

Our COVID Cocoon: The Parents Aren't Alright (But Help May Be Coming)

The pending authorization of COVID-19 vaccines for children ages 5 to 11 is a light at the end of the quarantine tunnel.

October 20, 2021 By Matt Volz and Kaiser Health News

My unvaccinated 7-year-old son began hacking and sneezing in late September as the hospitals in our home state of Montana started buckling under the latest covid surge. I took him to get tested when his symptoms wouldn't go away.

The cotton swab went up his nostrils and Thomas bucked out of my lap with a mighty snort, nearly ripping the 6-inch swab from the pediatrician assistant's fingers. It came out bent, but the sample was usable, and as she put it away, I asked a question to which I already knew the answer.

"So we're in quarantine?" She nodded. It would take about 72 hours to get the results, she said.

The next day, 4-year-old twins Anna and Karen started coughing and sneezing like their brother. They were already under orders to stay home after being exposed to a COVID-positive classmate, but they, too, were slapped with a new quarantine while we waited for the test results.

We had already experienced two COVID quarantines and summer camp closures in August. In September, our family accomplished a new feat in our pandemic journey: The twins entered a quarantine within a quarantine, running simultaneously to their brother's quarantine.

For the parents of children too young to get vaccinated, the news that [Pfizer and BioNTech deemed](#) their vaccine safe and effective for children ages 5 to 11 is a light at the end of a seemingly never-ending quarantine tunnel. Remember those lockdowns that defined spring 2020 for everyone? We parents are still living them, in increments lasting up to 10 days. When we're not in quarantine, we're bracing for the next one.

My wife, Beagan, and I now flinch every time we see a school number on our phones' caller ID. Are they closing again? Will our bosses be understanding this time? Can we find part-time care at the last minute? Are we even allowed to bring in that outside help if we're in quarantine?

But the record hospitalizations and spike in COVID deaths put the problems of our confined — yet healthy — family in perspective. The same day my son was tested, Montana was among the [top 5](#)

[states for new case rates](#) and the [governor sent National Guard troops](#) to help hospitals bursting with COVID patients. The 1,326 new COVID cases reported by the state included 118 kids under age 10.

Our pediatrician's office is part of the St. Peter's Health system, which was [implementing crisis standards of care](#) to ration medical services. Several hundred feet from us at the doctor's office, all eight intensive care beds in the main wing of the hospital were filled, six by COVID patients.

Here we were, just three weeks into the school year, and we were drained. Beagan and I spent much of August and September trying to manage the kids and our jobs. How bad might it get when the cold weather forced us all back indoors?

To top it off, we discovered that the two kittens we adopted from the local shelter had ringworm. The fungal infection spread to the entire family and the dog.

My wife summed it up neatly: "I feel like a crappy parent, a crappy employee, a crappy spouse, a crappy pet owner. I just feel crappy."

Children are much less likely than adults to get seriously ill or die from COVID-19. But they make up [about 15% of all COVID cases](#), and the highly transmissible delta variant has led to [a jump in child hospitalizations](#). Some children who get the disease may also develop ["long COVID"](#) or the sometimes fatal [multisystem inflammatory syndrome](#).

Despite the surge, it seems a lot of people in Helena and around the state have put the pandemic behind them. Maskless faces in indoor spaces, crowded events and [low vaccination rates](#) are the norm, aided by [new state laws](#) that stymie local health officials' ability to implement common anti-COVID measures.

I feel like an oddity when I'm one of the few masked patrons or employees at the grocery store, or my kids are the only ones masked at the children's science museum. So I asked Dr. Lauren Wilson, vice president of the Montana chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, whether I was being too cautious.

Wilson said the parents of unvaccinated kids are right to be cautious, not just because their children might get COVID, but because they could bring it home and spread it to vulnerable family members. It's also important to balance protecting children with providing for their needs, particularly their mental health, she added.

That can be difficult when parents are experiencing "decision fatigue" from the scores of choices they face every day about their families' safety, she said. It's difficult to assess risks when so many people are ignoring public health recommendations.

Our wait for test results stretched from three days to five. On the last day, I wrote this essay between tea parties, breaking up fistfights, playing "Frozen" on the television for the umpteenth time and giving in to my son's request to have potato chips for breakfast. The kids' negative

COVID test results arrived near day's end.

Then we found out 7-year-old son could soon join the ranks of the vaccinated if the Food and Drug Administration approves the Pfizer-BioNTech shot for his age group.

That will be a big day for us, along with the twins' 5th birthdays in the spring. In the meantime, I've started to cough and sneeze. Considering the kids' tests were negative, I think I'll skip getting one myself — in hopes of breaking our quarantine streak.

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