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Unvaccinated children risked life of young cancer survivor

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Marita Howell and her son Jonathon, has undergone chemotherapy for Non Hodgekins Lymphoma. Picture: Richard Dobson
Source: The Sunday Telegraph

MARITA Howell can ban parents bringing peanut butter sandwiches to her childcare centre, but she cannot ban kids who are not vaccinated.

Last year, those unvaccinated children risked the life of Ms Howell's son Jonathon, a cancer survivor.

The Maroubra mother is the operator of the suburb's Mary Campbell Pre-School Child Care Centre.

Maroubra is one of the nine local areas in NSW identified by the National Health Performance Authority as being "at risk" of outbreaks because of vaccination rates of below 85 per cent.

Last year, two unvaccinated children fuelled an outbreak of chicken pox at the centre - just as 14-year-old Jonathon was recovering from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which had destroyed his immune system.

Too sick for school, he was recuperating in the centre office - so was at high risk during the outbreak.

Westmead Children's Hospital paediatric oncologist Luciano Dalla-Pozza compares non-vaccination to drink-driving in terms of the danger it presents to cancer patients, whose immune systems are devastated by chemotherapy.

"We've had deaths (of cancer patients) from measles and chicken pox because it gets in the lungs and causes severe pneumonia," Dr Dalla-Pozza said. "If you come into contact with kids on chemo, you put someone else's life at risk."

Ms Howell was terrified when the chicken pox outbreak swept her centre. "If you don't immunise your child, for people like Jonathon that can be life-threatening. The thing that kills kids is not the cancer, but the infections they pick up," she said.

Jonathon's cancer is in remission.

He is having vaccinations to restore childhood immunity - but Ms Howell wishes immunisation was compulsory.

"I can't exclude people by law. I can ask for immunisation records and if there is an outbreak I get notified by the health department, but it would be good if it was compulsory," Ms Howell told The Sunday Telegraph.

"I know some can't be immunised for health reasons, but it would be good to eradicate these diseases altogether."