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UNLEASHING THE IMAGINATION OF SCHOOLCHILDREN TO INCREASE AWARENESS ABOUT ZOONOTIC DISEASE TRANSMISSION AND PERSONAL BIOSECURITY MEASURES

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Introduction

Awareness of zoonotic diseases is a basic requisite for the implementation of personal biosecurity practices. However, informing the general public through science communication comes with challenges as people differ in characteristics, ways of interpreting information and previous knowledge. Thus, science communication needs to be adaptive and flexible. Also, information is best shared on a platform that creates dialogue as well as excitement.

Objectives

To increase awareness of zoonotic disease among schoolchildren, we prepared an activity for a science festival arranged by the local municipality and local universities (Uppsala University and Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) in Uppsala, Sweden.

Material and Methods

The activity was targeted to children between 7-12 years old and included an arts and crafts corner where the students had access to different materials for creating their own zoonotic pathogen. The space was decorated with pictures of real zoonotic pathogens and printed examples of illustrations of pathogens. After creating their pathogen, the students were asked to fill in a “microbe passport” together with a researcher (Figure 1). In the passport, children could draw the host animal(s), choose if it was a virus or bacteria, specify symptoms, transmission routes and suggest protection measures.

Results

Interaction with the children during the exercise generated discussion and questions based on each individual’s perception and knowledge. These, in turn, allowed researchers to provide examples and mention existing zoonoses. In particular, discussions about routes of transmission and protection from the pathogen sparked various ideas in the children. In the discussions, the researchers could relate their ideas to common ways of disease transmission and related biosecurity practices.

Conclusions

Overall, our impression is that the activity created a platform for meeting the children at their individual knowledge level and harnessed their imagination and curiosity to increase understanding of zoonotic disease transmission and personal biosecurity measures.

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Keywords

Science communication • Zoonosis • Personal biosecurity

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