

To the Parents of Unvaccinated Little Kids This Holiday Season

Navigating the holidays with children too young to be vaccinated is causing stress for many. Please help us get through this last leg of the pandemic.

By LAURA VENUTO DECEMBER 10, 2021

Many parents of young children are finding themselves considering passing on holiday gatherings again this year, a decision not made lightly. As a therapist, I've sat with numerous people as they cried hard over this decision. Sometimes at night, when my sessions are over, my kids are sleeping, and I'm scrubbing dishes or folding laundry, I've shed my own tears as well.

As a psychologist and mom of a 7-year-old and a 4-year-old, I find myself feeling simultaneously excited and apprehensive about what the upcoming change in our household vaccination status means for the holiday season. Soon, I will have one fully vaccinated kid, and another with no clear opportunity for vaccination in sight. Our nuclear family is left in a precarious situation about how to handle holiday gatherings.

Three weeks ago, I escorted my 7-year-old to receive her first COVID vaccine dose. After 20 months of struggles, it felt like the end was finally in sight. Initially in disbelief that this greatly anticipated moment was finally here, shortly thereafter, the reality set in, and I cried hard tears. Soon, she will have the freedom and ability to return to the world in ways that feel quite magical. And let me tell you, we have some *big* plans for when she is fully vaccinated (indoor playdates, lunch at American Girl Place, a plane trip—the list goes on). However, families like ours with children under 5 are facing a different scenario, as there's no clear rollout date for vaccinations for the little ones. As we approach the holidays and the coldest months in the northeastern US, this uncertainty feels akin to a prison sentence without parole.

As a parent and a psychologist specializing in maternal mental health, I'm all too familiar with this quandary. In my practice, I see countless moms who are feeling misunderstood, ostracized and exhausted over the challenges of navigating family relationships during a pandemic. There are seemingly infinite examples of how the global health crisis, and the conflicting approaches to managing it, are exacerbating already strained family relationships and bringing parents to the breaking point.

One mother of an infant tells me that her relatives haven't taken COVID as seriously as she has. "When I try to share my concerns for my infant's health, they say I'm overreacting. They laugh at my suggestions that we quarantine or test before family gatherings. I am withdrawing from my family."

In certain parts of the county, it's often assumed that individuals who continue to take precautions and protect their children and themselves from COVID-19 are hypochondriacal, neurotic or hysterical. This perspective only creates more isolation for the parents who remain with legitimate concerns about the ongoing pandemic. The individuals who have this reaction to parents taking precautions seem to be the ones who latched on to the soundbite at the beginning of the pandemic that "COVID isn't a real medical threat to kids." However, it's clear that there are serious health risks for children too. Data from October 2021 released from the Kaiser Family Foundation puts COVID-19 within the top seven leading causes of death for American children.

In my sessions, I hear examples of the myriad ways in which the pandemic is negatively impacting parents. There are those who endured infertility or loss who are now having their traumas reactivated as they learn about complications like MIS-C and long-hauler COVID and worry for the safety of their kids. There are the parents whose relationships with family and friends feel irrevocably changed after enduring the past 20 months—and not to mention the masses of parents who feel burned out by the hoop jumping involved in making life with kids and a career work during a pandemic. From the daily screening forms that began to feel almost comical to parents living COVID-cautious lifestyles ("*Have you traveled out of the country in the past two weeks?*" "*No, it's been more like two years!*") to the mandatory quarantines, to the trips to the pediatrician for every runny nose, we are depleted, to say the least.

Health concerns aren't the only reason parents are living COVID-cautious lifestyles. For instance, my son's school requires a 21-day quarantine for unvaccinated students if someone in their household tests positive. In case you thought you misread that, you did not. Twenty-one days of being home with a very active 4-year-old in the middle of winter. If that idea isn't sufficiently terrifying, you have to remember in this scenario, he's home for 21 days because someone else in the household has COVID. And, if you're like me and have a nanny, you will be paying for them to stay away during this whole fiasco as well.

When faced with these harsh realities, combined with the uncertainty surrounding the Omicron variant, this upcoming holiday season creates difficult decisions for many with young children—even more difficult than last year's decisions. To the parents in this seemingly isolated club who are considering setting new boundaries on holiday rituals like testing and masking or simply staying home, I say, your concerns are legitimate. If you attend gatherings without feeling safe, there are potential long-term negative ramifications for your relationships as well as at a minimum, short-term ramifications for your mental health.

Do not succumb to the gaslighting; people who truly love you and your children will understand. To the friends and family in our lives, please don't take our suggestions to alter things or our decision to pass on the holidays this year as a personal rejection. We are simply doing the best we can with the information we have at present, which is a reasonable way to navigate and ultimately end a hopefully once in a lifetime event.

Despite my fatigue as I endure this parenting ironman triathlon, I do see light at the end of the tunnel. What parents will really need when the pandemic recedes are friends and family who respected and supported them, so we can come out of this situation as stronger and more united family systems. Let's all hope this is the last holiday season we'll be making these difficult decisions.

Dr. Laura Venuto, Psy.D. is a licensed psychologist at the 92Y Parenting Center and a maternal mental health specialist. Check out her website, her Facebook, and her virtual classroom.