COVID-19 vaccinations: Suggestions for reducing child injection anxiety

This week many parents are breathing a sigh of relief as primary school aged children start receiving their COVID vaccinations. Some children - on the other hand – are feeling terrified.

Research shows that 65 to 68% of primary school children fear having injections, making this a really common fear. Here are some recommendations for parents of children anxious and apprehensive about receiving their vaccine:

1) *Be mindful not to place too much time, emphasis, and attention on the upcoming procedure.*

2) *Give your child a couple of days warning about the procedure and allow enough time to chat with your child and hear their feelings about it. Without making too much of a fuss, reassure your child that it is normal and okay to feel apprehensive and calmly and confidently let your child know that you believe they can do it just like they have in the past.*

3) *During the chat, explain the steps involved in receiving a vaccination emphasizing the fact it will be similar to previous injections. Discuss with the child the importance of listening to the nurse or doctor giving the injection and trusting them to look after you. Avoid using the term 'needle' in your discussion.*

4) *Your child will benefit from knowing that your vaccination went well.*

5) *When chatting to your child, make the effort to understand why (e.g., pain, distrust of doctors etc.) your child fears having an injection as this information will assist you to help your child in the most productive way. If your child is preoccupied with worry, sit and develop some short coping statements (e.g., 'the pain doesn't last long') together. Place these messages on cards for your child to read at times when they feel fearful in the leadup to the procedure.*

6) *Ensure your child is participating in enjoyable activities that are likely to soothe their nervous system (e.g., beach, music, exercise, colouring) during the day leading up to the procedure.*

7) *Allow your child to bring a special comfort toy, book, or computer game to use in the waiting room.*

8) *As children use their parents as reference points for their own emotional responses, it is important that you appear relaxed and confident in the doctor or nurse helping you.*

9) *During the procedure, some children find distractions (e.g., listening to a song, mum talking about an upcoming holiday) help. If your child is really overwhelmed, just being close to you and listening closely to the doctor's instructions might be preferable.*

10) *Do a really pleasant activity (e.g., have a milkshake) with your child afterwards, praising and encouraging them. Talk to your child about what went well and remind them of this at their next vaccination.*

If your child is refusing to have their vaccine, exhibiting extreme levels of distress, or is highly preoccupied with fears about the process they may have a needle phobia. If you suspect this, please consult with your GP prior to your appointment about managing this situation. Children with needle phobias often benefit from taking part in exposure therapy, a psychological approach which involves the child gradually facing their fears in a way that builds confidence and resilience.

Written by Dr Anna McKinnon (11/01/2022)