

Why Covid Has Broken Parents' Sense of Risk

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There was a brief, shining moment in early summer when the decisions around Covid and my family felt manageable. My husband and I were vaccinated and had returned to some of our favorite indoor activities, like stand-up comedy shows and the gym. Our kids were at a mostly outdoor day camp with procedures we trusted, and the local case rate was low.

But as July bled into August, and the threat of the Delta variant increased and news about breakthrough infections emerged, my understanding of the risk of a given activity for any of us — but especially my 8- and 5-year-olds, who are too young to be vaccinated — went completely haywire.

A mundane question we faced was: Should we let our kid go to a play date with a new friend? Well, let me just check the case rate in this ZIP code and multiply it by the number of pediatric hospitalizations, then subtract the loss of joy and normal socialization my child will undergo by missing out on yet another typical childhood experience.

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As Paul Slovic, the president of Decision Research, a nonprofit institute that studies decision-making, and a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, explained: Assessing new information is difficult mental work, and “the brain is lazy.” It is particularly hard for people to assess risk and act with compassion when we are bombarded with numbers, or as Dr. Slovic put it: “Our feelings don’t do arithmetic very well.”

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