

Evaluation: Perceived Risks and Benefits of Vaccination

This section delves into the theme of "Perceived Risks and Benefits of Vaccination," a critical factor influencing parental decisions regarding influenza vaccination for their preschool-aged children in North East England. Parents grapple with weighing the potential risks of both the vaccine and the disease itself, considering factors like side effects, disease severity, and vaccine effectiveness. Understanding these perceptions is paramount to developing targeted interventions that address parental concerns and promote informed decision-making.

Subtheme 1: Perceived Severity and Susceptibility to Influenza

This subtheme examines how parents' perceptions of influenza's severity and their child's susceptibility to the virus shape their vaccination choices. The analysis reveals a nuanced understanding of influenza's potential impact on children.

Parents' decisions regarding influenza vaccination are deeply rooted in their understanding of the illness's severity, particularly for young children. Parents who perceive influenza as a serious health threat, as opposed to a common cold, often consider vaccination a necessary precaution for their child's well-being. For example, one parent stated, "I feel like it's something that can be quite serious for some people" [5:1.1], highlighting a clear association between perceived severity and the perceived need for vaccination.

However, there's a spectrum of understanding regarding influenza's potential severity in children, especially among preschool-aged groups. Some parents, unfamiliar with severe cases in young children, may perceive a lower risk and subsequently be less inclined towards vaccination. This lack of awareness contrasts with parents who have witnessed severe influenza cases, particularly in infants, leading to heightened concern and a greater emphasis on vaccination. This contrast is evident in the following statements: "But I don't know about in terms of children, I don't know if children can get proper flu" [4:1.8] and "you see other cases, really, you know, horror stories about babies catching these things and they're not been able to fight infections off" [9:2.4].

Furthermore, parents' perception of their child's susceptibility to influenza is molded by factors such as age, underlying health conditions, and exposure to other children. Parents of younger children, especially those attending daycare or nursery, often express heightened concern due to increased exposure to illnesses. For instance, one parent shared, "So, she just started going to nursery at 10 months and that was literally when she started becoming ill, which then in my mind makes me associate it with when she started mingling with more kids" [3:2.2]. Conversely, parents of generally healthy children with limited social interactions may perceive a lower risk and be less likely to view vaccination as crucial.

In conclusion, this subtheme underscores the importance of effectively communicating influenza's potential risks, particularly for vulnerable age groups. Tailored messaging that addresses specific concerns about susceptibility based on individual circumstances is essential to influencing vaccination decisions.

Subtheme 2: Concerns about Vaccine Safety and Side Effects

This subtheme explores the significant barrier posed by parental concerns surrounding the safety of the influenza vaccine and the potential for adverse reactions in their children. Worries about side effects, ranging from mild to severe, often fuel hesitancy and influence decisions to delay or forgo vaccination.

Parents express a range of concerns about potential side effects from the influenza vaccine. Some worries center around mild reactions like fever and feeling unwell, with parents expressing apprehension about their child experiencing discomfort. As one parent put it, "Um, obviously, the side effects for me would be would be the, the only worry, or the main one. You know, that possibility that they will be unwell for a couple of days or feel under the weather" [7:2.5]. This highlights a desire to protect their child from any potential discomfort, even if temporary.

More serious concerns revolve around the possibility of allergic reactions or a perceived weakening of the child's immune system due to vaccination. One parent articulated this concern: "Because I understand that a vaccine can't give you the flu, it won't make you ill, but I was concerned about him if his immune system was to be busy off reacting" [2:2.5]. Such concerns, though often based on misinformation, underscore the importance of addressing parental anxieties with clear, factual information.

However, it's crucial to acknowledge that some parents, while acknowledging potential side effects, believe that the benefits of flu vaccination, such as protection from the virus and reduced severity of illness, outweigh the perceived risks. They demonstrate a willingness to accept minor side effects in exchange for the potential protection offered by the vaccine. This perspective emphasizes the need for balanced communication that not only addresses safety concerns but also highlights the vaccine's protective benefits.

This subtheme underscores the critical role of healthcare providers in engaging in open and transparent communication about vaccine safety. Providing clear, evidence-based information, addressing misconceptions, and offering reassurance regarding the vaccine's safety profile are essential to building trust and encouraging informed decision-making.

Subtheme 3: Beliefs about Vaccine Effectiveness

This subtheme focuses on how parents' beliefs about the effectiveness of the influenza vaccine in preventing or reducing the severity of illness impact their vaccination decisions. The analysis reveals a spectrum of beliefs, influenced by factors such as vaccine efficacy against different strains and the possibility of still contracting influenza despite vaccination.

Generally, parents acknowledge that the flu vaccine does not guarantee complete immunity, understanding that it primarily targets specific circulating strains. However, they generally believe that the vaccine can significantly reduce the likelihood of their child contracting influenza or experiencing severe symptoms. This belief is evident in statements such as: "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" [4:2.8]. This perspective highlights the importance of emphasizing the vaccine's ability to mitigate the severity of illness, even if it doesn't entirely prevent infection.

However, the awareness that the flu vaccine targets specific circulating strains introduces a degree of uncertainty about its comprehensive protection. Parents recognize that the vaccine might not be effective against all strains, leading to doubts about its overall worth. One parent expressed this concern, stating, "I get that, my understanding is obviously with flu, it's a bit of a lottery in terms of how the vaccine is, is chosen and" [1:2.1]. This uncertainty highlights the need for transparent communication about the vaccine development process and the challenges of predicting circulating strains.

Furthermore, the possibility of contracting influenza despite vaccination, while acknowledged as a possibility, can contribute to vaccine hesitancy. Some parents might perceive this as a sign of limited effectiveness, questioning the value of vaccination if it doesn't provide complete protection. Addressing this concern requires clear communication about the concept of vaccine

efficacy, emphasizing that while it might not prevent all cases, it significantly reduces the risk and severity of illness.

In conclusion, this subtheme emphasizes the need for clear and transparent communication regarding vaccine effectiveness. Acknowledging limitations while highlighting the vaccine's ability to reduce the severity and duration of symptoms, as well as the risk of complications, is crucial for encouraging informed vaccination decisions.

Subtheme 4: Preference for Natural Immunity

This subtheme explores the perspective of parents who prioritize their child's natural immunity, often preferring to manage illnesses at home and viewing vaccinations as unnecessary medical interventions. This perspective is rooted in a belief in the superiority of natural immunity and a desire to minimize medical interventions.

Some parents adopt a proactive approach to health, focusing on building their child's natural immunity through healthy lifestyle choices and allowing them to contract and fight off infections naturally. They believe that this approach strengthens their child's immune system more effectively than vaccination, fostering resilience against future illnesses. This belief is evident in statements like, "We don't, we're at a point where we don't need to make them needlessly sick so I don't believe given her, her having the flu will build her up to be, have a better immune system" [10:2.10]. This perspective highlights the need for respectful dialogue to address concerns about vaccine interference with natural immunity.

Moreover, some parents express a strong sense of self-efficacy in managing their child's health, trusting their ability to provide care and support at home without relying on medical interventions like vaccination. They view common childhood illnesses as a normal part of development and prefer to allow their child's immune system to combat these illnesses naturally.

This perspective underscores the importance of acknowledging and respecting parents' values and beliefs regarding healthcare choices. Engaging in open and non-judgmental conversations about vaccination, addressing concerns about natural immunity, and providing evidence-based information are crucial for fostering trust and encouraging informed decisions.

Overall Conclusion

The theme "Perceived Risks and Benefits of Vaccination" provides invaluable insights into the complex interplay of factors influencing parental decisions regarding influenza vaccination for their preschool-aged children. It underscores the critical role of parental perceptions, shaped by their understanding of influenza's severity, concerns about vaccine safety, beliefs about effectiveness, and preferences for natural immunity.

Addressing these perceptions through tailored communication strategies that provide clear, evidence-based information, address concerns with empathy and respect, and highlight the benefits of vaccination while acknowledging limitations is paramount. By understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of parental concerns, healthcare providers can empower parents to make informed decisions that prioritize their children's health and well-being.

Theme: Information, Trust, and Access: Navigating the Landscape of Preschool Flu Vaccination

This thematic analysis explores the intricate interplay of information, trust, and access in shaping parental decisions regarding seasonal influenza vaccinations for preschool-aged children in North

East England. By delving into these interrelated aspects, this theme unveils the complexities involved in parental decision-making and sheds light on the barriers and facilitators influencing vaccine uptake.

Subtheme 1: Trust in Healthcare Professionals and Recommendations: The Cornerstone of Informed Decision-Making

The role of trust in healthcare professionals emerged as a cornerstone in this thematic analysis. Within this theme, the significance of parents' trust in their healthcare providers, particularly GPs and nurses, was evident throughout their narratives. Parents who perceived these professionals as reliable sources of information and valued their recommendations were more likely to choose vaccination for their preschool-aged children. This finding underscores the influential position healthcare providers hold in guiding parents towards informed vaccination decisions. For instance, one parent shared, "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 not something I'd look a great deal further into, I don't think [6:3.6]." This statement exemplifies the deep-seated trust some parents place in healthcare professionals, relying on their expertise to navigate the complexities of vaccination.

However, the analysis also revealed that a lack of clear and consistent guidance from healthcare providers regarding preschool influenza vaccination could act as a barrier to uptake. Parents expressed uncertainty or a lack of awareness regarding the recommendation for healthy preschoolers to receive the vaccine, often attributing this to their doctor not explicitly recommending it or providing sufficient information. This lack of proactive communication created a knowledge gap that contributed to hesitancy and, in some cases, led parents to perceive the vaccine as less important. One parent noted, "No, not particularly [1:1.12]," when asked if they had discussed the flu vaccine with their child's GP. This sentiment was echoed by another parent who stated, "No, I can't say that I have directly, because I haven't ever had the need to [2:2.2]," further highlighting the passive role healthcare providers played in initiating these conversations.

In conclusion, this subtheme highlights the critical role of trust and clear communication in influencing parental decisions regarding preschool flu vaccination. While trust in healthcare professionals emerged as a significant facilitator, the lack of proactive guidance and consistent messaging presented a barrier to uptake. These findings emphasize the need for healthcare providers to prioritize clear communication, address parental concerns, and provide consistent recommendations to empower parents in making informed decisions about their child's health.

Subtheme 2: Information Seeking and Sources of Influence: Navigating a Complex Information Landscape

This subtheme delves into the dynamic landscape of information-seeking behaviors and the various sources that shape parental knowledge and attitudes towards influenza and vaccination. Parents in this study displayed varying degrees of engagement in actively seeking information, highlighting the importance of disseminating accurate information through diverse channels to cater to these different approaches. The NHS website emerged as a trusted and valued source of information for many parents, reflecting a preference for official health guidance and a degree of health literacy in critically evaluating online sources. This reliance on a reputable source underscores the need for accessible and evidence-based information to empower parents in making informed decisions. One parent, when asked about their preferred source for health information, succinctly responded, "Ah the NHS website [5:5.1]," highlighting its perceived trustworthiness and accessibility. Another parent echoed this sentiment, stating, "I tend to go to the NHS ones because obviously the rules are different in the UK as to what you can treat things

with [4:4.7]." This statement underscores the importance of context-specific information and the trust placed in national health institutions.

However, the analysis also revealed that the internet and social media, while offering access to valuable resources, could also become sources of misinformation and fuel parental hesitancy. Parents expressed concerns about the overwhelming presence of misleading claims, anti-vaccination sentiments, and anecdotal accounts online, particularly within parenting forums and social media groups. This finding underscores the need for media literacy and the importance of discerning credible sources in the digital age. One parent vividly described their experience with online parenting groups: "Because as a mum, for some reason, it seems to be an automatic thing you do, you join loads of family Facebook groups. And then you see some of the information that people share on there and you kind of want to silently cry and go 'no, no, that's wrong!' [10:10.14]." This statement captures the frustration and concern parents experience when confronted with inaccurate and potentially harmful information within online communities often perceived as supportive spaces.

In conclusion, this subtheme reveals the multifaceted nature of information-seeking behaviors and the crucial role of trusted sources in influencing parental decision-making. While the NHS website emerged as a cornerstone of reliable information, the pervasive nature of online misinformation, particularly within social media and parenting forums, highlights the need for media literacy and critical evaluation of online content. Healthcare providers, policymakers, and public health organizations need to collaborate in promoting accurate information, addressing misinformation, and empowering parents with the tools to navigate this complex information landscape effectively.

Subtheme 3: Convenience and Accessibility of Vaccination Services: Overcoming Practical Barriers

This subtheme focuses on the practical aspects of accessing vaccination services and their influence on parents' opportunity to vaccinate their preschool-aged children. The analysis revealed that convenience played a pivotal role in facilitating vaccination uptake. Factors such as easily accessible clinic locations, flexible appointment scheduling, and the ability to combine the flu shot with other healthcare visits significantly increased the likelihood of parents choosing vaccination. These findings underscore the importance of aligning vaccination services with the realities of busy family lives to minimize logistical barriers. One parent, describing their experience, stated, "No, it was, it was, it was absolutely straightforward. Got the notification through the post and gave them a call, booked an appointment, went in and then showed up for it [6:6.22]." This statement reflects the ideal scenario where the process is seamless and convenient, allowing parents to integrate vaccination seamlessly into their routines. Another parent highlighted the importance of flexible scheduling, stating, "I think we just rang up the GP, got an appointment, and brought them in, fortnightly at the most. Very straightforward [8:8.11]." This sentiment highlights the need for healthcare providers to offer appointment options that cater to varying schedules and minimize disruptions to daily routines.

However, the analysis also identified time constraints as a significant barrier for parents considering influenza vaccination. Balancing work commitments, childcare responsibilities, and other family obligations often made it challenging for parents to prioritize and schedule vaccination appointments, leading to procrastination or missed opportunities. This finding emphasizes the need for flexible and adaptable vaccination services to accommodate the demands of modern family life. One parent candidly shared, "I say all that, but it's been very rewarding because we because we both work work full time. And the amount of time we actually get to spend with them through the week is very limited [4:4.2]." This statement captures the constant juggle many parents face, highlighting the need for healthcare services to adapt to these realities.

In conclusion, this subtheme underscores the crucial role of convenient and accessible vaccination services in overcoming practical barriers to uptake. While flexible scheduling, accessible locations, and streamlined processes can facilitate vaccination, the demands of busy lifestyles and time constraints can present significant obstacles. By addressing these practical barriers through adaptable service delivery models, healthcare providers can increase the opportunity for parents to choose vaccination and contribute to broader public health goals.

Overall Conclusion: Building a Foundation of Trust, Information, and Access for Preschool Flu Vaccination

This thematic analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how information, trust, and access intersect to influence parental decision-making regarding preschool flu vaccination in North East England. The findings highlight the importance of building a foundation of trust in healthcare providers, ensuring access to accurate and reliable information, and making vaccination services convenient and accessible to accommodate the needs of busy families. By addressing these key areas, healthcare providers and policymakers can empower parents to make informed decisions, promote vaccine confidence, and ultimately contribute to increased uptake of the seasonal influenza vaccine among preschool-aged children. This, in turn, can lead to a healthier community and reduce the burden of influenza on individuals, families, and the healthcare system as a whole.

Evaluation Section: Social and Contextual Influences

This section delves into the theme of **Social and Contextual Influences**, a critical aspect of understanding the factors shaping parental decisions regarding preschool influenza vaccinations in North East England. This theme underscores the intricate interplay between individual decision-making and the social environment in which those decisions are made. Parents do not make vaccination decisions in isolation; they are influenced by a complex web of social norms, familial experiences, and the broader societal context. Understanding these influences is crucial to developing effective interventions that can address parental concerns and promote vaccination uptake.

Subtheme 1: Influence of Social Norms and Networks

This subtheme explores the significant impact of social norms and networks on parental decisions surrounding influenza vaccination. Parents are embedded within social circles comprising family, friends, and peers, all of whom contribute to a shared understanding of acceptable health behaviors.

The analysis revealed that parents are attuned to the vaccination practices and attitudes prevalent within their social circles. Observing other parents vaccinating their children creates a sense of normalcy and social acceptance, influencing those who may be unsure about vaccination to align with the perceived majority. For example, one participant [3:2.11] described her decision to vaccinate her child, stating, "And then I started to hear other friends, even in Whitley Bay within different GP practice areas, were getting their children vaccinated." This illustrates how witnessing the actions of peers can solidify a parent's own vaccination decision.

Further emphasizing the power of social networks, another participant [7:1.4, 7:1.10] highlighted the influence of her NCT (National Childbirth Trust) group, explaining that discussions about vaccination within this trusted circle prompted her to research the flu vaccine and consider its importance for her own child. This example demonstrates how recommendations and information shared within trusted social networks hold significant weight in parental decision-making.

Subtheme 2: Past Experiences with Influenza and Vaccination

This subtheme highlights the enduring influence of past experiences on current attitudes and decisions regarding influenza vaccination. Parental choices are not solely based on current information or abstract risks; they are also shaped by their own and their children's previous encounters with influenza and the vaccination process.

Positive experiences with vaccination, such as minimal side effects or a perceived protection from illness, contribute to favorable perceptions and increase the likelihood of continued vaccination. Conversely, negative experiences, particularly those involving adverse reactions or a perceived lack of effectiveness, can fuel hesitancy and lead to vaccine refusal.

One participant [4:1.10] recounted how her child experienced a reaction to the flu vaccine, stating, "It's the only vaccination actually that she's had a reaction to." This experience clearly remained salient for her and likely influenced her future vaccination decisions. In another instance, a participant [4:4.2, 4:4.5, 4:4.7] shared her reluctance towards the flu vaccine, stemming from a personal history of never having received it and her husband's experience of becoming severely ill with influenza despite being vaccinated. This example illustrates how negative past experiences, both personal and observed, can contribute to skepticism and hesitancy surrounding vaccination.

Subtheme 3: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This subtheme examines the undeniable influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on parental attitudes towards childhood vaccinations. The pandemic, with its unprecedented focus on infectious diseases and public health measures, has had a complex and multifaceted impact on vaccination perceptions.

For some parents, the pandemic served as a stark reminder of the vulnerability to infectious diseases, leading to a heightened awareness of the importance of vaccination. Witnessing the potentially devastating consequences of a novel virus prompted them to prioritize vaccinations as a crucial protective measure. For instance, one participant [11:2.13] noted that the pandemic likely increased concerns around respiratory illnesses, suggesting a heightened awareness of the need for preventive measures like vaccination. Another parent [3:4.13] expressed her commitment to vaccination, viewing it as a "civic duty" to protect her child and the community.

However, for others, the pandemic exacerbated existing anxieties surrounding vaccines. The rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines and the evolving information landscape fueled skepticism and a desire for more data and long-term safety assurances. One participant [10:1.10] expressed skepticism about the speed of COVID-19 vaccine development, stating, "I'm a little suspicious about how quick these vaccines have been developed and are coming out." This apprehension reflects a broader trend of heightened scrutiny and caution towards vaccines in the wake of the pandemic.

Overall Conclusion

This analysis of the **Social and Contextual Influences** theme has revealed the profound impact of social networks, past experiences, and the COVID-19 pandemic on parental decisions regarding preschool influenza vaccination. Parents do not make vaccination choices in a vacuum; their decisions are informed and shaped by the social norms of their communities, their personal and observed experiences, and the broader societal context.

These findings highlight the need for interventions that extend beyond simply providing medical information. Effective strategies must address the social and contextual factors at play, fostering positive social norms around vaccination, acknowledging and addressing concerns stemming

from past experiences, and engaging in open and transparent communication about vaccine safety and efficacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By understanding and addressing these complex influences, healthcare providers and policymakers can work towards improving influenza vaccination uptake among preschool children and creating a healthier future for all.