



healthwatch
Bexley

Flu Vaccination Children Aged 2-3 Years

January 2020

***“Without vaccinations, our lives would be radically different.
Vaccines save lives...”***

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Summary

This report presents the views of parents with children aged two to three years old, living in the London Borough of Bexley about their thoughts and knowledge concerning the children's flu vaccine. Healthwatch Bexley worked with the South East London Clinical Commissioning Group (SEL CCG) Head of Communications and Engagement for Bexley to compile a structured survey which was used to engage with residents. The survey was designed to investigate the potential barriers for the uptake of the children's flu vaccine in the borough. At the time this work was commissioned local uptake rates were below the recommended levels across the borough.

Healthwatch would like to thank all the residents who took the time to complete our survey.

Recommendations

- In the run-up to the next flu season promotion of the annual vaccination programme needs to continue to increase awareness and act as a reminder to get young children vaccinated. Locally, the "Just the Flu" campaign needs to be publicised more by health visitors, nurseries, childminders and GP's to promote how effective the vaccine is. The local authority should increase messages targeted at parents about the dangers of young children catching flu and how vaccinating them can also protect others who are vulnerable, such as babies and older people.
- Before the next flu campaign, the local authority needs to identify which advertising methods can best target parents, ensuring posters and leaflets are available through health visitors, toddler groups, nurseries and other care settings. The campaign could also be promoted locally across social media sites such as Net Mum's and increased promotion of the Public Health Flu Vaccination leaflet "Winter Flu Vaccination Who Should Have It And Why" (Public Health, 2020) would assist parents.
- Next year there should be improved communication to eligible parents about how they will be invited to have their child vaccinated. Attention needs to be focussed on the appointment process outlined in the NHS website (NHS Website, 2020). GP practices need to ensure that invitations are sent on a timely basis. Clear guidelines should be available from GP surgeries as to what the procedure is if the flu vaccine is out of stock. Are parents automatically placed on a waiting list or do they need to call the surgery again at a later date? A more standard approach also needs to be taken about informing parents on the likely waiting times when the vaccine is out of stock.
- In the run-up to the next flu campaign, the local authority needs to promote clear messages targeted at parents that the children's flu vaccine is given as a nasal spray and is also available as a vegan product (animal-free product) upon request. Health visitors, toddler groups, nurseries and GPs can all assist in promoting this message.

Introduction

Flu is caused by a virus. It can be a very unpleasant illness for children and can also lead to serious health problems. Children spread flu easily. The best way to protect young children from the flu virus is to vaccinate them. Vaccinating them also protects others who are vulnerable to flu, such as babies and older people. The children's flu vaccination is offered free of charge every year by the NHS in the form of a nasal spray (NHS website, 2020).

This year, with Covid-19 in circulation, it's more important than ever that young children are vaccinated to protect them from flu. Public Health England launched the "Just the Flu" campaign in October 2020 focusing on parents of 2-3 year-olds amongst other vulnerable groups. The purpose of the campaign is to raise awareness of the seriousness and risks of flu and encourage those eligible for the free flu vaccination to get vaccinated. The campaign was promoted across England via digital and newspaper advertising, posters, social media, TV and radio adverts. (GOV.UK, 2020)

Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor, Jonathan Van-Tam, said:

"Flu can be deadly and it is easily spread in children and adults. The vaccine is the best way to protect yourself from becoming ill with the flu, especially if you are in a vulnerable group.

This winter with COVID still circulating, and the increased risk to life if you are ill with both viruses simultaneously, it is even more vital to get the free jab as soon as you can." (GOV.UK, 2020).

The key areas our research covered were:

- Awareness of the "Just the Flu" campaign.
- Awareness of the vaccine being given as a nasal spray
- Parents being able to request an animal-free product vaccine if requested.
- Investigating if parents are acting upon an invitation to get their child vaccinated and what the barriers may be.
- Concerns around Covid-19 and the safety of healthcare environments.

Methodology

The Healthwatch Bexley consultation period ran from 30th November 2020 to 8th January 2021. We worked with the Head of Communications and Engagement for Bexley (SEL CCG) to produce a series of qualitative and quantitative questions. Qualitative methods were used alongside quantitative methods to capture people's views, as this method is more exploratory and allows participants to provide rich in-depth answers in their own words (NHS England, 2017)

To gain residents' views, we promoted the survey using a package called "Survey Monkey" on social media platforms, via our website, by 'word of mouth' and also, through talking to community group leaders and asking them to promote to their service users. Through our contacts, the survey was

sent to children's nurseries across the borough and was also promoted on local Facebook "mother and baby" groups such as Bexley Mums.

Over the five-week consultation period, Healthwatch Bexley had responses from 152 people about the vaccine.

Some questions invited respondents to comment and expand on their answers which resulted in many similar comments with a selection included in this report. Comments were selected based on their originality or as a representation of a commonly occurring theme, the most relevant and significant of which are shown to illustrate the statements made within the questionnaire.

Limitations

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we are aware that these are unprecedented times and Healthwatch Bexley is constantly looking for new methods to engage with community groups, residents and hard to reach communities to gather their invaluable feedback.

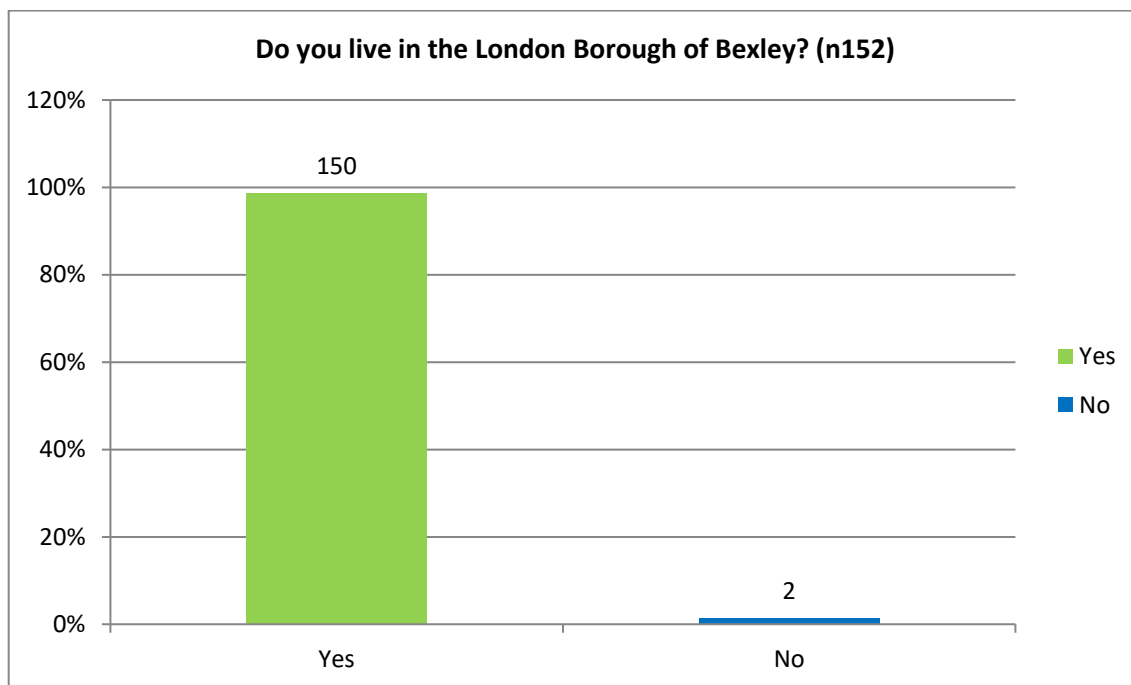
The survey was promoted via digital methods and this may mean the views of residents without digital access may not be included. Healthwatch Bexley has also been distributing information leaflets across the borough promoting what we do, our contact details and encouraging residents to talk to us.

The survey explores the views of a small sample of people and is not representative of all parents in the London Borough of Bexley.

Breakdown of Responses

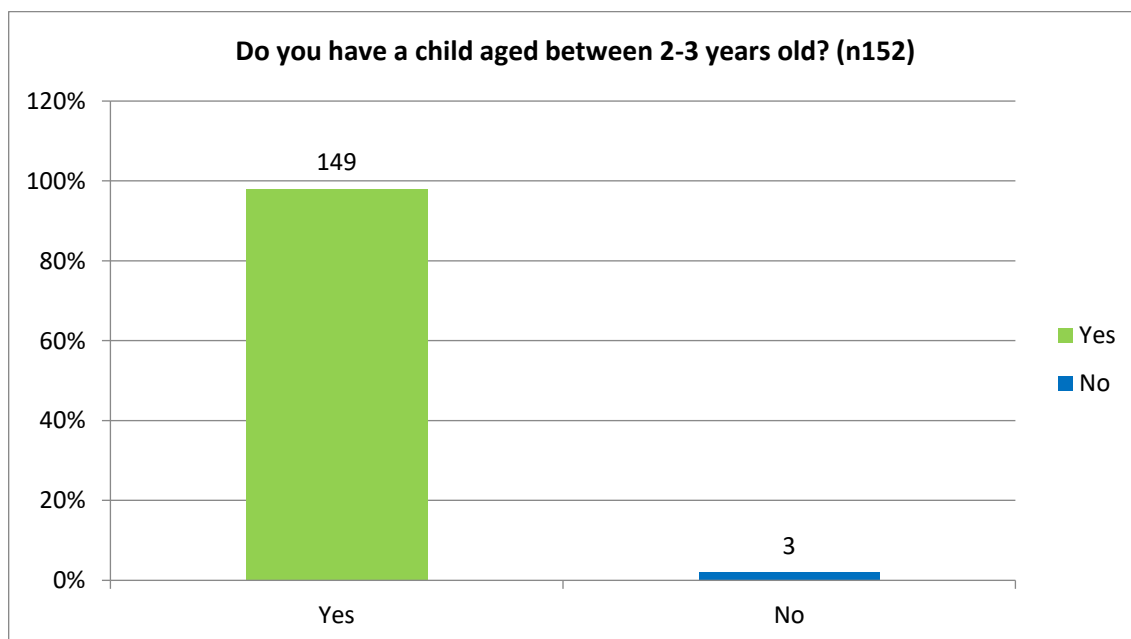
1. Do you live in the London Borough of Bexley? (n152)

99% of respondent live in the London Borough of Bexley, 1% did not



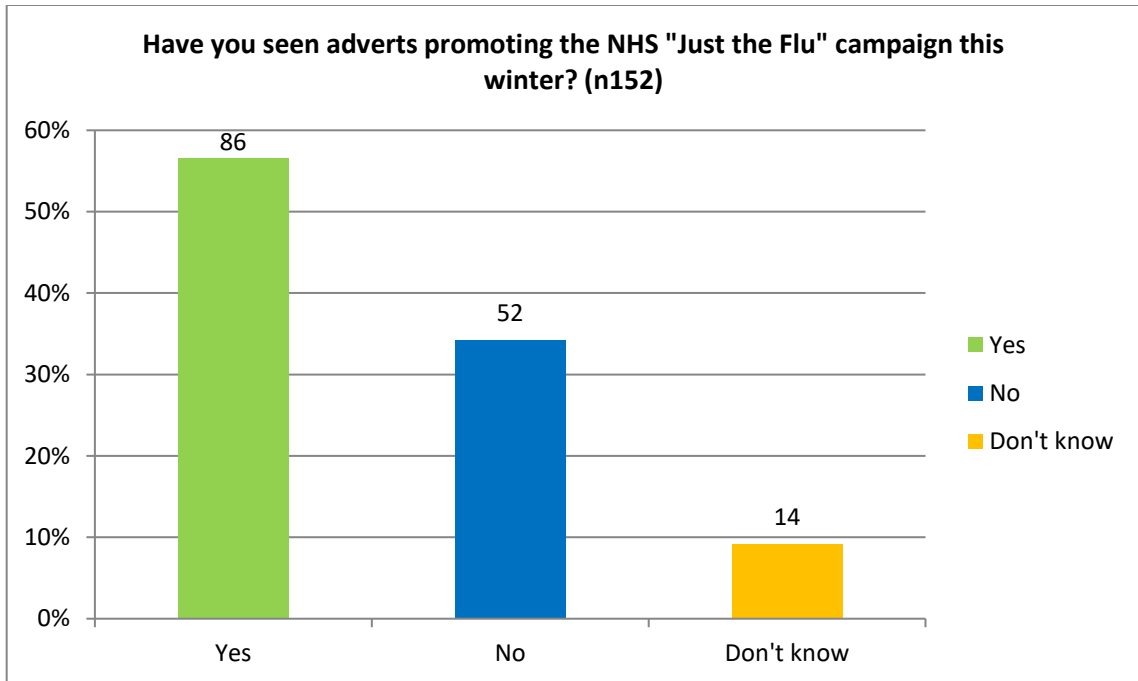
2. Do you have a child aged between 2-3 years old? (n152)

98% of respondents have children aged between 2-3 years, 2% do not.



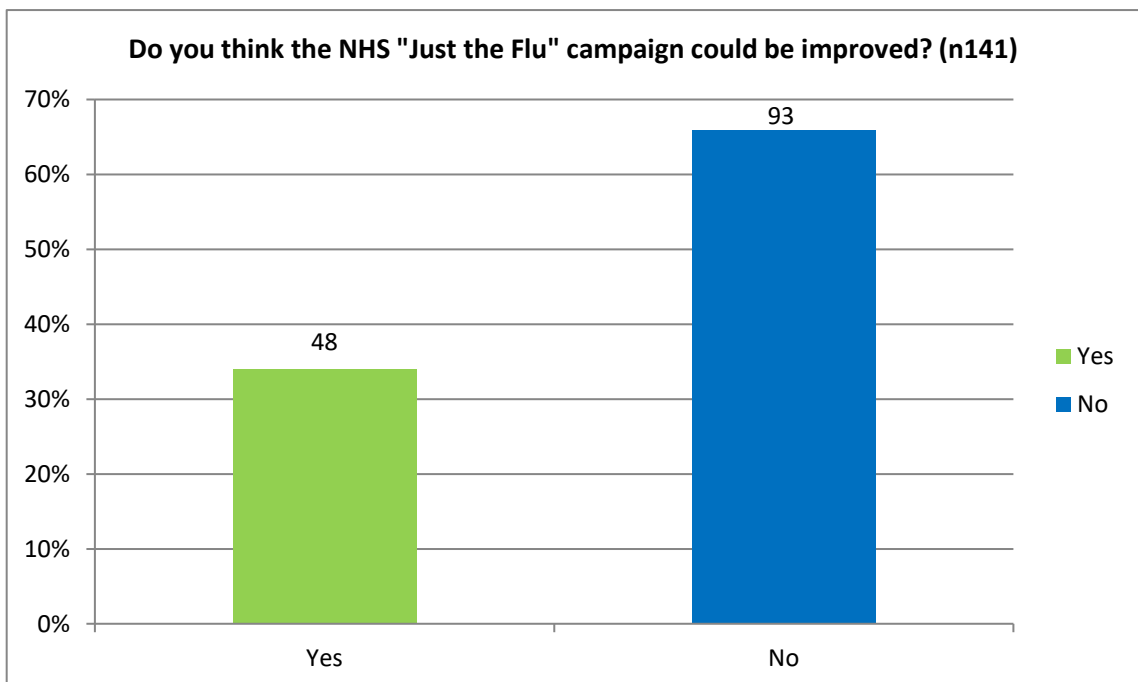
3. Have you seen adverts/posters promoting the NHS "Just the Flu?" campaign this winter? (n152)

The "Just the Flu" campaign launched in October 2020. **57%** of respondents had seen advertising, **34%** had not and **9%** were not sure.



4. Do you think the NHS "Just the Flu?" campaign could be improved? (n141)

Over a quarter (**34%**) of respondents think the NHS "Just the Flu" campaign could be improved whilst **66%** did not.



5. If yes, how could communication about the flu vaccine for children aged 2-3 years be improved? (n44)

Approximately a quarter of parents who answered this question had not seen any advertising for the “Just the Flu” campaign. The comments received indicated that advertising on television, radio and social media could be increased to raise awareness. Comments also suggested that awareness could be promoted and improved through health visitors, GP’s, toddler groups, nurseries and other care settings for parents.

Comments were also made about the preference of receiving a reminder text, email or letter from their GP when they are eligible for their child to receive the vaccine. It appears that some parents received reminder messages whilst others did not.

“I only found out via a letter from my surgery inviting my child for the flu vaccine, which was sufficient. I haven’t noticed any adverts anywhere.”

“I have only seen the campaign aimed towards adults and not children. I knew about the need for 2-3-year-olds to have the vaccination and so booked it myself but was not contacted by doctors. Targeted campaigning would be more beneficial to ensure that the right people see and take action. Making sure that it is explicit that it is a nasal spray and not an injection would also be useful.”

“I received a text from my doctors’ surgery but otherwise I haven’t heard/seen anything about it”

“Haven’t seen the poster but does it mention children aged two and above can have it and how? I didn’t know a child aged two could have it until I spoke to my sister.”

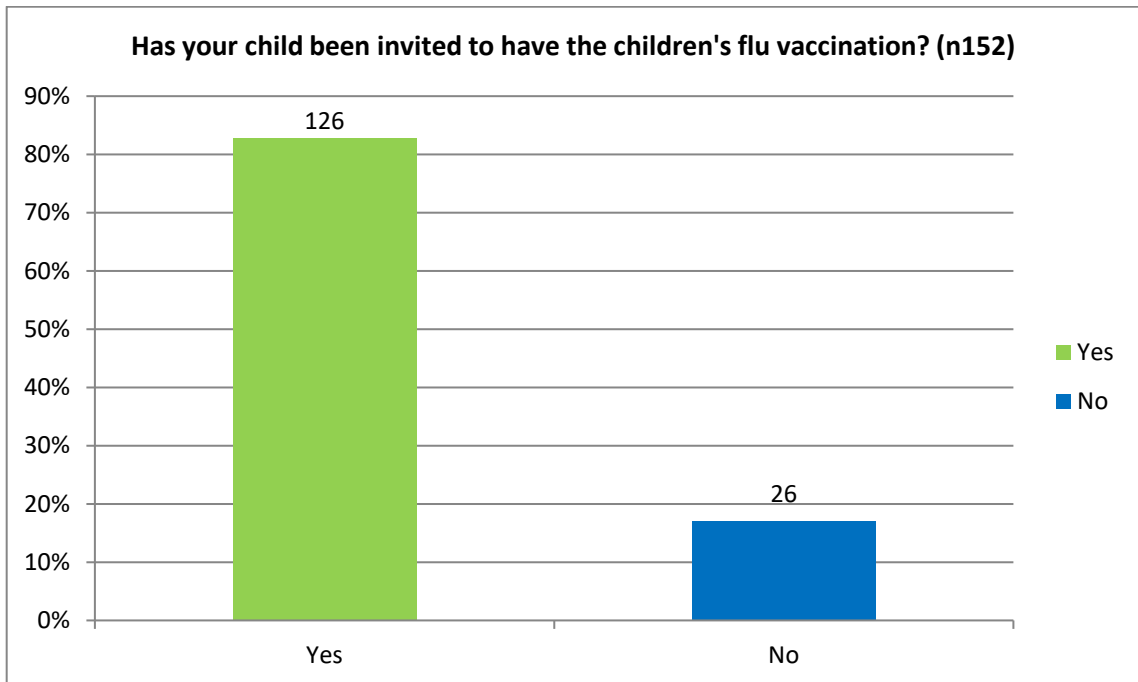
“I’ve seen adverts for the flu vaccine but not much in terms of why 2-3-year-olds need it. I vaccinate my child to protect them, but also to protect older people in my family.”

“We had a letter from the nursery, which was sent to them by Public Health plus I also had a letter in the post from Public Health but I don’t know if everyone did. It’s so important that there should be TV adverts”.

“I only found out via a letter from my surgery inviting my child for the flu vaccine, this was sufficient. I haven’t noticed any adverts anywhere.”

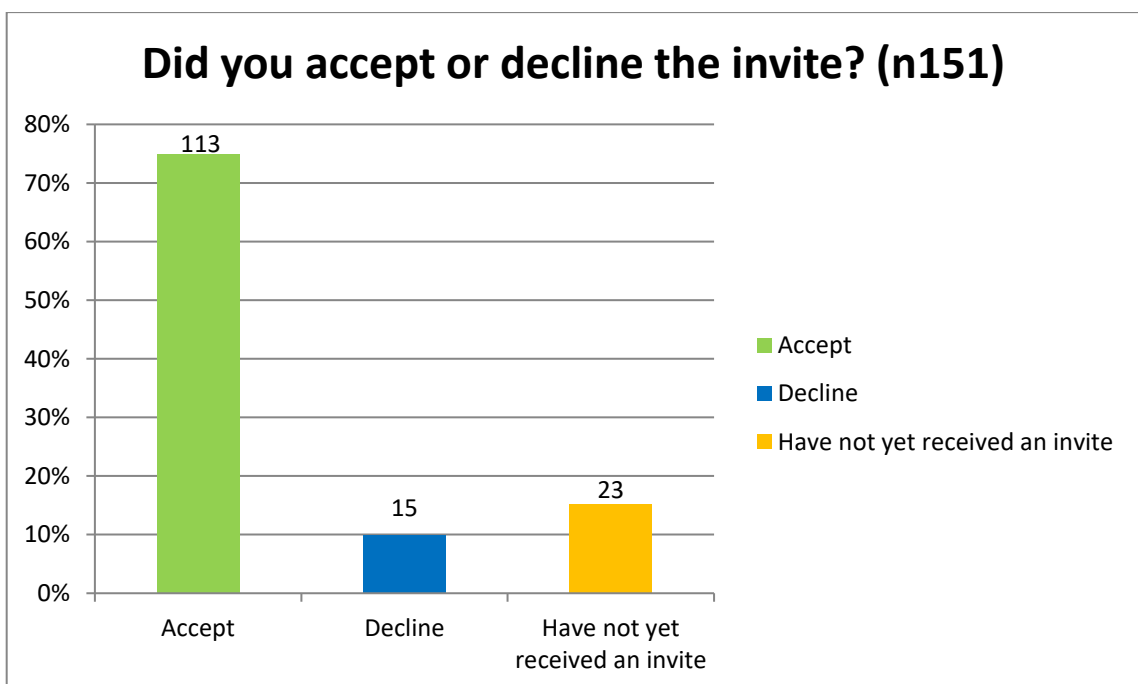
6. Has your child been invited to have the children's flu vaccination? (n152)

83% of respondents had been invited to have their child vaccinated whilst **17%** had not yet received an invite.



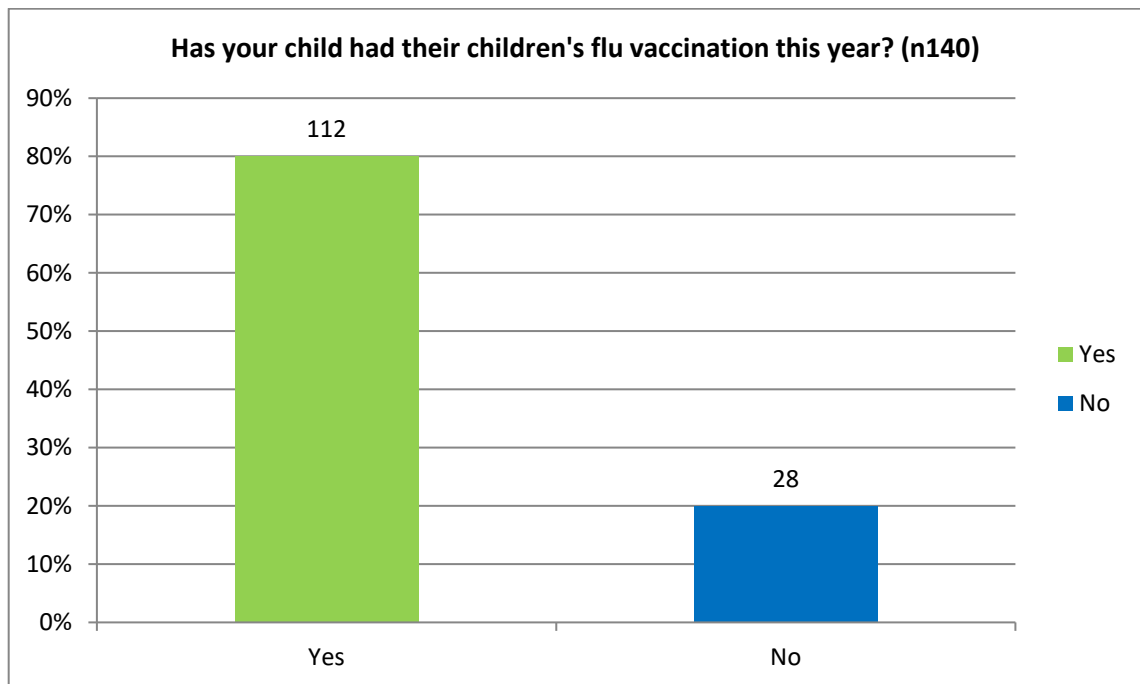
7. Did you accept or decline the invite? (n151)

75% of respondents accepted the invite, **10%** declined the invite and **15%** have not yet received an invite.



8. Has your child had their children's flu vaccination this year? (n140)

80% of respondents have had their child vaccinated, **20%** have not.



9. If you decided NOT to have your child vaccinated against flu, please tell us why? (n22)

Respondents believed that the flu vaccine does not work and that if their child did catch flu they would build up their immunity to the virus. These types of responses could indicate that a minority of parents are unaware of the dangers of children catching the flu. Also, there were concerns about the possible side effects of the vaccine. Parents have also expressed an interest in wanting to know what ingredients are in the vaccine.

Another area highlighted was parents requesting to have their child vaccinated but were still waiting to hear from their GP. Some GP's were stating that they did not have enough supply of the vaccine.

"My doctors have put my child on a waiting list over 6 weeks ago and still waiting for an invitation to attend for the vaccination. My child is on page 5 on the waiting list. I am unhappy about this but nothing the doctors can do about it."

"I want her too but was refused it when I contacted my GP as she wasn't seen as a priority. They were focusing on the elderly. They said they will call back when they had a date, but never called back."

"I want my child to have the flu vaccination but my GP surgery says they cannot provide it as it is out of stock."

"Would rather my daughter catch the flu naturally."

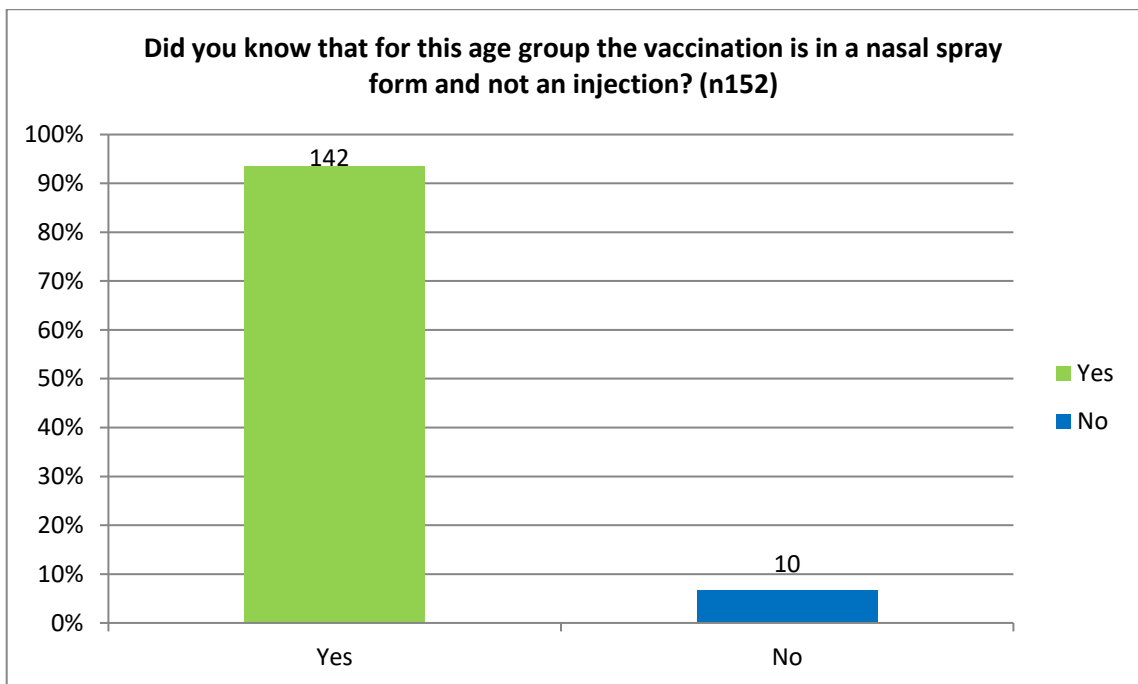
“Don't feel I have enough information to support it and feel it stops the immune system doing its job as antibodies are provided.”

“In my opinion, as no vaccine is 100% safe, the reason you vaccinate your child is that the alternative seems more dangerous than the vaccine itself. I have had 1 flu vaccine in my lifetime (Which I had a bad reaction to) and I have only had flu once. My partner has never had flu. Having a spray up my very young child's nose every year, with some questionable ingredients, seems more dangerous.”

“Not needed. Full information not given to parents including vaccine ingredients, side effects, efficacy.”

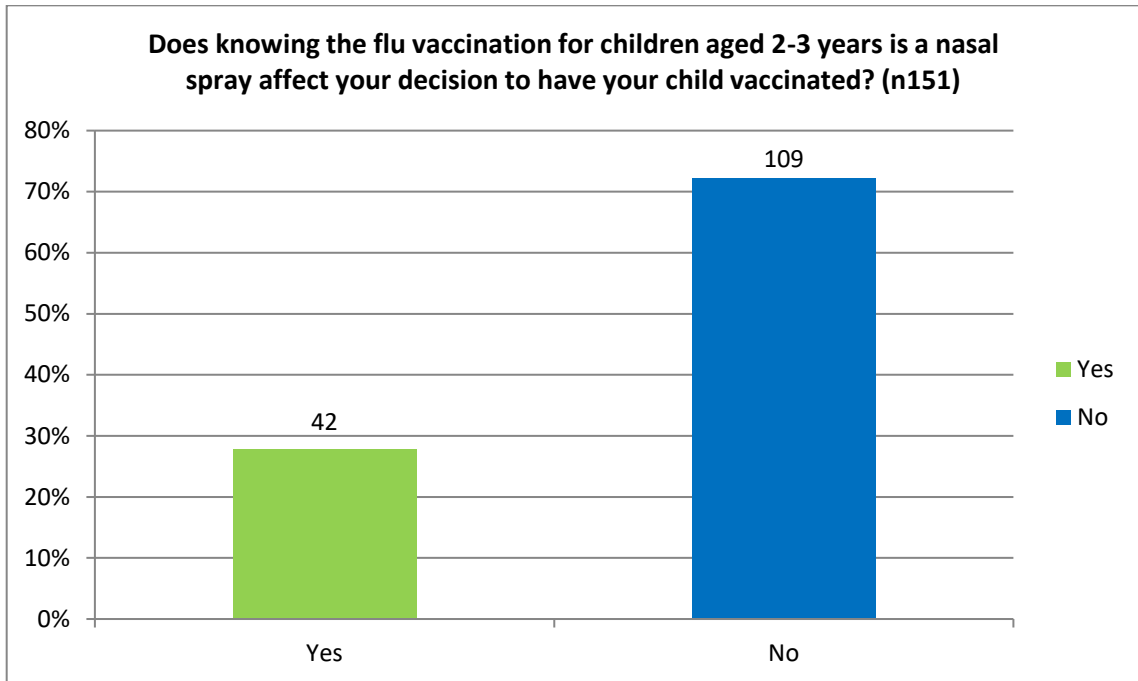
10. Did you know that for this age group the vaccination is in a nasal spray form and not an injection? (n152)

93% of respondents did know that the vaccine was given as a nasal spray for children 2-3 years of age whilst **7%** of respondents were unaware.



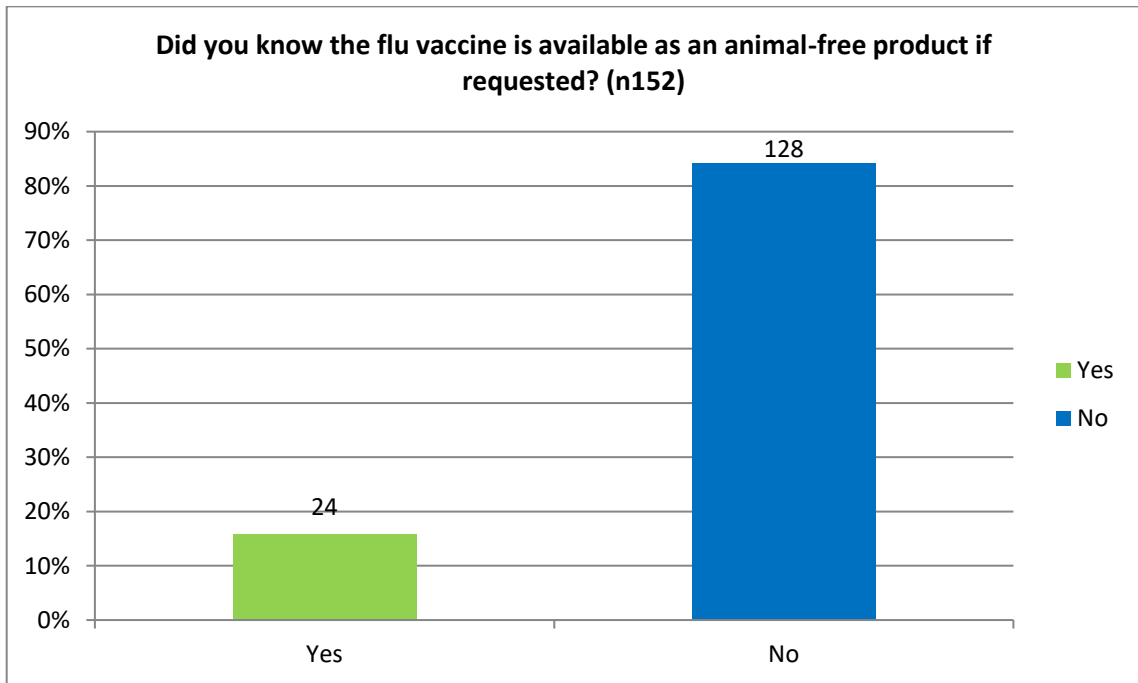
11. Does knowing the flu vaccination for children aged 2-3 years of age is a nasal spray affect your decision to have your child vaccinated? (n151)

28% of respondents said that their decision is affected knowing that the flu vaccination for children aged 2-3 years is a nasal spray. **72%** of respondents' decision would remain the same. This would indicate that knowing the vaccine is delivered as a nasal spray impacts on a parents decision to have their child vaccinated.



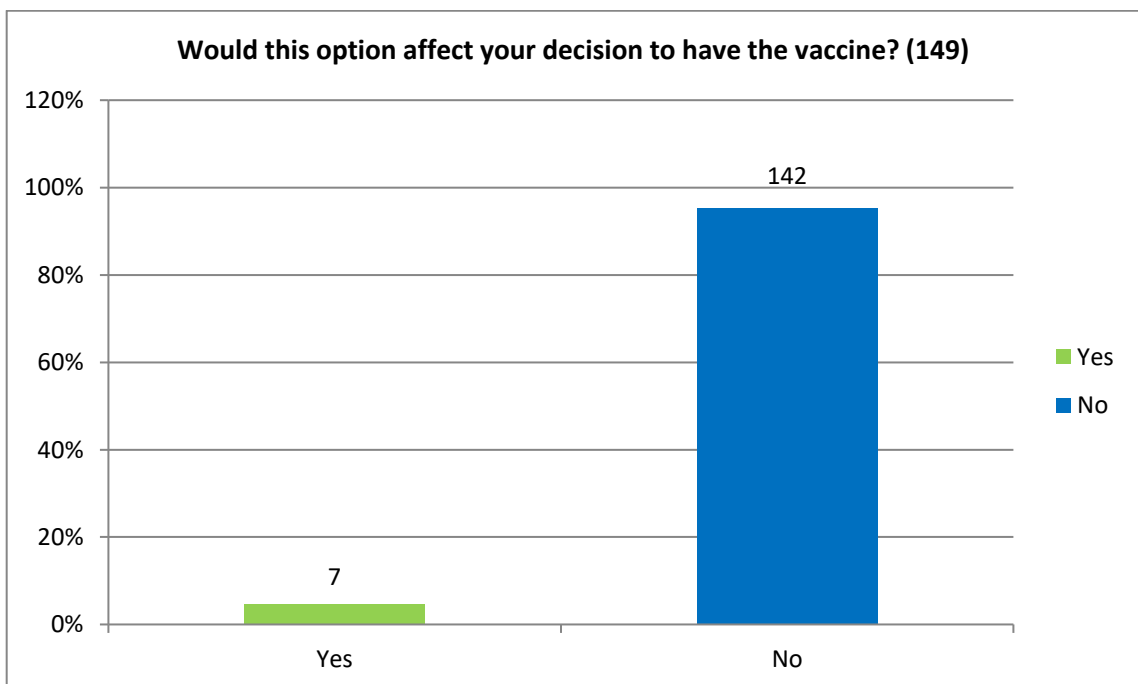
12. Did you know the flu vaccine is available as an animal-free product if requested? (n152)

16% of respondents were aware the flu vaccine is available as an animal-free product if requested, 84% were not aware.



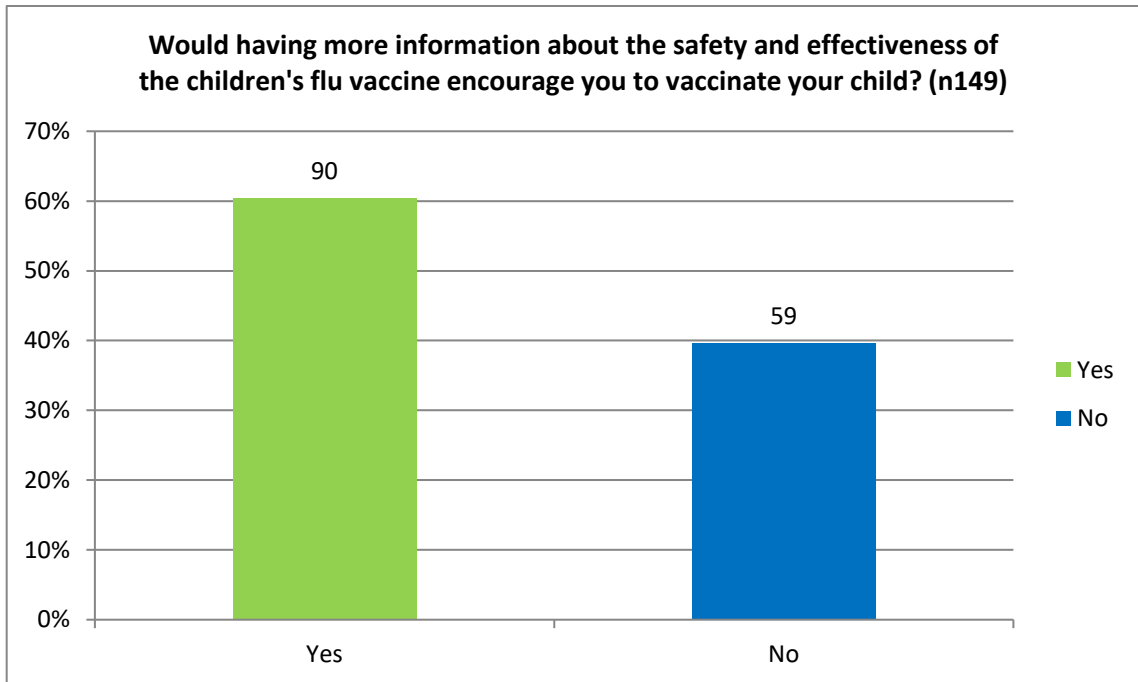
13. Would this option affect your decision to have the vaccine? (n149)

5% of respondents were likely to change their decision about the vaccine knowing that it is available as an animal-free product. 95% of respondents' decisions would remain unchanged.



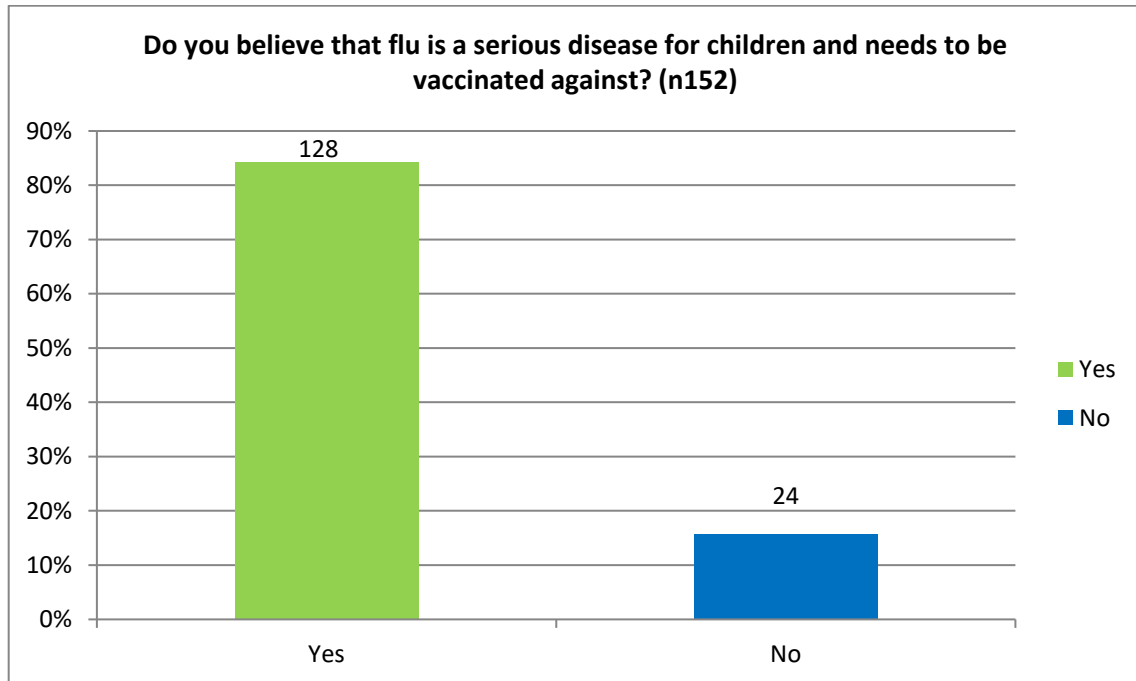
14. Would having more information about the safety and effectiveness of the children's flu vaccine encourage you to vaccinate your child? (n149)

60% of respondents said that having more information about the safety and effectiveness of the children's flu vaccine would encourage them to get their child vaccinated. **40%** of respondents would still stay with their decision even if they had more information. This indicates that parents who are getting their children vaccinated would still like to see more information about the vaccine.



15. Do you believe that flu is a serious disease for children and needs to be vaccinated against?

The majority of respondents (**84%**) believe that flu is a serious disease for children and needs to be vaccinated against whilst **16%** do not believe it is serious and that a vaccine is not required.



16. Have you seen articles on social media or other platforms that make you question the safety of the children's flu vaccine? (n41)

Half of the **41** people who responded to this question had not seen or been influenced by any articles on social media or other platforms about the safety of the vaccine. Whilst the other half had seen negative articles but mentioned they were mainly through social media sites and were not influenced by the messages.

"No, I haven't. All the information I have has been from the official sites for vaccination ingredients, side effects and various independent clinical studies. I also read a book written by a paediatrician called the "Friendly Vaccination Guide" which was very informative."

"No, but I don't think anyone knows it is serious for children. As with covid, my friends think it's just something old people need to worry about. The main reason I got my son vaccinated is to avoid taking time off work when he is ill (i.e. because people would think it was covid so we'd have to isolate for 2 weeks)"

"I've seen several attempts to undermine it, but I know better!"

"I see them all the time but will take advice from my GP over someone on social media such as Facebook who is unqualified. I often watch programmes such as The Vine & This morning and listen to advice from the resident doctors."

"I've seen things that have made other people question it-something along the lines of you don't know what's in it so don't. But it's not hard to look at the vaccine information and see what's in it but I work in the biochemistry sector and have a background in virology so don't understand it and don't question it."

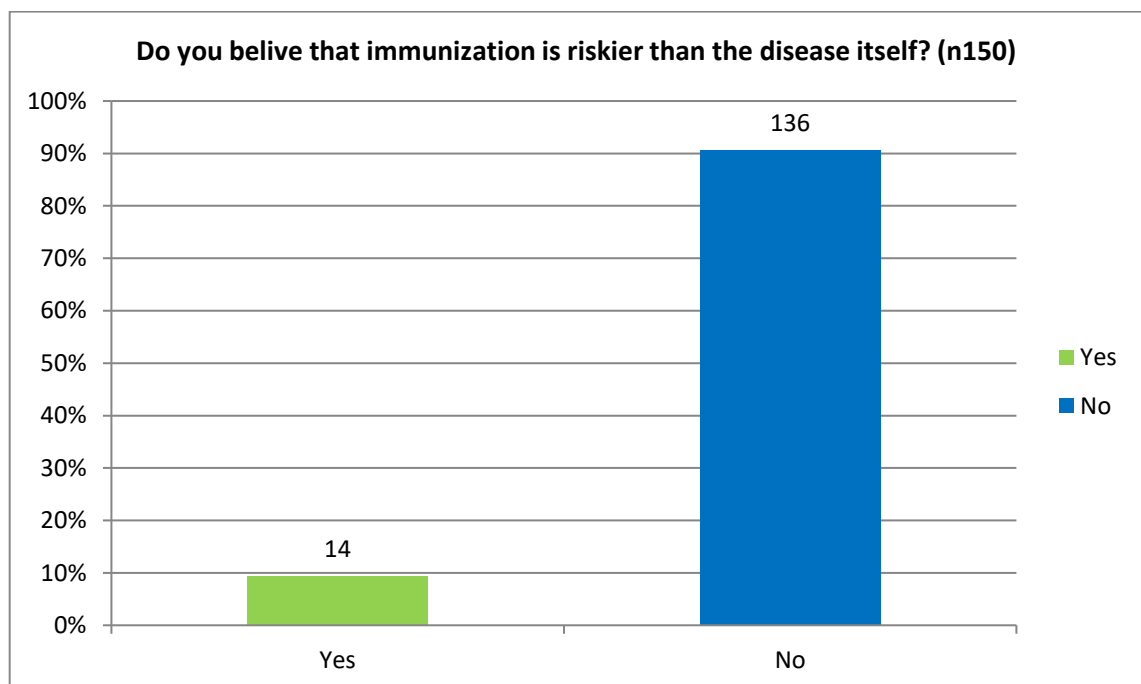
"Loads of mums have discussions about it on social media's I would say it's 50 /50."

"On Facebook discussion pages there are always people saying it's dangerous and spreads flu".

"Yes I have seen it but doesn't make me doubt about the safety"

17. Do you believe that immunization is riskier than the disease itself?

9% of respondents believe that immunization is riskier than the disease itself whilst 91% do not.



18. What has led you to these beliefs? (n29)

A third of respondents relied on science to make an informed decision. Other comments were in support of vaccinating to eradicate serious diseases and viruses, whilst others were concerned about the ingredients in the vaccine and the side effects.

"Reading articles written by trusted health care professionals rather than anti-vaxxers."

"Common sense; keeping self-informed and following advice of expert clinicians."

"I trust my GP and the flu vaccine has been around for many years with few side effects. Also, it was explained to me that it could be quite dangerous to contract covid 19 and the flu at the same time. The flu vaccine reduces the likelihood of this happening."

"I did not have the whooping cough vaccine as a child and suffered really badly with whooping cough and still feel effects for this 20 years later."

"I don't see flu as a massive illness I once had pneumonia which was bad but other than that I have never been off work with flu or cold for more than a couple of days."

"Because we have eradicated some childhood diseases and most of us are vaccinated. Diseases are coming back because of ignorant people who fail to see that they are here today because their parents vaccinated them. I'm sad that the U.K. has lost its measles free status."

"It's hard to answer this question as it's so hard to find specific information on the long term effects as not enough studies have been carried out or are available for us to see."

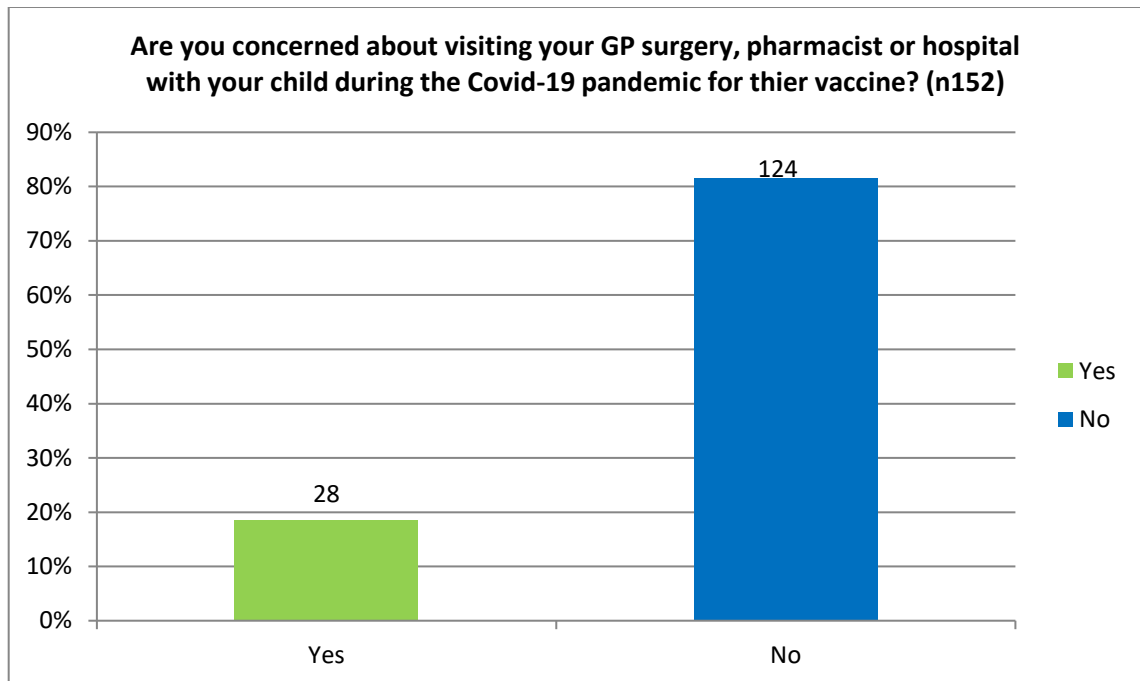
"Without vaccinations, our lives would be radically different. Vaccines save lives. I do not understand people who do not use vaccines."

"I understand the importance of protecting vulnerable groups."

"The flu vaccine (or different variations) is quite established. My child had a lot of colds and flu the first year which made her immune system quite low, and open to other conditions. So if the flu vaccine provides an additional layer of immunity I will give it to my child."

19. Are you concerned about visiting your GP surgery, pharmacist or hospital with your child during the covid-19 pandemic for their vaccine?

18% of respondents were concerned about visiting their GP surgery, pharmacist or hospital with their children during the covid-19 pandemic whilst 82% had no concerns.



20. What are your concerns about visiting your GP, pharmacy or hospital? (n20)

The main concern for people was being more exposed to catching Covid-19. Although this is a concern, many people still went ahead with getting their child vaccinated. There were also concerns about social distancing in waiting rooms and people wearing face masks.

"You just got exposed more to the outside and the more possibilities to get the virus. Also, children like to touch everything and then like to use their hands to touch their face more often"

"Exposure to people not in our bubbles, but we did it anyway."

"I am concerned that I'll catch it but I went to get the vaccine anyway."

"Contact with COVID however we have still chosen to immunise both our children at the GP/surgery as we feel it is important."

"I'd have concerns about sitting in a waiting room with strangers who may not adhere to social distancing advice or not wear masks"

"Being in the unventilated waiting room with fellow patients."

“Catching something if there is a long wait in a waiting room.”

21. Do you have any other comments to make about the vaccine? (n28)

The comments received show there is some frustration for working parents not being offered appointment times at their GP surgery that fit around childcare and work. Some have experienced problems contacting their surgery on the phone.

There also appears to be some confusion when a child is attending a nursery attached to a school. Parents assume that their child will be vaccinated at the nursery within the school vaccination programme but this is not the case.

“I called my GP surgery to book a flu vaccination however I can no longer call and speak to the receptionist to book an appointment as I’m being referred to e-consult. As a busy mum, this is not convenient.”

“It was extremely hard to get. Very, very difficult to get an appointment at the doctor's. I had to call and call and call to see if it was available. I received a text to say the vaccine was now available called the doctor straight away and they only had one slot in the middle of the day whilst I was working and my child with the childminder. I had to take the whole day off to be able to get my child the vaccine. The doctor said it was that time or nothing.”

“Yes. I had a real struggle to get my son the vaccine. Last year I was told he could not have it (he turned 2 in October 2019) as they said he was too young. This year, I had to repeatedly phone my GP surgery, they kept saying the vaccine wasn't available and call back again. I pestered them and called about 3 times and eventually got an appt. But the mums who didn't pester, who weren't that bothered, will have let it go. The GP didn't encourage me at all.”

“As the vaccine is administered in pre-set 'clinics' or sessions you have little control of time or date..... My daughter attends a preschool attached to a school. This would have meant taking her in the morning and collecting her an hour later to take her to the doctors and returning her when half the children had gone home at lunchtime. In the end, it was easier to keep her off for the whole day but that meant taking a whole day off work. Just because they are infants you cannot assume that someone is at home with them all the time.....”

“My Son is in a school-based nursery but wasn't offered the vaccine in the Nursery like my Daughter was in year 1 of the same school. I had to take him to the GP which I would rather have avoided during the Covid Pandemic. “

“As our child is in a school nursery, we received a letter telling us she was no longer under the health visitor system, but under the school instead. We were therefore expecting her to receive the vaccine at school (as our older son does), but this didn't happen. We, therefore, booked an appointment at the GP to receive the nasal spray, which was fine, but the letter we received about the end of the health visitor suggested this wouldn't be needed.”

“More info needs to go out to parents especially if the child is aged two and it's the first time a parent is aware their child can have it. I was expecting an injection and when it was a nasal spray, I was pleasantly surprised as I was expecting tears etc. In the little red book, my child receives a baby, the flu jab was described as influenza injection. This was confusing and I think it should be referred to in simple terms such as the flu jab.”

“Parents need full information to be able to make an informed decision about their child’s health and the need for this vaccine.”

“I wouldn’t have given my children the flu vaccine if Covid wouldn’t have been around as it’s important for their immune system must develop.”

Conclusion

This report was carried out to understand parents’ views of the children’s flu vaccine and to investigate the uptake of the vaccine in the London Borough of Bexley.

Whilst the feedback received highlights that there are opportunities to improve awareness, communication and better management of appointments, the responses from this survey also tell us that the vaccine uptake was quite good amongst parents of 2-3-year-olds. However, as this was a small group of residents it may not be reflective of the general population.

The survey has shown that communications about the “Just the Flu” campaign could be improved locally to increase awareness and reach a wider target audience. Those parents who do not believe in vaccinating their child could be unaware of the dangers of young children catching flu and the effects it can have on other members of the family.

The methods used to contact parents about getting their child vaccinated were confusing. According to the NHS website “Childs Vaccination Appointment,” parents should usually be contacted by their GP surgery by letter, text, phone call or email. If a parent knows their child is due for a vaccination they can also go ahead and book the appointment themselves, they do not need to wait to hear from their GP surgery (NHS website Childs Vaccination Appointment, 2020). This message is not promoted enough to parents and some invitations are not being received.

There was confusion around what the procedure should be if surgeries are out of stock of the vaccine. Parents were either added to a waiting list or just told the vaccine was not available.

93% of respondents were not aware that the children’s flu vaccine was in the form of a nasal spray. This is a very high amount. Over one-third of respondents said that knowing this has affected their decision about the vaccine.

There appears to be little awareness of the fact that the vaccine is also available as an animal-free product if requested. 84% of respondents were not aware of this fact.

Despite the current Covid-19 pandemic, the number of parents who said they would still be prepared to attend GP surgeries to get their child vaccinated against flu was high. This is very positive as the effects of catching flu and Covid-19 together can be life-threatening.

At the outset, it was felt that response to the children’s flu vaccine was low and therefore an issue. Despite some evidence to support this, the conclusion is that in general, the response has been largely positive across the borough.

There is a lot we can learn from the content in the responses from parents which can help to shape and improve the awareness, communications and the vaccination process going forward in the London Borough of Bexley.

Recommendations

- In the run-up to the next flu season promotion of the annual vaccination programme needs to continue to increase awareness and act as a reminder to get young children vaccinated. Locally, the “Just the Flu” campaign needs to be publicised more by health visitors, nurseries, childminders and GP’s to promote how effective the vaccine is. The local authority should increase messages targeted at parents about the dangers of young children catching flu and how vaccinating them can also protect others who are vulnerable, such as babies and older people.
- Before the next flu campaign, the local authority needs to identify which advertising methods can best target parents, ensuring posters and leaflets are available through health visitors, toddler groups, nurseries and other care settings. The campaign could also be promoted locally across social media sites such as Net Mum’s and increased promotion of the Public Health Flu Vaccination leaflet “Winter Flu Vaccination Who Should Have It And Why” (Public Health 2020) would assist parents.
- Next year there should be improved communication to eligible parents about how they will be invited to have their child vaccinated. Attention needs to be focussed on the appointment process outlined in the NHS website (NHS Website, 2020). GP practices need to ensure that invitations are sent on a timely basis. Clear guidelines should be available from GP surgeries as to what the procedure is if the flu vaccine is out of stock. Are parents automatically placed on a waiting list or do they need to call the surgery again at a later date? A more standard approach also needs to be taken about informing parents on the likely waiting times when the vaccine is out of stock.
- In the run-up to the next flu campaign, the local authority needs to promote clear messages targeted at parents that the children’s flu vaccine is given as a nasal spray and is also available as a vegan product (animal-free product) upon request. Health visitors, toddler groups, nurseries and GPs can all assist in promoting this message.

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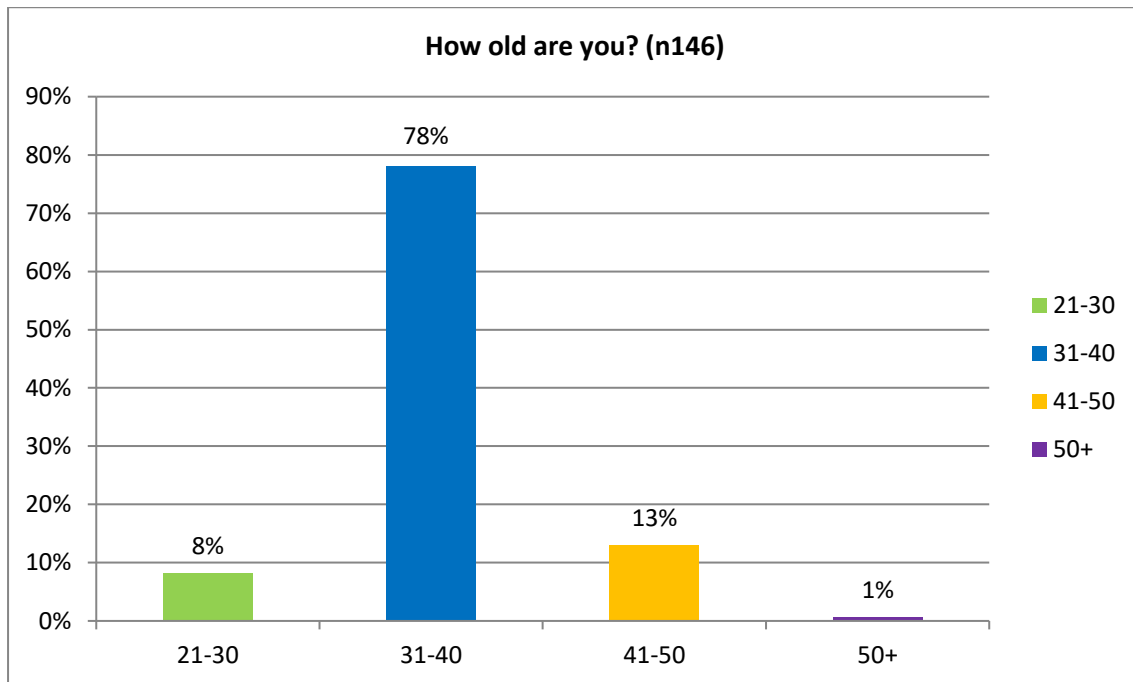
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Appendix 1

Demographics

Age



Gender

