



Why Spending Time With Kids Might Actually Help Protect You From COVID

By David Zweig



Photo: Hyoung Chang/Denver Post via Getty Images

Figuring out which pandemic safety measures were prudent and which were misguided is the monumental project left to scientists, ethicists, public-health experts, and others now that (roughly) normal life has resumed. Among the most important but controversial subjects for reassessment are the COVID-19 interventions that affected children, including their ability to go to school or otherwise participate in basic social activities. In large portions of the United States, schools were closed for many months or even more than a year, activities for young people were broadly canceled, and tens of millions of American

children were kept inside their homes and away from peers, teachers, relatives, and friends. While the persistent and considerable consequences of those policies are still coming to light, the main justification for them was that exposure to children increased COVID risk for adults.

A pair of new findings casts serious doubt on that logic. The two studies were published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* — one in August and one last month — and together they achieved something rare: They offered dramatic and important new information suggesting a correction to a commonly held narrative about children as dangerous viral vectors during the pandemic. But their results, according to multiple experts interviewed for this article, were also entirely expected.

The August paper found that “exposure to young children was strongly associated with less severe COVID-19 illness.” In an analysis of the records of more than 3 million adults in the Kaiser Permanente Northern California health system, the authors found that “those without identifiable household exposure to children based on health insurance enrollment had a 27% higher rate of COVID-19 hospitalization and a 49% higher rate of COVID-19 hospitalization requiring ICU admission than those with young children.” (In comparing adults with and without exposure to young children, the analysis matched each group for known COVID risk factors such as age, hypertension, diabetes, and BMI.) The study’s researchers, from Kaiser, Stanford University, and Columbia University, said their findings suggest that cross-immunity from common coronaviruses — which sometimes cause the colds and sniffles that children tend to carry — may play a role in protection against severe COVID-19 outcomes.

The study published in November, by researchers from Harvard Medical School, Boston University School of Medicine, and the Veterans Administration, offered biological evidence for the Kaiser study’s epidemiological finding. The researchers found that, during the first year of the pandemic, VA patients who had tested positive for some of the common-cold coronaviruses had an 80 to 90 percent reduction in likelihood of testing positive for SARS-CoV-2 infection. In other words, at least for a limited time, getting the common cold appeared to help some people’s immune system protect against COVID.

These two studies — one relying on laboratory data, the other on observational data — complement each other so compellingly that the researchers behind the November study cite the August paper as the inspiration for theirs. Taken together, the findings suggest that social distancing and isolation at a population level, particularly from young children, may have counterintuitively put some people at *greater* risk of COVID infection or severe disease once they resumed normal contact. (Several of the experts I spoke with noted that this doesn’t mean social distancing wasn’t beneficial for those at high risk of bad outcomes who were able to remain uninfected until they were vaccinated.)

Francois Balloux, director of the Genetics Institute at University College London, whose work focuses on the epidemiology of infectious diseases, said cross-protection — that is, exposure to the common-cold coronaviruses triggering greater immune protection against COVID — had long been the subject of quiet speculation by experts. “This hypothesis was aired since the beginning of the pandemic but was viewed as dangerous,” he said. “People avoided talking about this in polite circles.”

But the public discussion now seems to be happening. For instance, a recent essay in the *New York Times* on the relative absence then reemergence of certain viruses, co-authored by a virologist and an infectious-diseases epidemiologist, noted the possible effects of social distancing as well as cross-reactivity (infection from one virus conferring an immune-system benefit against other viruses) in this process.

The VA study adds intriguing new data to this conversation. There are four endemic coronaviruses that can cause the common cold. The VA researchers found that people who had tested positive within the past year for two of them — either 229E or OC43 — had a significantly lower rate of COVID than patients who had not tested positive for either of these coronaviruses.

Dr. Jake Scott, an infectious-diseases specialist at Stanford University, said the VA study had some significant limitations, but its findings fit with the existing literature, which indicates “there’s good reason to believe exposure to human coronavirus can lead to some degree of cross-immunity to SARS-CoV-2.”

The evidence of cross-protection should cause people to question some commonly held assumptions that governed pandemic safety measures. Balloux, who is a co-author on a study published last year in the journal *Nature* exploring how exposure to endemic coronaviruses might help T-cell immunity to SARS-CoV-2 infection, said the VA paper was just the latest small addition to the literature on the broader topic. And overall, Balloux said, it supports the idea that, at a population level, teachers or other professionals with exposure to young children were not at greater risk, as was the conventional wisdom during the pandemic, which drove policy decisions about shuttering schools and children’s activities.

This protective concept exists beyond the endemic coronaviruses. Although Scott did not want to apply this lesson to any policy decisions around mitigations, he said, “the infectious diseases that kids often spread are usually benign and can provide adults with certain immunological protection that they might not otherwise think about.”

To whatever extent school closures or social distancing from children reduce transmission, there may be a downside to those aggressive mitigations, said Dr. Paul Monach, one of the VA study’s authors. “It’s been proposed that the current surge of RSV may in part be because our population didn’t get it for two years,” he said. “It’s plausible that we can overprotect ourselves from viruses.” Instead, “getting a mini- or even micro-booster periodically simply by going about your life would be very reassuring.” He warned, though, that doing so is tricky and depends on how dangerous the virus is to children and everyone else.

While no one enjoys getting colds, these studies suggest that exposure to young children and their colds may offer a protective benefit against more serious illness. Dr. Monica Gandhi, an infectious-diseases specialist at University of California, San Francisco, said that, in light of the protective benefit of mild coronaviruses, “we need to evaluate unintended consequences” of preventing that exposure.

TAGS: FINDINGS COVID-19 MEASURES SCHOOL CLOSURES



Please read our [community guidelines](#).
Have a concern or tech problem related to commenting? [Report it](#).
All comments with links in them will require a moderator to approve.

All Comments 12

Most liked

— **grace_as_you_wish** 9 MONTHS AGO

The worst policy and science and policy is being normalized, all with the goal to keep us working and spending money; we are being sacrificed for the economy...every covid infection does damage to your heart and organs-proven fact. Every covid infection, no matter how mild, does damage. Long Covid is a risk to everyone, no matter how healthy you are. Our country's policy to ignore this airborne virus is a disaster. I'm waiting for the science to catch up, it will. There is promising work on a nasal spray to kill covid. We are all weakened by each covid infection. How will we work and spend when we are diminished by repeated infections? I'm wearing my 3M Aura mask and being careful. We have no guaranteed sick leave in this country and no free healthcare. If you get covid, make sure to get a PCR test so your infection is on record in case you need care after your acute phase. Again, we are being sacrificed for the economy. the most awful public health failure!

👍 LIKE 7 ↩️ REPLY ➦ SHARE

🚩 REPORT

— **jiminyglick** 8 MONTHS AGO

🗨 In reply to **grace_as_you_wish**

Bravo, aquagirl! The systematic and deplorable normalization of COVID will have one wonderful, ironic, certainly unintended consequence: a national health care system and expanded welfare coverage for the tens of millions of Americans with chronic illnesses and an inability to hold a full-time job due to organ disease and failure. (Any one else noticing the shocking decline in work product from their post-COVID "it's just like the flu!" colleagues and employees?!) And who will be around with the guts and/or decency to say "oops" in 10 years when the **** hits the fan?!

👍 LIKE 4 ↩️ REPLY ➦ SHARE

🚩 REPORT


— **sadsacker** 8 MONTHS AGO


🗨 In reply to **grace_as_you_wish**

Where are you getting this information? Are you a doctor? How do you know this? Sounds like you're being and creating some hysteria. I've been careful, vaccinated, or a mask when it made sense, I have not gotten Covid yet. But my observation of those who have had it that they're fine. Yes one person died in my circle. Heartbreaking. But it was a freak situation anyway are you a doctor? How do you know what you're telling us?

👍 LIKE ↩️ REPLY ➦ SHARE

🚩 REPORT

 [Top of comments](#)

 [Top of article](#)

[SIGN IN TO COMMENT](#)

THE **Intelligencer** FEED

12:07 P.M. POLITICS

Poll: New Yorkers Aren't Thrilled With Anyone or Anything

By Nia Prater

A Siena College poll found that a majority of voters see the migrant crisis as a serious problem and give leaders low marks for their handling of it.



11:55 A.M. EARLY AND OFTEN

First Republican Debate: Who's In, Who's Banned, Who's Boycotting

By Ed Kilgore

When Republicans debate in Milwaukee on Wednesday a few candidates will be missing due to the RNC's strict criteria and loyalty pledge.



10:48 A.M. WILDFIRES

Why Are More Than 800 People Still Missing on Maui?

By Matt Stieb

Tracking down evacuees is a major problem for officials after a natural disaster — especially when so many are tourists.



MOST POPULAR

1. Actually, Hunter Biden Is Getting It Worse

By ANKUSH KHANDORI

2. Why Are More Than 800 People Still Missing on Maui?

By MATT STIEB

3. Oliver Anthony and the Incoherence of Right-Wing Populism

By ERIC LEVITZ

4. Is David Solomon Too Big a Jerk to Run Goldman Sachs? 🗨️

By JEN WIECZNER

5. My Boss, the Monster

By MARY SHELL

10:26 A.M. POLL POSITION

What the Polls Say Today: Trump Still Riding High in Iowa

By Ed Kilgore

A long-awaited Iowa poll from Ann Selzer shows Trump maintaining a strong lead in the state that will vote first. DeSantis is down but not out.

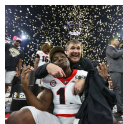


9:00 A.M. GAMES

College Football's Sad Last Dance

By Will Leitch

Enjoy one final season before everything turns upside down.



8:00 A.M. 2022 ELECTIONS

For Republicans, Abetting Coups Is a Good Career Move

By Eric Levitz

House Republicans who aided Donald Trump's efforts on January 6 are more likely to win reelection.



8/21/2023 EARLY AND OFTEN

The Iowa Caucus Could Be Republicans' Only Chance to Stop Trump

By Ed Kilgore

Some are hoping a Trump-slayer will emerge later in the primary. But if Trump's rivals underperform in Iowa, he could quickly become unbeatable.



8/21/2023 HURRICANE HILARY

Southern California Inspects Damage As Hilary Finally Sweeps Through

By Chas Danner And Nia Prater



Floods and broken rainfall records are left behind by Tropical Storm Hilary.

8/21/2023 TREMENDOUS CONTENT

Trump to Skip First GOP Debate, Maybe All 2024 Debates

By Margaret Hartmann

He's expected to stay home and post a prerecorded Tucker Carlson interview online. But Trump clearly wants to keep the debate speculation going.



8/21/2023 SCREEN TIME

Why Nothing on Your Phone Is Safe From Ads

By John Herrman

Tech companies are just hoping you'll put up with it.



8/21/2023 EXHIBIT A

Actually, Hunter Biden Is Getting It Worse

By Ankush Khardori

A bumbling Justice Department and Republican pressure have made the prosecution of the president's son anything but a "sweetheart deal."



8/20/2023 EARLY AND OFTEN

What Each Candidate Needs to Do in the First Republican Debate

By Ed Kilgore

With Trump likely absent from the stage in Milwaukee, the margin of error for DeSantis, Ramaswamy, Scott, and the rest of the 2024 field has narrowed.



8/19/2023 TREMENDOUS CONTENT

Giuliani Begged, But Trump Refused to Pay His Crushing Legal Bills

By Margaret Hartmann And Chas Danner

Giuliani's lawyers say he's broke, but Trump still won't cover the legal fees stemming from his pro bono work as the president's lawyer.



8/19/2023 VISION 2024

The Rise of the Young, Liberal, Nonwhite Republican?

By Eric Levitz

A significant minority of GOP voters are not what you would expect.



8/18/2023 RATF*CKING

James O'Keefe Is Now Under Criminal Investigation

By Matt Stieb

New York authorities are looking into how he spent donations to Project Veritas before he was exiled.



8/18/2023 SCANDALS

Who Are the Newly Revealed Jeffrey Epstein Contacts?

By Chas Danner And Benjamin Hart

Additional prominent names continue to surface from court filings and reviews of Epstein's schedules and emails.



8/18/2023 TRUMP INDICTMENTS

Threats From Trump Supporters Are Piling Up Against the Authorities

By Matt Stieb

His supporters have made racist threats and death threats against most of those involved in the prosecutions against the former president.



8/18/2023 TREMENDOUS CONTENT

Melania Really Doesn't Care About Trump's Indictment, Do U?

By Margaret Hartmann

She reportedly sees Donald Trump's fourth indictment "as another problem for her husband. Not for her."



8/18/2023 EARLY AND OFTEN

DeSantis Targeting Ramaswamy in Debate a Sure Sign He's Losing

By Ed Kilgore

Debate strategy memos say DeSantis should defend Trump and hammer Ramaswamy, singling out his Hindu faith. It's a recipe for defeat.



8/18/2023 TREMENDOUS CONTENT

Trump Cancels Press Conference, Will Lie in Legal Filings Instead

By Margaret Hartmann

Trump's lawyers got him to call off the release of his "Irrefutable REPORT" by promising to include his 2020 election fraud lies in court documents.

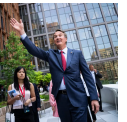


8/18/2023 EARLY AND OFTEN

A Late-Entry Candidate Won't Save Republicans From Trump

By Ed Kilgore

Anti-Trump Republicans hope Glenn Youngkin or another dark-horse savior will jump in the 2024 race. But it's already too late for that.



8/18/2023 THE NATIONAL INTEREST

'Lock Them Up' Is Now the Republican Party's Highest Goal

By Jonathan Chait

It's no longer about policy or even culture war but prosecutorial revenge.

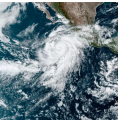


8/17/2023 APOCALYPSE WOW

A Hurricane Might Actually Hit Southern California and Arizona

By Matt Stieb

The unlikely Hurricane Hilary will bring flash-flood potential for much of the Southwest — and more rain than its deserts get in a year.



8/17/2023 CANADIAN WILDFIRES

Canadian Wildfires Force Evacuation of Northwest Territories' Capital City

By Chas Danner

Less than two weeks after wildfires killed more than 100 people on Maui, northern Canada's second-largest city isn't taking any chances.



8/17/2023 CONSERVATORSHIP

The Battle Over *The Blind Side* Is Getting Messy

By Matt Stieb



Michael Oher claimed the Tuohys took his share of the profits from movie, while the wealthy family says there wasn't much money to begin with.



Intelligencer



ABOUT INTELLIGENCER

NEWSLETTERS

CONTACT

MEDIA KIT

PRIVACY

AD CHOICES

ABOUT NEW YORK MAGAZINE

HELP

PRESS

WE'RE HIRING

TERMS

DO NOT SELL OR SHARE MY PERSONAL INFORMATION

ACCESSIBILITY

INTELLIGENCER IS A VOX MEDIA NETWORK.

© 2023 VOX MEDIA, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.