

The Demonization of Dissent

Last week the *New York Times* [ran an article](#) in which it described the apparent radicalization of a group of parents from mainstream political persuasions to a single-issue anti-vaccine fringe.

It describes how these parents seemingly came together on social media out of a concern about the damage inflicted by lengthy school closures on their children, started to share notes and articles—“many of them misleading”—about school reopenings and the efficacy of vaccines and masks, fell “down an online rabbit hole” and a year later emerged as fully fledged members of a “destabilising new movement”—anti-mask and anti-vaccine—“narrowing their cause to a single-minded obsession over those issues.”

If you read the piece at face value you might be left with the impression that these parents are a homogenous, almost cultish group of outcasts who, having been “indoctrinated,” have metamorphosed into anti-vaxxers who “sought other parents online” to infect with their ideology.

It is by now a familiar narrative on both sides of the Atlantic that anyone who dares question, let alone challenge, the wisdom of giving healthy children the COVID-19 jab is labeled anti-vaccine, and “othered.” It is a slur I know only too well—having been vocal in the UK for the last fifteen months in questioning why otherwise healthy children needed a COVID vaccine, I’ve been labeled, lazily and erroneously, an “anti-vaxxer” and, almost comically, “pro-death.”

I spoke to Natalya Murakhver, one of the parents named in the article to hear her views. She tells me “I’m not anti-vaccine – in fact I’m fully vaccinated. I opposed vaccine mandates in the US simply because I thought the views of the VRBPAC committee should be followed – namely that pediatric vaccines

should not be mandated but should be individual decisions carefully made between pediatricians and parents and based on risk/benefit. These vaccines are life-saving vaccines for some people – but not for all people.”

Far from being fringe, the view that children do not need the COVID-19 jab, it turns out, represents either a significant minority (for older age cohorts) or indeed an overwhelming majority (for younger) of parents both [within the U.S.](#), the UK and elsewhere. Are the 95 percent of U.S. parents who have declined to get their 0-5 year olds vaccinated for COVID-19 ‘anti-vax?’ What about [the 89 percent of UK parents](#) who as of the end of July had declined vaccination for their 5-11 year olds?

Of course they aren’t. They are simply recognizing the reality that the extreme age discrimination of COVID makes vaccination unnecessary for the vast majority of otherwise healthy kids, as does infection-acquired immunity.

The liberal application of the anti-vaccine label to these parents starts to feel increasingly nonsensical. Indeed, it would brand entire countries ‘anti-vax’ (Denmark, say, where the director general of the Danish Health Authority has said he believes vaccinating children “was a mistake;” or Sweden, Finland and Norway which declined to jab kids under 12 in the first place), as well as vaccine advisory boards around the world.

And this is where we have got ourselves in an almighty mess.

The shaming of parents for asking questions and for making nuanced, parental decisions which they are clearly now not willing to change, is not only divisive, but dangerous, preventing for too long now legitimate debate among parents, professionals and media.

By lumping together parents who are raising reasonable, rational and indeed essential challenges to vaccine mandates

for children, with a tiny minority who oppose *all* vaccines on ideological grounds, we have allowed concerns about the COVID-19 jab to bleed into other vaccination programs where uptake rates sadly are tumbling fast.

It should not be remotely controversial to say that I am against the COVID-19 vaccine for my otherwise healthy child but for other childhood vaccines, as is the position taken by Natalya—"Routine childhood vaccinations are super important" she says, yet this is a degree of nuance currently not permitted by our bludgeoning public health messaging, or indeed a swath of media outlets.

There is now a stunning disconnect between the number of parents declining the C-19 vaccine and public health messaging which continues to eulogize it. That disconnect appears to be fueling a crisis of trust among parents in other undoubtedly essential vaccine programs—in fact so insidious is this myopic vax-evangelism that it risks creating a new and far more serious public health disaster for our next generation: the pandemic has driven the largest sustained decline in vaccination uptake for 30 years.

In the UK it was reported back in February 2021 that 15 percent of UK 5-year-olds have not had two doses of the MMR, a decline which [the BMJ attributes](#) to falling trust in vaccination alongside health service disruption, and polio has reemerged in major cities in [both the U.S.](#) and [UK](#).

Instead of shaming parents, how much better it would be to greet this undeniably growing cynicism with curiosity—why are so many parents rejecting this vaccine? What are the learnings that public health needs to take from that? Most importantly, what soul-searching and messaging is needed to restore trust in public health?

It is dangerously naive to dismiss this spike in vaccine hesitancy as the deluded actions of an indoctrinated minority

of crackpots who must be brought to their senses. Denouncing parents who raise reasonable questions and challenges about risk/benefit for their children as heretic anti-vaxxers, as the public health machine in the U.S. and UK has done repeatedly, is proving equally self-defeating.

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