

Non-vaccinators just want to fit in

24 May 2018, by David Stacey

A new study by researchers at The University of Western Australia has revealed parents' choices about whether to vaccinate their children are largely influenced by their social networks, with parents often left feeling either validated or marginalised within their communities.

The [study](#), published in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, shows how [parents](#) experience tugs towards 'appropriate' forms of vaccination behaviour in their social groups, and how non-vaccination is often viewed as a valued form of capital.

The researchers interviewed parents from two Australian locations with low vaccination rates; Fremantle in WA, and particular postcodes in Adelaide. Parents in those locations were identified as either refusing or delaying recommended vaccines for their children.

Some Fremantle parents were also fully vaccinating, yet remained quiet about it in social interactions with their peers as they believed their decision to vaccinate would attract disapproval.

Dr. Katie Attwell from UWA's School of Social Science said vaccination decisions were linked to broader behaviours around food, school choices and birth practices present in like-minded communities.

"While there were differences between social groups in Fremantle and Adelaide, parents from both locations regarded vaccine questioning and refusal as a marker of distinction among their social groups. Many also believed that they were raising children healthy enough to navigate the world unvaccinated," Dr. Attwell said.

"Parents in Fremantle who accepted vaccines described experiencing alienation from their community. Meanwhile the Adelaide participants, who were initially recruited around an organic market and in many cases were more vehemently opposed to vaccination, found their social groups

to be like-minded, and felt that their decisions were validated within them."

"What our study really drew out was how the sociality of vaccine questioning and refusal reflects a certain stage of life where new parents are making new friends. They don't want to risk social criticism when they are seeking acceptance."

The study suggested that pro-vaccine messages, designed by providers, [public health](#) officials or governments, needed to better equip parents who vaccinated to communicate safely about their choices with their peers who didn't vaccinate. This could reflect the fact that new parenting was a vulnerable time for parents as they entered a new phase of life and sought to form new relationships.

"Providing people with effective evidence-based ways to respectfully disagree and introduce new perspectives is an important start in intervening among vaccine-critical social groups," Dr. Attwell said.

The study also considered how parents who vaccinate but were proficient in other practices with high symbolic capital in their groups – such as baby-wearing or infant nutrition – might share this expertise with others as a way of affirming their status within their [social groups](#).

Provided by University of Western Australia

APA citation: Non-vaccinators just want to fit in (2018, May 24) retrieved 3 March 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-05-non-vaccinators.html>

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