

Tip sheet: Child-friendly approaches for health actors undertaking vaccination campaigns

Strengthening collaboration between child protection and health actors during infectious disease outbreaks

June 2023

Because children are at different stages of development and maturity, their needs are different from those of adults. Fear of needles, infections, and/or possible side effects, as well as misinformation or a lack of information, can pose significant barriers to vaccinating children. Therefore, a successful vaccination campaign for children requires specific strategies. The child-friendly approaches summarized in this tip sheet can be used in the context of infectious disease outbreaks to mitigate vaccine hesitancy, increase uptake, and create a more positive experience for both children and their caregivers.

Many of the child-friendly approaches outlined in this tip sheet can also be used by health actors during the screening and treatment of children during outbreaks,

such as when collecting specimens like nasal swabs or blood tests.

This tip sheet suggests practical ways to integrate child-friendly approaches into vaccination campaigns in the following four areas:

- sharing accurate information,
- addressing children's fears and concerns,
- providing family-centered and inclusive services, and,
- offering post-vaccination support.

1

Sharing accurate information

Providing reliable information to children and caregivers can minimize the impact of misinformation and increase vaccination rates.

- ▶ Provide caregivers with accurate information about the infectious disease and the vaccine, including where and how to access vaccinations for children of different ages.
 - Focus on the science of the disease and the evidence of its consequences to combat rumors and misinformation. This will allow caregivers to make an informed decision before consenting to the vaccination.
 - Provide children with the information they need to give informed assent or consent.¹
- ▶ Give caregivers tools and resources to discuss the infectious disease outbreak and vaccination with their children.
- ▶ Use accessible and age-appropriate language and formats for children and caregivers of diverse backgrounds.

¹ **Informed consent** is the voluntary agreement of a person — an adult and/or, in some cases, an adolescent — who is legally and developmentally capable of making a decision, who understands what they are being asked to agree to, and who exercises free choice. **Informed assent** occurs when a person — an adult or a child — expresses a willingness to share certain information or participate in services.

- ▶ Share key messages through a variety of social and mass media platforms using written, audio, and video messages that appeal to diverse audiences and age groups. Consider using comic strips, cartoons, infographics, radio broadcasts, and/or video clips.
 - Engage with colleagues specializing in risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) and those working on community awareness campaigns to ensure key messages are aligned and a cohesive approach is taken to address common rumors and misinformation.
 - Work with schools to disseminate information to their students and with community actors to target out-of-school children.

2

Addressing children's fears and concerns

It is common for children to have some anxiety about vaccinations. However, there are a number of strategies to reduce distress and make vaccination a child-friendly and positive experience that is also more efficient.

- ▶ Take the time to ask the child how they feel about being vaccinated.
 - Ask caregivers to talk with the child before vaccination, explaining what a vaccine is and why it is important:
 - “A vaccine teaches your body how to fight bugs, protecting you from getting really sick.”
 - Younger children may be more familiar with the concept of medicine:
 - “A vaccine is like a medicine that helps our body stay healthy.”
 - Listen to the thoughts and concerns children share with you or their caregivers.
 - Honestly address any questions they have.
- ▶ Validate their fears and emotions.
 - Be careful not to trigger fear in a child who does not feel scared. However, do reassure them that it is normal to be afraid and that there is nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone fears something, even adults.
 - Put the possible pain in context and explain that it is less severe or dangerous than the disease being prevented.
 - Emphasize the protection that the vaccination provides:
 - “It may be painful and scary. But aren't you glad you are safe from this terrible virus? And you are also keeping everyone around you safe.”
- ▶ Encourage young children to keep their favorite things—dolls, stuffed animals, and blankets—with them for comfort.
- ▶ Put the child in a comfortable position.
 - The child may be small enough to sit on their caregiver's lap. If possible, place the child in a chest-to-chest position for added comfort.
- ▶ Prepare the child with clear and honest information about what will happen.
 - Explain in age-appropriate terms why you need to give them a vaccine.

- Tell them what to expect. Describe the steps of the process, including whether the vaccine will be given orally or by injection, how long it will take, whether it will hurt, and what the pain will be like.
- Let them know before you touch them:

“An injection is like being stung by a bee. You’ll feel like I quickly pinched you.”

- If the vaccine is given orally, agree with the child and caregiver on what to do if the vaccine dose is rejected (i.e., if the child spits it out):

“Can you believe that the cholera vaccine tastes just like chicken soup? Try it and tell me if you agree.”

► Show them first.

- If you, the child, and their caregiver think it will be helpful, ask an older child or adult to get the vaccine in front of a younger child to reduce their anxiety.
- If the child wants to see it, show them the needle beforehand. If you have smaller needles for children, show them the size difference and explain that you use a smaller needle for them than for adults, which usually hurts less.
- Caregivers can also use a toy to demonstrate how a vaccine is administered.

► Consider distracting the child by singing or playing music, but be honest about what will happen to them when distracted.

► Allow the child to make choices and/or suggest solutions whenever possible. For example, suggest strategies to minimize pain when an injection is used. Agree together on what is possible.

“It will hurt less if you keep your arm relaxed and loose like a noodle.” “You can take a deep breath and stay still while you exhale.” “You can close your eyes or look away if you want to.”

“Which arm do you prefer, this one or that one?” “Which hand is your writing hand? I’ll vaccinate you in the other arm so it doesn’t hurt when you have to do your schoolwork.”

- Comfort them if they experience pain during the vaccination.
- Facilitate breastfeeding or nursing during the vaccination of infants or younger children to relieve discomfort.

► Give children stickers, stamps, badges, balloons, or coloring pages after the vaccination is over as rewards for their bravery. Older children/adolescents may want to take a selfie and share it on social media to encourage their peers to get vaccinated.



Source: Sacha Myers / Save the Children
Dr Mohamed from the Emergency Health Unit vaccinates Thowayba against cholera in Sudan.

Providing family-centered and inclusive services

Children are at a different age and stage of development than adults. Services should therefore be family-centered and inclusive to meet the distinct needs of children and their caregivers.

- ▶ Ensure the availability of adjusted dosages and the timely delivery of services to avoid delays for children.
- ▶ Prioritize the vaccination of at-risk children. This includes, but is not limited to, younger children, adolescent parents, married children, unaccompanied or separated children, children in displacement, children in alternative care, children in conflict with the law (including children in detention), street-connected children, children with disabilities, or children with chronic health conditions that may make them more vulnerable to infection and/or limit their ability to follow public health measures.
 - Consult with local authorities and community leaders (including disability rights organizations and focal points) to identify strategies to reach at-risk children and remote areas.
- ▶ Facilitate community-level solutions to financial and logistical barriers to vaccination. For example, collaborate with Community Health Workers and/or offer mobile clinics as needed.
- ▶ Wear child-friendly uniforms or clothing with bright colors and name tags so children can easily identify you.
- ▶ Provide child-sized masks and age-appropriate and accessible infrastructure, such as handwashing stations.
- ▶ Take the opportunity to ensure that other routine childhood vaccinations that may have been interrupted due to the outbreak or other context-specific challenges were administered in a timely manner. Refer children and caregivers to health professionals as needed.

If vaccinations are to be administered **at a central location or at a fixed site** (for example, a local school, community center, or hospital),

- ▶ Whenever possible, offer family-friendly service hours and/or flexible appointment times at locations that are accessible to children and caregivers of diverse backgrounds.
 - Allow children and their families to choose a suitable time and location for the vaccination.
 - Consider the accessibility needs of children and/or caregivers with disabilities.
 - Consider the risks that may arise due to location and/or timing for children and caregivers (i) of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC); (ii) with marginalized socioeconomic, political, and religious backgrounds; and (iii) in situations of displacement or statelessness, etc.
- ▶ Select vaccination sites where children can move freely while maintaining physical distance and ventilation for onsite prevention measures.
- ▶ Use bright colors and appealing designs to decorate a separate area for children and their caregivers. See the [Checklist for child-friendly isolation and treatment centers](#) for more detailed guidance.
- ▶ Provide designated areas for children who need extra time or support.

Offering post-vaccination support

Children may experience mild reactions to the vaccination that need to be monitored. They will also need a vaccination record.

- ▶ Explain what side effects may occur as a result of the vaccine. Depending on the vaccine, there may be bruising and pain at the injection site, fever, aching muscles, rash, fatigue, loss of appetite, and/or vomiting.
 - Explain how observation of adverse events will occur after vaccination (for example, whether the child will be asked to remain under observation for 15 minutes after the dose is administered).
 - Indicate how long any effects may last.
 - Advise caregivers to monitor their children for any severe side effects that may require follow-up with a medical professional according to an established referral pathway.
- ▶ Advise caregivers on how to manage mild side effects themselves. Examples include:
 - Use a cool, damp cloth to help reduce redness, soreness, and/or swelling at the injection site.
 - Encourage rest in a cool environment and staying in the shade.
 - Advise caregivers about appropriate clothing to control body temperature. For example, avoid covering the child with blankets that can make them hotter.
 - Offer clean water and/or other healthy drinks to the child frequently.
 - Provide appropriate strength and dosage of recommended pain relief medications.
- ▶ Give caregivers (or unaccompanied adolescents) copies of their vaccination records.
 - Advise them on the importance of keeping the vaccination record safe and presenting it when seeking medical assistance.
 - Explain that vaccination records may be necessary to access certain services (for example, attending school), cross international borders, etc.
 - Inform them how to obtain a copy of these records if they lose them.

This tip sheet was written by Nidhi Kapur, with support from Hannah Thompson, at the request of the READY initiative. It was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of READY and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. Led by Save the Children, the READY initiative is implemented in partnership with the Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health, the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, UK-Med, and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy. READY is augmenting the global capacity of non-governmental organizations to respond to large-scale infectious disease outbreaks. For more information, visit our website at <http://www.ready-initiative.org>.