

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Focused on working with policy makers and practice partners
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)
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Do rewards and punishments improve vaccination rates in pre-school children?

About 5-10 per cent of children starting school in England are not fully vaccinated. In some countries, reward payments have been offered to parents to vaccinate their children. Elsewhere, unvaccinated children are not allowed to attend school. We studied how useful and acceptable these strategies would be in the UK.

Researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, summarised what is already known from previous studies about rewarding parents or limiting school entry to increase vaccination rates. We found four studies that looked at effectiveness and six that looked at acceptability. There was not enough information to conclude whether rewards or limiting school access would increase vaccination rates. In some countries, limiting school entry was more acceptable than rewards.

The team interviewed 91 parents and 24 health and education professionals in the North East of England. Both parents and professionals preferred the idea of rewards for everyone, rather than offering these only to some parents. Overall, preventing unvaccinated children from attending school was seen as more appropriate than rewarding parents. However, both parents and professionals thought that making vaccination appointments more flexible, and providing better information and education were the best ways of increasing vaccination rates.

Finally, we asked 521 parents to complete an online survey. As in the interviews, parents in the survey preferred universal rewards to offering these only to some people. However, unlike in the interviews, parents in the online survey preferred rewards for everyone to stopping unvaccinated children attending school. The anonymity of the internet may have allowed these parents to be more honest. Parents also preferred shorter appointment waiting times and information to be presented in numbers rather than in charts or pictures.

Parents in both the interviews and survey felt rewards could be effective for some people. However, most parents in the survey said they would not require a reward to vaccinate their children. The maximum parents felt should be offered to others for the full course of vaccinations was £70.

Key Findings

- In some countries, rewards have been offered to parents to vaccinate their children. Elsewhere, unvaccinated children are not allowed to attend school.
- There is not enough previous research to draw any conclusions on whether rewards or restricting school entry increases vaccination rates.
- Previous research suggests that limiting school entry tends to be more acceptable than rewards. None of this research was conducted in the UK.
- Parents and professionals interviewed in the North East thought preventing unvaccinated children attending school was more appropriate than rewarding parents.
- Parents who completed an online survey preferred rewards to stopping unvaccinated children attending school.
- There was a widespread preference for universal rewards offered to everyone, rather than targeted rewards only offered to some groups of parents.
- Most parents said they would not require a reward to vaccinate their children and that the maximum that should be offered to others was around £70.
- Both parents and professionals thought that making vaccination appointments more flexible, and providing better information and education were the best ways of increasing vaccination rates.

Policy relevance and Implications

- There is currently not enough evidence to justify offering parents financial rewards for vaccinating their children, or limiting school entry to fully vaccinated children as a method of increasing vaccination rates.
- Parents and professionals recognise that financial incentives may be effective in encouraging a small group of parents to vaccinate. Exploratory and pilot work in the UK may be useful.
- There was widespread dislike amongst all groups of the idea of targeted incentives offered only to some parents. Any exploratory or pilot work should focus on universal incentives to maximise acceptability.
- It was not clear whether offering financial incentives or preventing unvaccinated children from attending school was more preferable and this should be explored further using different methods.
- Parents and professionals spontaneously offered a range of alternative suggestions for increasing vaccination uptake. Reducing waiting times, avoiding block-booked appointments, and providing easily understandable information were particularly valued. New initiatives could focus on optimising current services and ensuring these address known reasons for non-vaccination.

“Rewards could be effective for some people... making appointments more flexible and providing better information were seen as the best ways of increasing vaccination rates”

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Academics from Fuse reviewed previous research on the effectiveness and acceptability of rewards and punishments to improve vaccination rates in pre-school children. We then interviewed parents, teachers, doctors, nurses and public health policy makers to seek their views on these interventions. Finally, we ran an online survey on acceptability of rewards and punishments for pre-school vaccinations.

This brief summarises the results of a project entitled: *“Effectiveness and acceptability of parental financial incentives and quasi-mandatory schemes for increasing uptake of vaccinations in preschool children: systematic review, qualitative study and discrete choice experiment”* funded by the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment Programme.

Full results are available at: www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/hta/volume-19/issue-94#hometab0

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

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