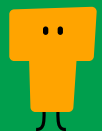




TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH PLAY

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S IMMUNISATION

Practical information for pharmacies
and other community healthcare providers



INTRODUCTION

NHS England recently announced an update to its [annual flu letter](#) to reflect the national pilot that is planned for community pharmacies to provide flu vaccines to 2-3 year olds. NHS England has already commissioned community pharmacies to provide seasonal influenza vaccinations to children aged 2 and 3 years for the 2025/26 season and has published advanced service specifications, including those for [children](#).

This information sheet aims to provide community pharmacies, and other immunisation service providers to young children, with practical information about adopting a child-centered approach. Drawing on the principles of health play practice, it shows how simple techniques can improve the vaccination experience for children and families while also supporting greater programme uptake. This is in line with national guidance from NICE (NG204: Babies, children and young people's experience of healthcare), which reminds us that 'children need care that fits them, their age, weight, developmental stage, medical needs, ability to communicate and context.'

HEALTH PLAY PRACTICE

Practical suggestions for community pharmacists and other vaccination service providers to young children.

Parents

1. Parent's and guardian's emotional state can affect children's experiences. **Many parents may still feel anxious or distressed due to previous experiences with their child's vaccinations.**
2. Advise parents to **watch an informational video** that outlines what to expect during the immunisation and gives them access to play preparation techniques in advance of the visit.



<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/translational-health-sciences/research/bcvc/parents/nasal-flu-video.html?utm>



<https://youtu.be/DZmK41chA20>

3. Encourage parents to engage in simple role play at home before the appointment using toy medical kits or dolls. Display a toy syringe/spray in the clinic room and briefly demonstrate "pretend play" to help normalise the experience and reduce fear. Having a toy or teddy "go first" during the visit can also help younger children understand and feel more secure.

Environment

- 4. A visually calm and clutter free space with minimal medical equipment, tools or supplies on show helps reduce anxiety and prevents children from fixating on unfamiliar or intimidating items.** It can also avoid overstimulation in those with sensory sensitivities. Some children may benefit from entering the clinical space with just their parent or carer initially, building a sense of safety and trust.

Practitioner approach

- 5. Time to acknowledge and connect with the child before administering the vaccine** can build rapport, foster trust and therefore help reduce anxiety. Look for visual cues of their interests, such as character-themed clothing, toys, or bags, and use these as conversation starters.
- 6.** Offer a choice of distraction techniques or play materials. Providing options helps the child feel a sense of control and agency and can significantly ease the vaccination experience.
- 7. Where possible, give the child the choice to sit with their parent or guardian and decide how they wish to be positioned during the vaccination.** Respecting their preferences promotes comfort, reassurance, and cooperation.
- 8.** Offer 'well-done' stickers after the procedure to acknowledge the child's bravery and end the appointment on a positive note.

The information provided here draws on the following documents:

- [Play Well: guidelines for commissioning and designing health play services \(NHS England/Starlight, 2025\)](#)
- Play Well: recommended standards for health play services (NHS England/Starlight, 2025)
- [Professional Standards for Health Play Specialists](#) (Society of Health Play Specialists (SoHPS, 2025)
- [Starlight's Vaccine Project](#) (Starlight, 2024)
- [iSUPPORT](#): International collaborative rights-based standards to support paediatric patients during clinical procedures by reducing harm and establishing trust (ISupport).
- [NICE](#): Guidance for considering the experience of babies, children and young people (BCYP)
- [CYP Me First](#): Child centred communication

WHAT ARE THE RELEVANT NATIONAL GUIDELINES?

Play Well, national guidelines for commissioning and designing health play services (NHS England/Starlight, 2025) states:

Children's psychological experiences of medical treatment range from feelings of temporary, mild anxiety to clinical post-traumatic stress disorder. This can endure and impair a child's trust as they grow into adulthood, leading to a [lifelong aversion](#) to healthcare and healthcare professionals ... Playing is often the primary means by which children express how they are feeling and what they need.

"Health play services should be available to all babies and children and young people accessing primary care, including dental and preventative community services, offering play opportunities within child-friendly community health services (to encourage) greater engagement in preventative, community and primary healthcare and healthier lifestyles for children.

"All children need play and have a right to it. It should be integrated into all community provision affecting or involving children. Primary and public health initiatives such as vaccination programmes should engage with health play teams..."

Summary case study: supporting children's vaccinations

Starlight provided play sessions and play and distraction resources to 8 COVID-19 vaccination sites for the North East London Integrated Care Board (ICB).

The sites included community centres, medical practices, special education schools and family hubs. An estimated 2,500 children and young people were supported through the project.

The evaluation of the project found that providing play sessions and resources before and after receiving a vaccine reduced the proportion of children feeling negative emotions and increased the proportion feeling positive emotions. Feedback from parents and carers, clinical and non-clinical vaccination staff, and the Starlight team indicated that parents also felt positive emotions (for example, relief, relaxation) because their children were supported by the play provision.

From: Play Well, national guidelines for commissioning and designing health play services (NHS England/Starlight, 2025)

Let's help make every vaccination visit calm, positive, and child-friendly so that children and families feel safe, supported, and confident in their care. Starlight has worked with a variety of healthcare settings to make interventions more child-centred, improving experiences for both patients and staff.

To learn more about how we can support your team,
contact us at consultancy@starlight.org.uk

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