

Exploring how parental decisions on vaccines can be swayed by social media

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Social media is so rife with misinformation regarding childhood vaccinations, health care professionals need to be prepared to provide adequate information and support parents to ensure informed decision-

making, a new study has found.

Led by nursing and midwifery researcher Dr. Susan Smith from Flinders University's College of Nursing and Health Sciences, the study looked at the significant role social media plays in shaping parents' perceptions and choices regarding childhood vaccinations.

The [paper](#), "Exploring social media influences on vaccine [decision-making](#) in parents: a netnography," is published in the journal *Therapeutic Advances in Vaccines and Immunotherapy*.

"Parents are increasingly turning to social media for health-related information and while it can provide access to valuable and supportive material, it can also amplify [vaccine hesitancy](#) due to the spread of misinformation," says Dr. Smith, also a former maternal child health nurse.

"As vaccine hesitancy continues to rise in high-income countries, including Australia, we need to ensure a coordinated effort to enhance the quality of information available to parents online."

The study looked at an online community on Facebook, created specifically for the research, that encouraged open discussions on vaccine choices in pregnancy and parenting.

Over a year of data collection, three main themes emerged: vaccine safety concerns, the emotional debate, and issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, including vaccine mandates.

"We found that parents who actively engage in [online communities](#) are often exposed to a wide range of opinions, which can either reinforce their decision to vaccinate or increase their hesitancy," says Dr. Smith.

"Misinformation was high, including incorrect information around vaccine ingredients and side effects, which was shared alongside fear-mongering memes and conspiracy theories against the necessity for childhood vaccinations."

The research also explored the emotional impact of social media on parents, with arguments from both sides of the fence contributing to parental hesitancy.

"An unexpected aspect of our research was the degree of aggression and vitriol that vaccine-hesitant parents were exposed to on the Facebook page, which had the potential to cause fear and anxiety in the undecided," says Dr. Smith.

"Proponents of vaccination tended to ridicule, rather than encourage a healthy discussion that may have in fact helped a parent to understand the benefits of immunization.

"If we are to help people make informed choices, we must create more supportive online environments where parents can access accurate information and feel reassured about their choices."

The authors say the research underscores the complex nature of [vaccine](#) decision-making and the influential role of [social media](#) and calls for health care professionals to join in the fray to help parents.

"We need to ensure parents are receiving timely and [sensitive information](#) about immunizations during pregnancy and in early parenting to limit the need to go online for further information," says Dr. Smith.

"By understanding the ease of access to misinformation, its effect on decision-making and being motivated to respond in an appropriate

manner, health care providers will be better placed to respond and ensure parents are well informed."

More information: Susan E. Smith et al, Exploring social media influences on vaccine decision-making in parents: a netnography, *Therapeutic Advances in Vaccines and Immunotherapy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/25151355241249607](https://doi.org/10.1177/25151355241249607)

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