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## I'm Not Vaccine-Resistant Or An 'Anti-Vaxxer' — I'm Teaching My Kids Why Shots Matter

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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When I took my kids to get their flu shot this year, I didn't offer them anything as a reward.

No candy or ice cream — just a needle in the arm.

They're eight and six now, and old enough to understand that although it hurts, it's important to protect ourselves against pathogens when we can. With the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan this year, and now with two confirmed cases in Toronto as of Monday, January 27 — updates here (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>) — it is clear that we don't always have that luxury.

### Teaching Compassion And The Power Of Community

Beyond protecting ourselves, I like to remind my daughters that when we get vaccinated we are really doing so for the benefit of the entire community (<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/874784323881>). People who have diseases that affect the immune system, the elderly and young babies are particularly vulnerable. They have all of these people in their life. It's motivating for them to know they are helping to reduce the chances that their new baby cousin or their grandmother will get sick.

Not everyone feels this way. A *CBC Marketplace* investigation recently sent hidden cameras into an anti-vaccine conference

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/marketplace-anti-vaccination-hidden-camera-washington-1.5429805>) in Washington, D.C.. Activists who consider themselves as part of the "anti-vax" movement are convinced that big pharma and big government are conspiring to erode their civil liberties and poison their children with risky vaccines.

The insidious thing about these kinds of arguments is that when they get captured on hidden cameras, or when people shut them down for ignoring science, it just confirms their feeling that there is a big conspiracy against them. It feels good

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLmswTRpHOY>) to be part of a club that thinks it is fighting for freedom from tyranny.

## Beyond "Anti-Vax"

The number of parents who self-identify as "anti-vaccine" is still fairly small. But their advocacy has seemingly affected a much larger group — those parents who are what public health officials call "vaccine-hesitant."

Across Canada, schools are seeing more and more students showing up unvaccinated (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-vaccination-outbreak-hesitancy-measles-1.5343220>).

Worldwide, the number of people who are unsure or nervous about vaccinations is also growing (<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>) — despite well-established evidence ([http://www.who.int/immunization/programmes\\_systems/vaccine\\_hesitancy/en/](http://www.who.int/immunization/programmes_systems/vaccine_hesitancy/en/)).

The feeling of identity that comes with belonging to a group that is fighting "The Man" is a powerful one. To help my kids feel good about getting their vaccines, I try to frame it for them as part of a bigger picture, a movement that includes everyone in their community.

## Talking To My Little Ones

“You guys are pretty healthy,” I explain to them, “and if you got the flu you’d probably just get better after a couple of days in bed.” (I didn’t tell them about the six children who have died so far in Canada from this year’s particularly nasty virus (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/flu-1.4975466>)).

“But other people don’t get better,” I continued. “If they’re already sick, or weak, they could get seriously ill.”

“Could they die?” asks Olive, my six-year-old.

“It’s rare, but yes, it’s possible.”

During the H1N1 outbreak of 2009, a friend of mine died from the flu (also something my wife and I haven’t told our kids). He was in his 20s and healthy, yet his body couldn’t stand up to that year’s powerful virus which disproportionately targeted young people.

While there’s no guarantee that the flu shot could have prevented my friend from getting sick and dying, the more people who get vaccines means the less likely that diseases like this will spread and mutate. That’s called “herd immunity (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-1-key-immunization-information/page-14-basic-immunology-vaccinology.html>).”

So, while I don’t give my kids a treat when they get their shots, I do make sure they feel like superheroes. When they bare their arms, they are courageously battling against a foe that wants to infect as many people as possible. When they brave the needle they are helping to protect their grandparents and other vulnerable people in their community.

And I feel like that’s something to celebrate; even if it hurts.

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