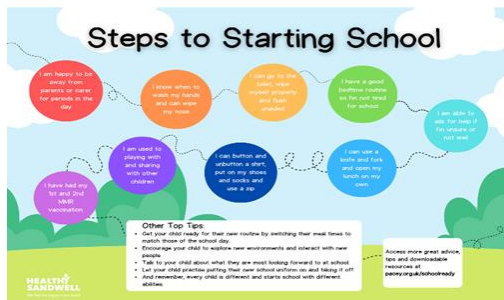


Healthy Sandwell: Dual approach aimed at normalising MMR vaccine



A pilot project encouraging families to think about MMR as a step in preparing children for school helped to increase confidence in vaccination and take up.

A readiness checklist was developed during over the summer (2023) by Healthy Sandwell, the council's public health team, in collaboration with

communications colleagues, Central Health Partnerships PCN, and Black Country ICB, which provided funding of £20K for a 3-6 month project.

The checklist covered nine milestones including having both MMR vaccinations and was shared with parents of 4-5 year-olds due to have their second MMR jab as part of a school readiness package. Staff were trained to prompt families to consider how children would be helped by the health and social skills, which also included being able to use the toilet unaided, being able to wash their hands, or ask for help when needed.

They also spoke with families of children who'd not had their second MMR vaccination when invited to understand why and to offer reassurance or help to book.

"We really wanted to change the narrative around vaccination uptake," explained Cathren Armstong, Public Health Specialist and Acting Health and Wellbeing Board officer at Sandwell MBC.

"So we decided not to focus only on the vaccination, but rather we tried to present it as a normal part of school readiness for children.

"That was the first part. But we also wanted to know why parents were not taking up the invite, so we could offer them help and advice to address their concerns."

Uptake of MMR by children's fifth birthday is significantly below the national 95 per cent target in Sandwell, at **80.4%** (NHS Digital: 2021-22). It is among the 20% most deprived districts in the country with around a quarter of children living in low-income families who face recognised barriers in accessing care.

"Accessibility to care is really difficult for them," said Cathren. "We also have many diverse communities, and we know many people have a mistrust of healthcare services. And then of course there's misinformation around autism and multidose vaccinations, which has played a big role in Sandwell.

"We also wanted to see if getting people vaccinated for COVID would have had an effect."

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The school checklist was posted through doors, shared on social media and through the PCNs six practices. Out of 55 parents spoken to, 23 bookings were made for MMR vaccination – a 41.8% uptake.

“The practice nurses and the social prescribers were trained in motivational interviewing techniques, and they talked to parents about all of these things on the checklist,” said Cathren. “So, ‘does your child have a good bedtime routine? What's the bedtime? Do you read a story?”

“And then, of course, part of that was ‘has your child had both MMR vaccination? This is a good requirement for school because children are going to be with one another a lot and there are chances of diseases and germs being spread’.

“And that worked well.”

The second element saw them phone parents identified by the PCN as having children who hadn't had their 2nd vaccination to ask if they'd be happy to discuss why. A script was agreed to help guide the initial conversation.

Of 77 families contacted (41.6% of defaulters), nine went on to book the MMR. Reasons given for not taking up the vaccine when first invited included:

- hearing it could cause Autism
- delaying immunisations as child is awaiting surgery
- too many vaccines given at one time
- problems with allergies in the past
- refusing all vaccines – have done their research and have a friend who is a Dr who has also advised not to vaccinate children
- the MMR ‘feels too harmful’
- does not want any vaccinations, feels they do more harm than good
- have been too busy but would aim to book another time.

“It highlighted again the impact of misinformation,” said Cathren. “But what we also saw was that if we target our communications to help them to understand how vaccinations work, that may actually help us to address some of the hesitancy parents are experiencing.

“And again, it's changing the rhetoric around vaccinations, normalizing it as part of the parenting pathway.

“When a child is ill, they'll take the antibiotics that are prescribed for them. Why not take the vaccination? It should just be a normal part of our treatment protocol.”

ENDS