

Pain study links children's fear of needles to parent behaviour

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More than half of children are scared of needles; York University researchers have found a strong connection between this fear in anticipation of a jab and their parents' behaviour during infant vaccinations.

Psychology Professor Rebecca Pillai Riddell's lab investigated factors contributing to the anxiety that preschoolers experience in anticipation of pain when getting their vaccines. The pain study found that past and continuing behaviour of the parent was the biggest reason for this suffering.

"We observed how these children behaved before their needles and after their needles when they were infants and preschoolers," says Pillai Riddell. "We also observed how parents interacted with their children, and the types of things they said to their children during infancy and at the preschool age."

For some children, the fear of needles and vaccinations before getting the shot is so severe that they experience more pain-related distress right after the needle and also learn to avoid future [medical procedures](#) and appointments.

The researchers, including Pillai Riddell, Professor David Flora and lead author PhD candidate Nicole Racine, observed 202 parents in the Greater Toronto Area and 130 children between four and five years of age - these children were among the 760 who were followed at the first

wave at two, four, six and/or 12-month immunizations.

The goal of this final wave is to link the regulation of pain to mental health outcomes, according to the researchers at the Opportunities to Understand Childhood Hurt (or OUCH as it is commonly known) lab.

The study to find out what leads to children developing needle fear, titled "Predicting preschool pain-related anticipatory distress: the relative contribution of longitudinal and concurrent factors," is being published in the journal *Pain* this fall.

"We were interested in whether pain-responding and parent behavior during infancy predicted needle fear at preschool," says Pillai Riddell.

Parents were also asked about how scared they were before the needle, and how scared they thought their child was.

Health-care professionals were also observed prior to children receiving needles.

"This is a major public health concern and stresses the importance of understanding what leads to needle fear in young children and how we can prevent it," says Racine.

These findings highlight the importance of developing interventions to help parents to best support and coach their [children](#) during painful medical procedures right from their first [needles](#) as a baby.

Provided by York University

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