PROTECTING UNVACCINATED CHILDREN AS COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS ARE LIFTED

Public Health Insider
Washington state is about to reopen with 70% of people 16 and older initiating the vaccine series.

This may cause excitement for some and nervousness for others, perhaps even a mixture of both! But for families and caregivers with children under the age of 12 who are not yet eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine, re-opening may cause concern and raise a lot of questions on how best to protect our kids who are still at risk of getting COVID-19.

There are over 300,000 children in King County who are not protected from COVID-19 infection. We do not know yet when children under 12 will be eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

For parents, caregivers, and families, here are ways you can continue to keep children under the age of 12 safe.

- Continue to wear masks
  Fully vaccinated residents are no longer required to wear masks in most indoor and outdoor settings.

  However, masks are still an important way to protect children. Since unvaccinated children can still transmit the virus to others, mask wearing protects others as well. We continue to depend on one another for this community protection. All adults should continue wearing masks indoors and outdoors in schools and childcare settings. Also consider wearing them in other public, indoor settings when children are present in large numbers.

- Continue modeling mask-wearing behavior. Even if you and other family members are fully vaccinated you can show support for your children when you are all out together.

- Explain why it is still important. Younger children may be confused why they still need to wear masks when older children and adults around them no longer must. Share that things are getting better, but face masks will continue to keep them and other unvaccinated people safe while we wait for a vaccine for everyone.

- Not all kids can wear masks. Children under the age of 2 should not wear a mask. Children between ages 2-4 sometimes struggle wearing a mask, especially for extended periods. Everyone who can mask should to protect the children who cannot.

Get vaccinated if you are eligible

Everyone ages 12 and older is eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. If you are eligible, get vaccinated and help protect others around you who are not eligible, including children under 12. People who are vaccinated are not only protected, but vaccines can help keep people with no symptoms from spreading COVID-19 to others.
Make a family plan

As your family and younger children spend more time around groups of people who are and are not wearing masks, it’s helpful to have a plan for different gatherings or locations. This can help children know what to expect.

Openly discuss comfort levels based on risk assessment and health history with immediate and extended family.

Be consistent so that kids know what to expect in different situations and are more able to cooperate within an established routine. Your plan may change over time—talk to your kids about the changes and answer their questions.

Here are some examples of possible family plans:

- There is no need to wear masks indoors with vaccinated family members, but kids and adults will wear masks running errands at grocery stores, etc.
- There is no need to wear masks for outdoor playdates with friends, but masks are still required at busy, public playgrounds and for indoor playdates.
- There is no need to wear masks indoors or outdoors with a small, select group of friends, including unvaccinated children (often considered a pod).

Choose to socialize outside whenever possible

The risk of spreading COVID-19 is much lower outside than inside. Outdoors, even a light wind can dilute and disperse viral particles. When we are indoors, we need to pay special attention to the amount of fresh air entering the space. The circulation of fresh air is crucial for diluting any coronavirus that may be present and preventing it from spreading between people.

When being outside is not possible, prioritize good ventilation and social distance. Some examples could include:

- Sit by an open window on public transportation.
- Carpool with the windows down.
- Have kids sit further apart in a shared vehicle and wearing masks.
- Open as many windows as possible in the building.

Assess relative risks based on activity type and setting

Everyone’s risk tolerance is different. Those with children under 12 should consider the community transmission risks and impacts of participating in settings where you are indoors, with unvaccinated people or people outside of your home, and the likelihood and ability for physical distancing and consistent mask use.

Areas with low vaccination rates pose a higher COVID-19 risk for kids who are unvaccinated. When you plan travel, consider vaccination rates at the destination. Make informed decisions about traveling with your kids or how to approach quarantine around traveling.

And while COVID-19 is a risk, it is not the only risk when considering children’s health. The disruption to many regular routines and activities, from in-person school, sports and social events, can impact children negatively in a variety of ways. Health is not limited to physical health, and families and caregivers must also consider the mental and behavioral impacts on children.

Many parents and caregivers are very tired due to the emotional and physical energy it requires to constantly weigh COVID-19 risks when it comes to their kids. The pandemic has demanded a lot from us all, with unique challenges for families and caregivers. However, it is helpful to remember that we make decisions around risk all the time. Many other activities and choices are statistically riskier for kids than getting sick from COVID-19. There is a heightened awareness around COVID-19. It is important to take precautions to protect children and others who may not be vaccinated, and also make choices that feel best for your family’s unique situation.

Originally published on 6/22/21.