

# Addressing Vaccination Anxiety for Children

## Strategies for Healthcare Professionals



Fear of needles and vaccine visits is common in older children. What you do and say can help children experience less pain and help parents and children more readily accept recommended vaccinations. Below are strategies that can improve the vaccination experience, especially when combined. Consider what is practical. Simply acknowledging the feelings of both child and caregiver and letting them know you care can help.

### Before the Visit

**Pre-registration** may minimize time in the waiting room where anxiety can mount.

**Establish expectations.** If possible, let families know the child will be offered any needed vaccinations and that you'll work with them to make the experience comfortable.

**Have the caregiver bring a favorite comfort item or "fidget item"** from home (e.g., spinner, game).

**Set up the vaccination room/area** so it's comfortable and private. Keep needles out of sight until necessary.

**Consider topical analgesia** (e.g., 5% lidocaine cream, spray, or patch). This may help with pain but needs to be applied to the vaccination site 30 to 60 minutes ahead of time. With guidance, some families may accomplish this before arriving.<sup>1</sup>

### During the Visit

**Ask the caregiver and child** how the child handles vaccinations.<sup>2</sup> What helps them cope? If needed, remind the caregiver that their calm and supportive attitude will make the child feel more secure.

Invite the caregiver and child, as appropriate, to **ask questions** so they feel prepared.

**Watch your words!** Use words that help the child cope during vaccination. Using fear-provoking words (e.g., 'shot', 'sting') or false reassurances ("It won't hurt a bit") can increase a child's distress and pain.<sup>3</sup>

**Offer suggestions** of coping strategies, if needed. Slow deep breaths before, during, and after vaccination can be calming. Some children want to see the vaccination, but most children like to be distracted. Encourage those children to talk about something else pleasant or play with a mobile device. Displaying fun posters in the vaccination area can provide distraction, too.<sup>4</sup>

**KEY IDEA: Asking parents and children what helps them cope is essential. Support their choices, when feasible.**

### Non-pharmacological Pain Management Options

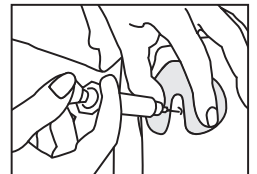
In addition to topical analgesics (see above), non-pharmacological pain control strategies can temporarily "confuse and distract" pain sensors. Options include:

**Cooling the injection site** with a vapocoolant spray immediately before injection.

**Using pain-minimizing injection techniques:** Don't aspirate before injecting. Inject quickly. If giving multiple injections, give the most painful vaccine last.

**Placing a vibrating case** with optional ice pack (e.g., Buzzy by Pain Care Labs) proximal to the injection site.

**Placing a plastic device with several short, blunt contact points** (e.g., ShotBlocker by Bionix, pictured right) on the patient's skin before injection. These are non-prescription, inexpensive and can be cleaned and reused. If helpful, some families may keep one for future vaccinations.



### After the Visit

**Use of pain-reducing medicines** (e.g., ibuprofen or acetaminophen) before vaccination is not recommended because it might diminish the immune system's response

to vaccination. These medicines may be used as needed to treat pain or fever after vaccination.

1. *Guide to Topical Anesthetics and Numbing Cream* from the Meg Foundation at [www.megfoundationforpain.org/2022/7/22/topical-anesthetics-infographic/](http://www.megfoundationforpain.org/2022/7/22/topical-anesthetics-infographic/)
2. Screening Checklists about Vaccine Contraindications and Precautions from Immunize.org at [www.immunize.org/clinic/screening-contraindications.asp](http://www.immunize.org/clinic/screening-contraindications.asp)
3. *Improving the Vaccination Experience: What Health-Care Providers Say* from AboutKidsHealth (Canada) at [assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHAssets/CARD\\_HCP\\_WhatYouCanSay.pdf?hub=cardcommvac#card](http://assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHAssets/CARD_HCP_WhatYouCanSay.pdf?hub=cardcommvac#card)
4. *Search and Find Poster* from AboutKidsHealth (Canada): [assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHAssets/CARD\\_SearchAndFind\\_Poster.pdf?hub=cardcommvac#card](http://assets.aboutkidshealth.ca/AKHAssets/CARD_SearchAndFind_Poster.pdf?hub=cardcommvac#card)

