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IDEAS

# Your Unvaccinated Kid Is Like a Vaccinated Grandma

Parents should bet on vacations with their kids this summer.

By Emily Oster



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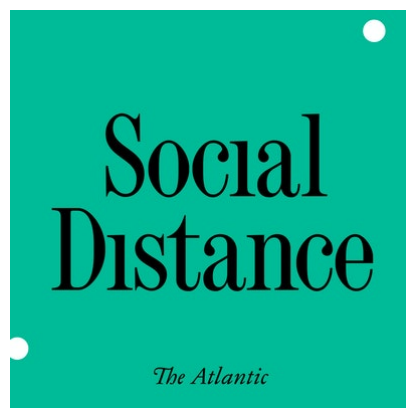
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**About the author:** *Emily Oster is an economist at Brown University. She is the author of Cribsheet: A Data-Driven Guide to Better, More Relaxed Parenting, from Birth to Preschool and Expecting Better: Why the Conventional Pregnancy Wisdom Is Wrong—and What You Really Need to Know.*

President Joe Biden wants all adults to be eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine by May 1. In a speech last week, he suggested that Americans should be able to celebrate July 4 with (smallish) barbecues. For many people, this was the first hopeful vision in a while. We still have a ways to go, but the speed of the vaccination process in recent days makes quasi-normalcy by July seem not completely out of reach.

At least one group feels left adrift, however, and potentially behind: parents. Vaccines for children under 16 are not yet available. Trials have begun, but realistically, children won't receive a shot in the arm until the fall or winter. Parents are wondering if, after a year of remote school, no playdates, and a lack of grandparent visits, they'll still have to socially isolate while everyone else enjoys their BBQ.



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We Need to Vaccinate Kids

Children may mostly be spared the worst of COVID-19, but we're still relying on them to reach herd immunity.

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But the best available research indicates that families with young children don't, in fact, have to live like it's 2020 until 2022. Parents can go ahead and plan on barbecues and even vacations. The explanation for why lies in the resilience of kids to COVID-19, and in herd immunity.

[Read: The truth about kids, school, and COVID-19](#)

Children are not at high risk for COVID-19. We've known since early in the pandemic that they are much less likely to fall ill, especially seriously ill. Although scientists don't quite understand why, kids seem to be naturally protected. As a result, you can think of your son or daughter as an already vaccinated grandparent.

Hear me out.

Think about a grandmother who's received, say, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Trial research indicates that the second shot reduces her risk of serious illness by about 95 percent. Her risk of death goes way down too, although the trials were not geared toward reaching a conclusion on that point. (The Pfizer control group recorded zero deaths.)

Different vaccines yield different results, but all of the vaccines approved by the FDA (Pfizer-BioNTech's, Moderna's, and Johnson & Johnson's) are very effective, which is why the CDC has indicated that vaccinated individuals can interact unmasked with other vaccinated individuals. It hasn't yet commented on flying, but I'm guessing the CDC will relax its flying advisories for vaccinated individuals in the next few weeks. It will continue to recommend masks, for the sake of protecting the *unvaccinated* population, because the science on transmission by the vaccinated is still hazy.

Now think about your child. The CDC has published some risk assessments by age. For comparison's sake, I'll phrase the findings the way I would the results of a vaccine trial: Being a child aged 5 to 17 is 99.9 percent protective against the risk of death and 98 percent protective against hospitalization. For children 0 to 4, these numbers are 99.9 percent (death) and 96 percent (hospitalization).

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The central goal of vaccination is preventing serious illness and death. From this standpoint, being a child is a really great vaccine. Your unvaccinated first grader appears to have about as much protection from serious illness as a vaccinated grandmother.

Comparisons are more difficult when it comes to the risk of any infection at all. An [Israeli study](#) undergoing peer review found that the Pfizer vaccine reduces infection in asymptomatic cases by about 90 percent, and in symptomatic cases by almost 94 percent. Child case counts haven't been well documented, in part because asymptomatic infection appears to be so common among kids. However, the available data suggest that children are less likely than adults to contract the coronavirus, but more likely to contract it than a vaccinated grandmother. (Below, I'll address the latest thinking on variants, and research on the possible long-term effects of less-than-serious infections, which remains [murky, and controversial](#).) This news may feel a little mixed: Yes, kids are protected from serious illness, just like their vaccinated grandparents, but they are not as protected from contracting the virus at all.

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Here is where the concept of herd immunity comes in to save the summer. If the Israeli Pfizer study is anywhere near right, then case rates will fall once a large share of adults are vaccinated. They are likely to fall *a lot* as the virus finds fewer and fewer receptive hosts. Children will gain some protection from infection simply because not as much virus will be in circulation.


To put all of this together: When you think about socializing or traveling with your children this summer, remember that you'll likely be traveling around in a low-disease environment with the equivalent of your vaccinated older parent. But with more whining. Maybe. Even if your children are too young to wear a mask, they are protected by these other factors.

The same logic applies to playdates, and camp, and everything else. Yes, a vaccination program for kids is desirable, but even in the absence of one, kids are *not* at the same risk of serious illness as the rest of us. We should be able to return to some normalcy well before our kids get a vaccine.

I hear your what-ifs, so let me talk through two of them. First, fear of long-term consequences for children who do contract the coronavirus. Some children have serious post-COVID illness (called MIS-C), but this remains extremely rare. New research shows that long COVID is usually linked to older age groups, and to graver symptoms while sick. Second, the variants. At least one of them—the U.K. variant, B.1.1.7— is now quite common in the U.S. But this variant is *not* more risky for kids than the original strain, and it *is* responsive to the vaccines. It really does not change the calculus at this point.

COVID-19 has surprised us many times, and I'm not suggesting that we dismiss either of these concerns outright, or not try to learn more about them. But continued isolation is costly. Keeping children away from family, friends, and new experiences has downsides for them and their parents. When we return to normal this summer, we should bring parents and kids with us.

Emily Oster is an economist at Brown University. She is the author of *Cribsheet: A Data-Driven Guide to Better, More Relaxed Parenting, from Birth to Preschool* and *Expecting Better: Why the Conventional Pregnancy Wisdom Is Wrong—and What You Really Need to Know*.

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