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‘TO BE, OR NOT TO BE VACCINATED’:

PUBLIC RESPONSES TO THE ROLL OUT OF THE COVID-19 VACCINE PROGRAMME

‘British Families in Lockdown Study’ - Leeds Trinity University

This paper has been written by the ‘British Families in Lockdown’ research team led by Leeds Trinity University and identifies parental views on the COVID-19 vaccine and the national roll out. ‘British Families in Lockdown’ (BFiL) is a qualitative study which was quick to respond to the start of the pandemic in 2020 and is one of the few qualitative studies collecting a broad range of data from the UK population from the first lockdown up until the present time.

Sixty parents from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures were interviewed at the start of the study in March 2020. We have been conducting follow-up interviews with a selected number of the original sample since then and invited participants to complete an online survey across the three national coronavirus lockdowns of 2020-2021. More recently, we interviewed parents in February 2022, towards the ending of the legal domestic restrictions in England. Parents have shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children’s schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use as part of the study.

Summary of findings

- The majority of participants had been vaccinated and received the booster jab.
- On the whole, there were positive views around the vaccination programme roll out, particularly as it was perceived as the main way to enable society to get back to normality.
- For those who were unvaccinated, there were concerns over the testing and safety of the vaccinations.
- Parents were more reluctant to vaccinate their children.
- Participants would appreciate further testing and information on the safety of COVID-19 vaccinations, especially for children.
- There were mixed views on the trustworthiness of available sources when it came to researching COVID-19 vaccinations.
- To increase acceptance and uptake of the vaccination programme, more needs to be done around information sharing, including the contents of the vaccine and details of the trials undertaken.
- More information may increase the credibility of the vaccines in the public’s minds and alleviate concerns.

- Lack of trust or reduced trust in the Government was a strong issue which appeared in the accounts of participants' decision making and views on the vaccination roll out.

Decision making for vaccinated individuals

- The majority of the parents we had spoken to had contracted COVID-19 at least once. This influenced their decision making in terms of having positive views around the vaccine and becoming vaccinated.
- Parents were concerned about their own health or the health of loved ones (particularly those who were elderly and/or those classified as vulnerable) in their decisions to become vaccinated.
- A small number of parents trusted the Government's advice regarding the vaccination programme.
- A minority of parents cited work and travel reasons (including holidays abroad) for their decisions around the vaccination uptake.
- A number of parents experienced peer pressure from others to become vaccinated.
- A majority of participants shared the view that the vaccination programme roll out would enable people's 'lives to get back to normal'.
- Some parents felt that it was a social and moral obligation to become vaccinated in protecting others, especially those who were classed as vulnerable. This included people they knew but also on a general level.
- Some parents were happy to become vaccinated as they saw the COVID-19 vaccine as no different to other vaccinations that were available, often making comparisons to the Flu jab.
- Some parents felt that the vaccination had been adequately tested for safety.
- Religion was not suggested to be an influential factor for vaccinated parents.

Decision making for non-vaccinated individuals

- Personal reasons for non-vaccination included pregnancy and breastfeeding and the government guidelines at the time.
- A minority of non-vaccinated parents subscribed to the herd immunity concept.
- A minority of parents felt that contracting COVID-19 was inevitable and the vaccination was not necessary.
- Others felt that the vaccination does not prevent infection in itself, as such, it was not useful when an individual is already healthy.
- Some parent subscribed to the idea that natural immunity would protect them, particularly if they had contracted COVID-19 in the past.
- The 'newness' of the vaccine was perceived as a concern and deterred vaccine uptake.
- Parents questioned the reliability of the short testing period for the vaccinations.
- Lack of research on the lasting impacts of the vaccination was a particular concern for those who were unvaccinated.
- Concerns about unknown side-effects were cited as a reason for non-vaccination. Some parents cited the thalidomide tragedy as a cause of doubt.

- Some questioned the overall effectiveness of the vaccine if the government were inviting people to have booster jab soon after the initial roll out (see booster vaccination section below also).
- For a selected number of individuals, there was some level of scepticism and doubt regarding the seriousness of COVID-19. Even amongst those who had experienced the virus themselves.

Sources of information used

- Formal sources of information which parents turned to included news reports (particularly the BBC), research journal articles, websites for international and national organisations (such as World Health Organisation and the NHS).
- Information from doctors, scientific sources and scientific advisers were seen as being mostly reliable.
- Parents expressed how difficult it could be to make an informed decision on the vaccine uptake due to the conflicting advice available.
- Some parents also felt overwhelmed by how much information was on the internet about the vaccine from different sources.
- In a small minority of cases, parents cited negative accounts of the vaccination from friends, family and colleagues as a reason to decline the vaccination programme.
- Some sources of information were seen as more credible than others. BBC news, Broadsheet newspapers, NHS information and the WHO were seen as more trustworthy.
- Most participants were aware of the bias in some sources of information, or perceived bias, including political views and the possibility of fake news.
- Some parents felt that information online was often 'scaremongering'.
- Social media was often cited as the least accurate source of information but was still read and/or used to make decisions.
- Some parents relied on informal advice from spouses, partners, friends and family as trusted sources, especially if they had a medical background.
- There was evidence that parents did not fully understand how the vaccination worked and/or how it was tested.

Booster vaccinations

- The majority of parents had received a booster vaccination.
- Many parents saw the booster in a similar vein as annual Flu jab boosters and were happy to continue getting boosted.
- A small minority questioned why the COVID-19 booster was being rolled out again, which influenced decision making. There were mixed views on the effectiveness of the booster vaccination as a result.
- Some parents did not feel it was necessary to get boosted so soon after receiving the initial vaccination/booster, despite government advice to do so, citing that their immunity system did not require it.
- Most parents were happy to continue with any subsequent booster programmes if needed.
- Several participants expressed reluctance to continue with booster jabs if implemented, seeing regular boosters as an inconvenience. Many expressed views such as 'when will it ever end'.

- Generally parents were happy to consider having one booster a year, perhaps two. More than this and they would question why?
- Parents felt that more research was needed around the booster vaccination and any others to follow.
- There were concerns about the safety of booster vaccinations.
- A small number of parents or children who had contracted COVID-19, felt that they were likely to be immune and so, did not need the booster jab.
- Some parents wanted to build up their own immunity defences after the initial vaccination and felt reluctant to have the booster jab.
- A number of parents felt they did not want their children to have the booster jab since the potential negative impacts were unknown.

Impact of vaccination status

- Parents who were vaccinated felt less worried and less anxious about contracting COVID-19.
- Many vaccinated individuals were going out of the house more as a result of their vaccination status.
- For a small number of individuals, being vaccinated allowed them to attend social and family events with less worries about contracting and/or passing on COVID-19.
- Many parents suggested that they were socialising more since their vaccination.
- Parents felt less worried about their children's health if they were vaccinated, particularly within school settings and when socialising with peers.
- Some parents suggested that the vaccination made no difference to how they led their lives.
- In a number of instances, parents continued with protective measures to reduce possible infection risks, despite being vaccinated, such as wearing face masks and restricting unnecessary social outings.

Children and COVID-19 vaccine

- Many children were not vaccinated due to their young age.
- For older children who were vaccinated, their parents were also vaccinated.
- Vaccinated children had often discussed the vaccination decision to some extent with their parents.
- Some parents expected their children to get vaccinated due to health concerns for the child, parents or other family members.
- A minority of parents were happy for older children to make their own decision regarding the vaccination uptake.
- Some parents suggested that the COVID-19 vaccination was like any other childhood vaccination - which they had not objected to in the past.
- But other parents suggested that the key difference (and their reluctance to vaccinate their child) was due to the lack of testing on the COVID-19 vaccination compared to other childhood immunisation programmes.
- Some parents felt that children felt peer pressure to become vaccinated, particularly if the vaccines were delivered at schools.
- In one case, a parent's child had been confronted by ant-vax protesters outside their school on the day of their vaccinations.

- Some children had contracted COVID-19 and this influenced parents' decisions and views around vaccinating their children in both positive and negative ways.
- Some parents did not think that the vaccination was necessary for children, believing that they are less likely to be affected by COVID-19 itself.
- Parents were more wary about the COVID-19 vaccine for children and wanted more research on the effectiveness and side effects for younger populations.
- Some parents were particularly worried about the potential physical effects that the vaccine may have for children, especially those who were prepubescent.
- Parents expressed concerns over potential fertility issues in the future for children who receive the COVID-19 vaccine, this included worries about risks of disabilities in their future grandchildren.

Vaccination debate

- The vaccination debate was seen as complex and often politicised.
- Majority of participants were pro-vaccination.
- Some vaccinated individuals felt that 'anti-vaxers' were often extreme in their viewpoints and uninformed.
- However there were instances where parents recalled friends and family members who were anti-vaccination but also well-informed, highly educated and in the medical professions.
- Most vaccinated individuals were respectful of other people's decisions around the vaccine roll out.
- For those who were vaccinated, most would encourage others to become vaccinated citing social responsibility for others.
- A small number of vaccinated parents felt that non-vaccinated individuals were being 'selfish' and not helping society to 'move on'.
- Some parents felt that the vaccination debate was underpinned by political stances and ideas around human rights/freedoms.
- Regardless of vaccination standpoint and status, some participants were still taking precautions to protect themselves and others, such as sanitising hands and use of facemasks.

Views on the Government

- There were mixed views from parents regarding how the Government handled the pandemic and the vaccination programme.
- Most parents were approving of the Government's strategy in terms of the roll out.
- A small number of parents felt that the Government had a 'knee jerk' reaction to the pandemic and the vaccination roll out.
- Gratitude was expressed for the role of the NHS in the vaccination programme.
- Some felt that the Government needed to provide clearer information and reassurance during the roll out.
- There were mixed views on mandatory vaccinations imposed by the Government.
- In most cases, parents did not agree with mandatory vaccinations.
- Parents agreed that the issue of mandatory vaccination was a difficult subject particularly when it came to protecting the vulnerable (e.g. in care homes).

- There were small instances, where parents felt that the COVID-19 vaccine should be compulsory for all.
- Some felt that the Government should continue to enforce restrictions to prevent infection risks despite the roll out.
- Parents felt less trusting of the Government and the Prime Minister due to alleged rule breaking around COVID-19 restrictions, this then influenced parents' views on Government messages around the vaccination programme.
- Some viewed overseas countries as being more effective with the vaccination programme, in terms of uptake and providing public information.
- A small number of parents would follow the international reporting of the vaccine roll out in overseas countries when deciding on the vaccination themselves.
- Overwhelmingly, parents spoke about wanting to 'get back to normality' and there were mixed views in terms of how effective the Government were in enabling this.

Recommendations

1. There is a need for clearer information on the COVID-19 vaccine and booster jab that could allay public concerns.
2. Providing impartial information about the contents of the vaccine and the reliability of the testing would be helpful.
3. Identifying and tackling fake news is important in helping people to make informed decisions around the vaccination programme.
4. Parents are particularly concerned about the safety of COVID-19 vaccinations for children. Clear information regarding the potential vaccination effects and benefits upon children is needed.
5. Almost all participants mentioned the need for further research into the current COVID-19 vaccinations and how safe they are in the short, medium and long term and this needs to be shared with the public in an accessible manner.

March 2022