



Guidance -March 2022 Covid-19: Children, Young People and Needle Phobia

The Issue

The NHS is offering COVID-19 vaccine to all children and young people aged 12-17 years and to other specific groups aged 5-11 years. The Government announced on the 16th February 2022 that all children aged 5-11 years will also be offered the COVID-19 vaccine, in line with advice from the [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation \(JCVI\)](#). The offer is “non-urgent” and will be made available to all children throughout the UK. Further information on COVID-19 vaccine including advice on safety and eligibility is available from www.nhs.uk

The Office for National Statistics Coronavirus (COVID-19) latest insights into [Coronavirus vaccination uptake in children](#) and young people 12-15 years, depicts uptake of first dose at 56.8% and 15.7% for the second . Increasing vaccine uptake in children and young people is crucial to protect individuals and break the chains of infection in the community¹.

Addressing any worries or fears children and young people may have, is important as there maybe avoidance due to a variety of concerns. Recent research with children and young people has identified needle phobia as one of the causes of avoidance, with younger children being particularly more effected².

This guidance for supporting children and young people with needle phobia is based on current information and available examples of best practise.

Audience:

School nurses and education staff

Intro: What is Needle Phobia?

Many people fear injections to some extent, but once that fear becomes persistent, excessive and unreasonable, then the fear becomes a phobia. Needle phobia is the fear and avoidance of receiving injections, and/or of having a blood sample withdrawn through venepuncture. This is a specific phobia and is extremely common yet not very well recognised. It is thought to affect between 3.5 % to 10% of the adult population³. It is likely to be much higher in children, particularly those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)⁴

How does/might it impact children and young people?

Symptoms can be physical, psychological and behavioural. They include⁵:

- Fear or anxiety
- Panic attacks, nausea, or sweats
- Palpitations
- Fainting (due to a reflex in which perceived pain or the sight of blood triggers a drop-in blood pressure)
- Insomnia in the days or weeks before an expected injection.
- Palpitations, shortness of breath and an increased heart rate and blood pressure.
- Even thinking about a procedure involving needles can trigger feelings of panic and an almost overwhelming desire to escape.

What therapeutic techniques can help with needle phobia?

Breathing Exercises⁶ Taking slow, deep breaths can help children and young people feel calmer and more relaxed. The goal of calming exercises is to get the child or young person from “flight, fight or freeze” mode back to “rest and digest” mode. Deep breathing helps them get more oxygen into their bloodstream, opening up their capillaries. It has a physical effect on their body to help them calm down and lower stress. There are many techniques available. You could try using the following technique:

Take 5 Breathing

Put up one hand, palm facing out and fingers spread apart. Place the index finger of your other hand at the base of your thumb and breathe in while you move your finger up one side of your thumb. Move your finger down the other side of your thumb and breathe out. Do the same thing with the remaining four fingers and take deep breaths in and out as you move your finger until you have completed 5 deep breaths. [Take 5 Breathing](#)

Further breathing exercises, activities, games and videos to help let go of anxiety are also available at the [Childline Calm Zone](#) [Save The Children](#) and [Ambitious About Autism](#).

Breathing Apps can also be helpful. The apps guide the individual breath by breath, and it feels like somebody is there with them. Helpful apps include [Calm](#).

Develop a Fear Ladder⁷

Assist the child or young person to develop a ‘fear ladder’ – a list of all of the situations related to needles which they fear, arranged in order of difficulty. Put the easier ones at the bottom – like the first rung of the ladder. This might include thinking about procedures involving needles, seeing pictures of them, watching them on TV and in real life, and actually having them done. Rate each situation on a scale 0 to 10, where 10 is the most difficult and 0 is the easiest.

Situations Distress	Rating
Having an injection in my arm	10/10
Holding a needle	9/10
Touching a needle	8/10
Watching someone else having an injection in real life	8/10
Watching someone having an injection on TV or online	7/10
Looking at photos of injections	6/10
Listening to someone talking about having an injection	6/10
Thinking about having an injection	5/10

Advise the child or young person to start with the least difficult item (for example thinking about having an injection, in the table above). Plan enough time so that they can stay with the fear long enough to feel their anxiety peak. Stay on that level for a while, then gradually reduce. Staying with the fear allows them to see how anxiety makes them feel. Remember that anxiety drops on its own over time. Begin to use breathing exercises. Go into the feared situation, and stay with it until their anxiety has started to drop. - Take some time to relax, continue using the breathing exercise. When they feel confident with one situation, move up to the next step of the ladder. They will need to practise with one situation a few times before they are ready to move on to the next one.

Positive Coping Statements⁸ are a useful calming technique as they replace the negative thoughts that are making you anxious with realistic, positive thoughts. Here are some examples of positive coping statements:

- I have got through this before and I will get through this again.
- I will be protecting myself and my family if I do this.
- it will only hurt a little bit for a short while
- My family and teachers will be proud of me for doing this
- I can breathe; I am calm.

These are just examples, children and young people can use any coping statement they want. Prepare them when the child or young person is feeling calm and encourage them to look at them when they are feeling anxious about the needle.

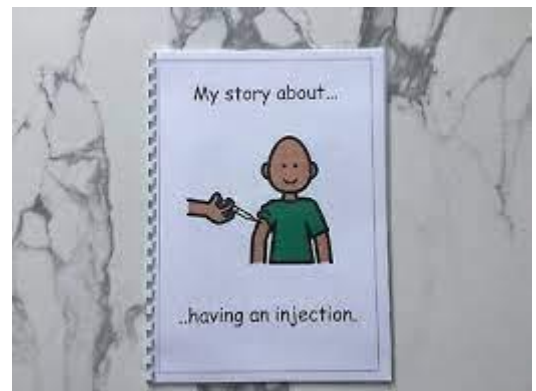
Distraction⁹ is a simple but powerful approach particularly with children and young people with SEND. It involves encouraging the child or young person to concentrate on something else. Activities used will depend on the child or young person's age. Distractions can include:

- Listening to music
- Reading a book or interactive book
- Doing a maths puzzle
- Telling jokes
- Watching TV
- Singing
- Holding hands/stroking
- Talking to the child or young person about their day or interests
- Counting
- Playing a game
- Telling a story
- Blowing bubbles
- Drawing
- A tablet or phone with their favourite song or TV show playing

Try to make vaccination a positive experience for a child. It could be useful to explain that they are being given an invisible shield like a superhero to protect them, their family, and friends¹³

Social Stories

Children and young people with communication difficulties may benefit from social stories, visual timelines, role playing and modelling. These can all help to work through the child or young person's fears. Resources tend to need to be tailored to the child or young person's needs. Speech and Language Therapists and Special School Nursing Teams can help develop these.



The [Together Trust](#) has vaccination visual support materials for people with communication difficulties which are useful for young people.

[Timeline Vaccine Guide and Resources](#)

[Vaccine Social Story](#)

View a video on needle phobia from *Leicestershire Partnership NHS*

[Needle phobia - Top tips video](#)

What to do if the child or young person feels faint during the vaccination¹⁰

If the child or young person begins to feel lightheaded and you are worried they might faint, applied tension could help to regulate their blood pressure to avoid fainting. Applied tension can also be used whilst working with their fear ladder in stages of anxiety.

Ask them to tense the muscles in their arms, upper body and legs for 10 to 15 seconds until they feel warmth rising to their face. Relax their muscles for 30 seconds. After 30 seconds, repeat the tensing exercise until they feel the warmth in their face again. Repeat the exercise five times.

Ask the child or young person to lie down with their legs raised – if they cannot do this then ask them to sit with their head lowered between their knees.

- drink some water
- eat something
- take some deep breaths

If you are with someone who has fainted¹¹

Try to keep calm. If you can, lay them on their back and raise their legs. Usually, the person who has fainted will wake up within 20 seconds.

Immediate action required: Call 999 if: Someone faints and they:

- cannot be woken up after 1 minute
- have severely hurt themselves from a fall
- are shaking or jerking because of a seizure or fit

Role of school nurses in supporting children and young people to have immunisations

In their work in schools, school nurses and the community can identify and respond holistically to children and young people with needle phobia. They can provide support and information to them, their families and education staff. They can work in partnership with education staff to provide extra support to immunisation clinics; providing a specialist and personalised response to support affected children and young people¹². It is recommended that children and adolescents with anxiety, intellectual disabilities, and needle phobia avoid larger scale vaccination settings. These are loud and busy places and can increase a child's distress and make the process more difficult. Consideration should be given to a smaller setting, such as a separate quiet room¹³.

In particular school nurses can support with the following:

- Personal coping strategies
- Learning and implementing therapeutic techniques
- Distraction strategies
- Social stories and timelines
- Information and resources
- Referrals to other health professionals e.g., Community Learning Disability, Team and Behaviour Therapists.

If young people are unsure or worried about getting their school immunisations, this video from *Aneurin Bevan University Health Board* may ease their mind, answer any questions they may have and reassure them that they will receive nursing support. [Get Immunised](#)

Role of schools in supporting children and young people to have immunisations

Schools can help to reduce physical or logistical barriers to vaccination by supporting immunisation clinics in schools. School clinics are convenient for children and young people and can encourage take-up. Guidance is available for schools on the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Vaccination Programme for 12 to 15 year olds](#)

Educational benefits may include:

- Reducing the chance of outbreaks of COVID-19 in schools
- Avoiding absenteeism due to COVID-19 infection and for isolation

Schools have 3 primary roles which will be familiar to them from other vaccination programmes:

- To provide information to their School Age Immunisation Services (SAIS) provider on which children on their roll are eligible for the vaccine
- To share the information leaflet, consent form and invitation letter supplied by the SAIS team with parents and children
- To provide the space within school, and the time away from the timetable, to enable vaccinations to be given by NHS commissioned teams

Education staff can also have a valuable role in working with children and young people during the school clinic to help with quiet break out rooms for children and young people who need this, reassurance, relaxation and distraction.

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