

How Much Longer Can We Keep Doing This Without a Vaccine?

All parents are struggling during the pandemic, but those with kids too young to be vaccinated are barely holding on.

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Parents are not OK. No caregivers are, really. But parents of children who are too young to be vaccinated against Covid-19 are most certainly not OK at this point in the pandemic.

Back in December 2020, when we were all 20 years younger, [the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported](#) that “one in five people in households with children (21%) have reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless in the previous week.” Today, I’d imagine that number is closer to five in five.

It has always been a struggle for parents in this country. There is no safety net, no national standards for what constitutes quality (and affordable) child care, and, [at a most basic level, no paid leave](#). Pile on a global health crisis, and it’s no wonder so many of us are reaching a breaking point or experiencing parental burnout—particularly new parents, who are figuring it all out for the first time, without any of the support systems we had planned on.

Navigating the mental hula-hoops of exposure is exhausting on its own. My partner and I have rarely brought our 2-year-old son into a grocery store, and when we do, we’ve put the stroller rain cover to good use. And seeing people is generally off the table. Some weeks we make plans but eventually have to cancel them, because someone was exposed or tested positive—in the case of our son’s birthday, for the second year in a row, because the risks outweigh the benefits.

Even after we both got vaccinated against Covid, we knew our pandemic lives wouldn’t change all that much. Sure, many have suggested that infected children typically do not become as severely ill as adults. But one child being hospitalized or dying from Covid is too many when that one child could be your own. And now, with the Omicron variant, which “may affect the youngest children in unforeseen ways,” according to [a January 7 New York Times report](#), and a rise in the number of hospitalized children 4 and under, what options do we really have?

Between January 4, 2020, and January 8, 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that [at least 259 infants \(0–4 years old\) have died from Covid](#)—with the rates for [Black and brown infants](#) disproportionate to their population sizes. Immunocompromised children have been uniquely affected.

Our son is not immunocompromised. But since his birth, when he spent five days in the NICU, to today, when he is experiencing global development delays, we have been in full protection mode, because at this point it's the only thing we feel we have some control over.

There are a few other factors that have contributed to our lockdown mentality. Our son was born on January 1, 2020, so it is quite literally all we've known, since we kept most loved ones away early on because of the mix of cold and flu season (and the NICU visit really freaked me out). And then, at 7 months, he had a major surgery, an experience traumatizing enough that if we can avoid the hospital again during the pandemic, we'd like to do so. The other factor is that our son receives services through New York state's Early Intervention program, and with in-person provider visits (when we are able to do them, depending on the local Covid case count), we want to avoid putting these wonderful people (or the other families they work with) in harm's way.

But this isolation doesn't impact only us, the adults. It's not an ideal situation for our toddler either. The lack of opportunities to socialize with other kids has consequences.

For a brief period he was in daycare, but we were told by the facility that he could no longer attend if he didn't start walking by 21 months (and as of this writing, he is not yet walking). The result is that what our son needs is beyond what we can provide him, which is torturous. If our son could be around other children regularly, he could watch how they move or play and perhaps learn to mimic their behavior, but that's not possible.

News reporting over the past year suggests that developmental delays like the ones our son is experiencing may be exacerbated by pandemic isolation. [A local news station in Tampa, Fla.](#), reported that experts are seeing "delays with motor function, speech, play, and social skills, and it may be even more difficult for children who were already having issues with these things."

Jessie Willis, a speech language pathologist in Atlanta, [told local news in August of last year](#), "We have seen an increase in speech and language delays since Covid hit, and it's a very complicated issue." Willis added, "Before the pandemic, parents were going to their well checks. They were going to daycares. They were socializing with other families. And then when everything shut down, well check visits were delayed, which means early intervention services were delayed. Families stopped socializing and daycares shut down."

This time is hard for parents, period. But parents of children who are too young for the Covid vaccine: I see you. Whether your children are in a daycare that has been closed more often than it's been open or are at home with you, a provider, or your spouse, the calculus of it all often doesn't add up.

Weekdays can be the most challenging, as is the case for all parents, especially single moms, who are working from home. My husband and I take turns making sure our son doesn't miss any of his doctors' appointments, including weekly appointments with a physical therapist, a speech therapist, and an occupational therapist. His providers are amazing, but much of that care during peak Covid is via telehealth, which is not optimal. We do the best we can—moving his hips this way and his shoulders that way during physical therapy, for example—and hope it will all work out.

After losing his full-time job in 2020, my husband became the stay-at-home parent, taking on gigs in between as they come up (and only when it's safe to do so). But I am incapable of ignoring my toddler saying "Mama" throughout the workday from the other room. So my focus time can be limited to when he's napping or sleeping some days, particularly on the days when he sees his providers.

I wish I could say I take comfort in knowing we're not alone. But I don't take comfort in others' pain. I don't take comfort in knowing other parents have it the same or worse, particularly single parents. My partner and I are so lucky to have each other, a roof over our heads, heat, food, and a safe and comfortable place to sleep at night. We have it good, but we're barely hanging on as the pandemic enters its third year without a clear time line for when our son will be able to get vaccinated against Covid. It shouldn't be like this.

Still, as much as I want to agree with those who place all the blame on people who are not getting vaccinated and boosted to help protect the most vulnerable, the stressors that parents of young children are navigating reflect the fundamental failure of US systems to support working families. When child care is out of reach or temporarily paused, not every family can afford to have one adult (or the only adult, in the case of single-parent households) take on caregiving responsibilities full time. The pandemic has made it so that, no matter our circumstance, we have had to accept that everything is not OK, that we're not going to get it right or be able to keep up most of the time, and that maintaining hope for our children's future is the best we can do.

Now that our son is 2 and developing some "big emotions," I try to make him laugh—a big laugh—at least once a day. He likes to dance while I hold him, so we have dance parties as often as we can. Or I'll blow raspberries on his belly, or wave my arms around high, which for some reason always makes him smile. If those silly moments are his only memories of this period, I'll be grateful.

We've managed to keep him safe, healthy, and happy. On the good days, I know it's enough.