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## Hair Pulling, Superheroes And Stickers — How My Three Kids Braced Themselves For Vaccination

**BY JOSEPH WILSON**

**PHOTO © TATYANA.BUZMAKOVA/TWENTY20**

Back in January of 2020 I wrote an article about bringing my kids to get a flu shot (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/vaccines-canada-2020>).

I made a glib reference to “the coronavirus in Wuhan ... with two confirmed cases in Toronto.” I had no idea what was coming.

I was back at the clinic with my daughters last weekend, this time with all three of them, now almost two years older, for the COVID-19 vaccine.

Our youngest, Maria, is five, just old enough to get the jab and also old enough to remember the discomfort from the flu shot she got a couple of weeks earlier.

That experience did not go well.

She flailed and cried and lashed out at my wife who was trying to hold her down. The pharmacist even got the needle in once but my daughter twisted her arm free. It was not a pleasant experience for anyone involved and she was not happy when we informed her we'd booked her for a COVID shot.

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**During flu season, Joseph Wilson used the opportunity to teach compassion to his kids.** (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/vaccines-canada-2020>)

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## **A Little Older, A Bit More Strategic**

Our older daughters (10 and eight) were also nervous but have started to develop strategies to ease their anxieties. Sonia drew a comic strip of every step in the process: a worried face sitting in the back seat of the car on the way to the clinic; a pharmacist rubbing disinfectant on her arm; a needle going in; and then a beaming grin with the knowledge that it was all over.

In narrative form, she could see her fear morph into pride.

Elizabeth likes to act things out. She would give shots to her stuffies and wrap them up in toilet paper bandages. She'd then turn the "needle" on herself to demonstrate its effectiveness for her patients. Maria looked on nervously.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"A little," said Elizabeth as she reached over and tugged Maria's hair: hard, but not too hard.

"Ow," said Maria. "Is that it?"

"Yup," said Elizabeth getting back to work.

"Do it again," said Maria.

Elizabeth obliged.

Maria reflected on whether she thought she could accept this level of discomfort moving forward. Throughout the day, whenever Maria's imagination would elevate the shot to catastrophic levels of pain, she would approach Elizabeth and ask for a little hair-tug to keep her expectations grounded.

It seemed to work.

## **The Slow Walk To Vaccination**

We took Elizabeth and Maria together the next day to the clinic and they were greeted by health care workers decked out in capes and masks: a superhero theme to bolster the confidence of the young patients.

They were presented with a "COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic Passport" that needed to be stamped with stickers at different stations. We completed the pre-screening questionnaire, then checked in for our appointment. Two stickers down, two to go.

My wife took Maria into one room, and Elizabeth and I followed a nurse dressed like Super Mario to meet a doctor dressed like a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

Elizabeth rolled up her sleeve and turned her head towards mine. There was fear in her eyes, but she had been practicing for this moment. And it was over in seconds. Her body relaxed and the doctor looked directly at her and said, “Thank you for doing this. It’s really important.” She left the room with her head held high with her last stickers.

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**For some parents vaccinated early, they are left wondering when the rest of the country will catch up.** (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/i-vaccinated-in-february-thought-thered-be-more-in-the-club-by-now>)

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## No Kids Are Alike

When I took Sonia the next day the doctor had a slightly different strategy.

“I’m going to put a sticker on your right index finger here, OK?” he said.

Sonia obliged, looking skeptical.

“I want you to squeeze the sticker between your thumb and finger as hard as you can and stare straight at it,” he said.

“OK,” she said, squeezing down. She didn’t even notice the needle go in her left arm.

“OK done,” the doctor said. Sonia was still squeezing with all the intention she could muster.

“That’s it?” she said.

“That’s it.”

The last sticker in the passports was the most important. It said “I helped protect my community.”

On our way out several people thanked my daughter (and not me, which I think is a crucial distinction) for helping the community in which she lives: more vaccinated people mean less stress on the health-care system when someone gets sick, less transmission of the virus and slower mutation rates.

In the end, our girls were proud, both of the courage they showed in the face of fear, but also, I hope, in the knowledge that they did something beneficial for their community.

Who knows when we’ll be back for our next shots? Flu, COVID, booster... either way I’m sure our kids will be practicing their emotional responses, even if by the ancient ~~SHARE~~ strategic hair-pulling.



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