to reluctance in engaging in open communication about health concerns or accepting medical advice. One participant expressed this frustration stating, "And I find it very, I don't find that I get that good information when you ask questions I find this is still a very kind of, probably just my just my GP practice, its very paternalistic" [10:2.63]. This quote highlights how a perceived lack of openness and a failure to address parental concerns can damage the patient-provider relationship and hinder effective communication.

The presence of conflicting information from different healthcare sources further exacerbates this erosion of trust. When parents receive inconsistent advice or encounter discrepancies between the guidance from specialists and general practitioners, it can create confusion and cast doubt on the reliability of healthcare information. This uncertainty can make it challenging for parents to make informed decisions, potentially leading them to delay or forgo vaccination. One participant expressed this concern, stating, "things like that get kind of updated in the kind of the advice from the allergy side of things is updated, but the advice that we are given as parents isn't right and I think it would put probably, you know, if I hadn't had such a good relationship with the allergy

team, it would quite easily put you off to say, 'well, no, I'm not going to get them' [5:2.28]. This experience highlights the detrimental effect of inconsistent information and the need for clear, consistent messaging from all levels of healthcare.

Overall Conclusion: Trust as a Cornerstone of Vaccine Uptake

The theme "Trust in Healthcare Professionals and Information Sources" emerges as a critical factor influencing parental decisions regarding preschool influenza vaccination. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of deference to medical authority, reliance on trusted online sources, and the significant impact of personal experiences and social networks.

Parents largely trust healthcare professionals, particularly GPs and the NHS, viewing their recommendations as key drivers of vaccine acceptance. Reputable websites, especially the NHS website, are highly valued sources of information, although concerns about navigation and accessibility exist. Interestingly, while relying heavily on GPs for vaccination services, parents often demonstrate limited proactive engagement in seeking detailed vaccine information from these professionals. This passive approach highlights a potential area for improvement in healthcare communication strategies.

Worryingly, negative experiences with healthcare providers, such as encountering dismissive attitudes or receiving conflicting information, can significantly erode trust and create substantial barriers to vaccine uptake. This emphasizes the need for healthcare systems to prioritize empathetic communication, address parental concerns proactively, and ensure consistent messaging across all levels of care.

Ultimately, building and maintaining trust is paramount in promoting vaccine acceptance. By understanding the factors that influence parental trust – from their preferred sources of information to their personal experiences within the healthcare system – interventions can be tailored to address concerns, provide clear and consistent information, and ultimately empower parents to make informed decisions about their children's health.