

# To jab or not to jab?

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), “The two public health interventions that have had the greatest impact on the world’s health are clean water and vaccines.” Yet, despite this, more and more people in the UK are failing to take up the MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella) vaccine for their children leading to the WHO revoking the UK’s measles-free status.

Why is it important for nurseries to encourage parents to get their children vaccinated and what could be the consequences if parents continue to choose not to do this?

## What are vaccines and how do they protect us?

Vaccines are substances that train a body’s immune system to fight a disease that it may not have come into contact with yet. Dead or weak strains of harmful diseases are injected into the body where the immune system can start attacking them. The immune system can take time to discover the most effective way to fight a disease but as the vaccine virus is dead or weak, it can do this without it taking over the body and making the person ill.

Once the body has discovered the most effective way of fighting the disease, it duplicates this process around the body so that if the disease returns, the body can fight it off quickly. If a person was to encounter the full strength virus without having a vaccine, they could become extremely ill or even die before their body has time to understand how to fight it.

## What is ‘herd immunity’ and how does this help others?

‘Herd immunity’ is achieved when a disease does not spread despite the fact that certain members of the community for health, cultural or religious reasons cannot or do not wish to be vaccinated. This is achieved because almost everyone around them is vaccinated and therefore, there are not enough unvaccinated people around to pass on the virus. 95% of the UK population need to be vaccinated to protect the other 5% who are not.

## Why are healthcare professionals concerned?

New figures from 2018-19 show that in England, the vaccination rate for the first dose of MMR, usually taken round the time of a child’s first birthday, fell to 90.3%. This means that herd immunity is not working effectively. People who are not vaccinated are becoming increasingly at risk of contracting potentially fatal diseases such as measles.

Measles can lead to life threatening conditions such as pneumonia and longer term issues such as blindness or even brain damage. Vulnerable people such as babies are at a higher risk of these complications.

## What rules are enforced around the world?

In the USA and Australia, vaccinations against different diseases are compulsory for schoolchildren. In Australia, if a parent or carer does not vaccinate their child, they are fined. This is named the ‘No Jab, No Pay’ policy where the state withholds benefits from parents of children under 20 years old who are not fully immunised. France, Germany and Italy have already made vaccines compulsory or are about to do so for school aged children.

## How could falling vaccine rates affect the UK?

Currently, the UK does not enforce the vaccination of children but in September Health Secretary Matt Hancock said he was “looking very seriously” at making

vaccinations compulsory. However, Chief Executive of the Royal Society for Public Health, Shirley Cramer insists “compulsory vaccination should be a last resort.”

## Why might certain people not want to be vaccinated?

Certain members of the community for religious or cultural reasons, may not wish to be vaccinated. Additionally, vulnerable members of society such as young children, the elderly and those with on-going health issues, may not be able to have a vaccine. It is this section of the population that are most at risk and therefore rely on ‘herd immunity’ to protect them.

**“Social media hype and disproven research has contributed to a distrust around vaccines in the last few decades.”**

## Why are some people worried about vaccinating their children?

Social media hype and disproven research has contributed to a distrust around vaccines in the last few decades. In 1998, Dr Andrew Wakefield claimed he had discovered a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. However, in the last nine years subsequent studies have found

no link. Dr Wakefield’s research has since been completely discredited by the medical profession and he has been struck off the medical register.

Anti-vaccine stories have also spread online. The NHS warns that these anti-vaccine stories “may not be based on scientific evidence and could put [a] child at risk of a serious illness.” Nurseries should talk to parents about the dangers of advice spread through social media and direct them to discuss it with their GP or health visitor.

## Why do some people disagree with mandatory inoculations?

- It creates further controversy – there have been demonstrations against compulsory vaccinations
- Fines may not encourage people to vaccinate their children and could harm the most deprived in society
- Some people have doubts over how a compulsory policy would be implemented and monitored.

## What else might the UK Government consider to encourage vaccinations?

- Catch up programmes for people who missed out on vaccinations
- Better reminders for parents when vaccinations are due
- Vaccines to be offered in supermarket pharmacies
- Campaigns to target areas of the country, such as London, where vaccine uptake has been particularly low.

## Early years expert advice

- It’s important that staff working with children are aware of up-to-date information about the immunisations given
- Managers may consider asking all practitioners to complete a brief checklist, outlining their own vaccination history. This can help you act quickly and more efficiently if there is a disease outbreak or a health concern with one of the children in the setting
- Practitioners can ask their own GP surgery/clinic to see whether they are fully up-to-date with vaccinations e.g. tetanus
- Do not discriminate against families who have not had their children immunised as there may be some children who for health reasons cannot be immunised
- There may be rare circumstances where a nursery could refuse a child entry to nursery. For example, if there was a measles outbreak and the nursery did not want to spread the disease to a child who had not been inoculated
- Take into account all risks such as staff who are pregnant
- Ring the NDNA legal helpline for advice – don’t assume what you want to do is ok – it’s important to look at each case individually.

## Member case study

Alison Wilcock, Owner of Number 9 The Nursery, decided her nursery’s policy would be that all children who attend must be inoculated unless it is for a legitimate reason such as a medical condition.

She was approached by a parent who did not wish to vaccinate their child and had no legitimate reason. Alison contacted NDNA, our free member legal helpline and consulted with her GP husband before changing the policy.

Although Alison wholeheartedly believes it is a parent’s personal choice, she felt she had a duty and responsibility to ensure all children who attend her nursery are as protected as possible.

Alison understands that some parents may not realise how dangerous illnesses such as measles can be. Although she feels her decision to change her policy is not the most popular choice, she acknowledges everyone has rights including ensuring that parents know that they are sending their children to a safe place where they can learn and grow.

## Advice from our Legal Helpline (free for members):

- Take legal advice on specific circumstances before refusing admission to a child on the basis that they haven’t been vaccinated
- We have to give consideration to the provisions of the **Equality Act 2010** which, amongst other things, protect service users in the UK from discrimination on the grounds of disability and religious or philosophical beliefs. Therefore, before making any decisions to refuse admission it is important to discuss with parents their reasons for not vaccinating their child
- Any discrimination in these circumstances would be likely to be “indirect discrimination”. It might be possible for a nursery to justify the refusal of admission as a means of achieving a legitimate aim.



Alison Wilcock and husband Dr Christian Wilcock