

Their parents never got them vaccinated. As young adults, they faced a choice.

Some who received little to no vaccination in childhood sought out the shots themselves in adulthood — and risked family relationships.



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By Trisha Thadani

At 30 years old, Lacie Madison just assumed she was fully vaccinated her entire life. But when she got a job at a hospital and was required to check her immunity, the doctor called with shocking news: It appeared she was barely vaccinated as a child, if at all.

“I just said, ‘Are you kidding me?’” recalled Madison, now 39.

Madison, who was mostly home-schooled as a child in Montana, is part of a small but growing

population of U.S. adults who did not receive routine childhood vaccines — a result of parents skipping or delaying shots for their kids over religious or personal reasons, including concerns about safety.



Lacie Madison holds a photo of herself with a Band-Aid on her arm from a day she received vaccinations. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

As some states work to make it easier for parents to claim exemptions for many childhood vaccines — or seek to [eliminate school mandates entirely](#) — Madison’s experience is one that could become more common as today’s schoolchildren age into adulthood. Falling vaccination rates around the country mean more will grow up without protection from debilitating diseases until they are old enough to decide for themselves, typically at age 18. Delaying vaccines can have perilous long-term consequences, and some immunizations are less effective as people age.

Interviews with more than a dozen adults who went unvaccinated as children and some of their parents offer a glimpse into the subset of Americans who grew up in vaccine-skeptical households long before the coronavirus pandemic and Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. elevated those views.

Some didn't know the extent to which they were unprotected until enlisting in the military or health care fields, which often require proof of immunity to join. A few caught vaccine-preventable diseases and are still dealing with the fallout. Others chose not to tell their parents they were getting shots after turning 18 and confided in mentors or other family members as they made their appointments.

Immediately after learning about her lack of antibodies from her doctor in 2017, Madison scheduled the next available appointment at the hospital's clinic. According to medical records shared with The Washington Post, Madison then spent the next year catching up on immunizations for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR); chicken pox; and hepatitis B — viruses that have been largely controlled in the U.S. because of widespread immunization. She was nervous about the potential side effects, and braced for impact.

Instead, she said, she hardly felt more than a sore arm from receiving so many shots.

“I’m grateful that science and herd immunity kept me safe while I was unvaccinated,” said Madison, who now lives in Hampton, Virginia. “And I’m happy that I had the ability to amend that.”

While the vast majority of American parents support immunizations, a [Washington Post-KFF poll](#) conducted this summer found that 1 in 6 parents have delayed or skipped some vaccines for their children, excluding for the coronavirus or flu. The number of people exercising religious or personal exemptions has risen in 36 states and D.C., with 17 states reporting exemptions exceeding 5 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Public health professionals say vaccination rates could decline even further in the coming years, as Kennedy uses his platform to raise concerns — not borne out by scientific research — about the safety of vaccines.

The U.S. is experiencing the highest number of measles cases in 33 years as well as an elevated number of cases of pertussis — commonly known as whooping cough. Experts largely attribute falling vaccination rates to [misinformation](#), which accelerated during the pandemic, about the safety and effectiveness of certain vaccines.

For Madison's parents, Russ and Julie Pierry, the decision to forgo vaccinations for their children in the 1980s was rooted in mistrust of the medical system. In an interview, they said they were disturbed by the battery of shots recommended for their children and didn't trust their doctor to steer them in the right direction.

The Pierrys said Madison, their oldest child, received a few shots when she was born, though they did not know exactly which ones. As Madison grew, they ignored the recommended immunization schedule and boosters and got her a religious exemption for the one year they sent her to a Christian private school.

"We didn't have anything against the shots, political or religious," Julie Pierry said. "It just seemed like a waste of time."



Madison when she was a child in Montana. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

02/13/2017

Dear Ms. Madison,

Your varicella (chickenpox) test showed that you are not immune to chickenpox. To protect you from varicella, VUMC policy requires that you receive the varicella vaccination series, unless you are granted a medical exemption. Please come by Occupational Health to start your vaccine series on March 8, 2017 which is the same date that your MMR is due.

A letter Madison got in 2017 telling her she lacked immunity. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

Long-term consequences

In many ways, medical specialists say, vaccines are a victim of their own success. They have been so effective in controlling diseases like polio and smallpox that many people are unable to imagine how devastating such outbreaks can be for a community.

But for 26-year-old Emma Sonas, a childhood bout with whooping cough was so debilitating that she is still dealing with the consequences.

Sonas, who was delivered in a home birth, said she did not receive a single vaccine growing up. When she was 13, Sonas, along with her mom and siblings, caught whooping cough, a highly contagious respiratory infection that leads to uncontrollable coughing fits as the person gasps for air. Sonas's symptoms were so severe that she slept upright in her bed for months. Otherwise, she'd wake up and feel like she was drowning.

"My respiratory system has never been the same," she said. "The idea that a choice my parents made has resulted into something like this has been really hard to understand and deal with."

Sonas — who started catching up on her missed childhood vaccines in 2019, according to medical records — said she spent "a lot of time" being angry about her parents' decision. But she has since realized that they thought they were just doing what was best for her.

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"It is such a complicated thing to hold, because it was a choice that hurt me," she said.

In an interview, Sonas's mother, Christina, said she "sides with nature" and distrusts the companies behind the vaccines. Christina Sonas said she trusts the science behind the vaccines and got the coronavirus vaccine to help protect her immunocompromised family members, including her daughter. When her kids were growing up, she said, it did not feel necessary to vaccinate them because they were home-schooled and she took precautions to isolate them when they were sick.

But when her children came down with whooping cough, Christina Sonas — who also fell ill — said she felt like she "dropped the ball."

“I did feel as a non-vaccinating parent that I needed to be very attentive to my kids’ health,” she said. “It was part of my responsibility to them and to public health.”

The consequences of not receiving a vaccine on the recommended schedule can be severe, leaving people vulnerable to contagious diseases like whooping cough and measles, said James Campbell, a pediatric-infectious-disease specialist at the University of Maryland Children’s Hospital and School of Medicine. And some vaccines — like the one for HPV, which has the potential to prevent more than 90 percent of cancers caused by the virus, according to the CDC — are more effective when given at a younger age.

But for parents like Jeremy Newman, the vice president of policy and litigation at the Texas Homeschool Coalition, it’s a risk they are willing to take to have more of a choice in deciding what goes into their child’s body. Newman and his wife vaccinated their first child, who is now 7, but grew uneasy about the shots as they did more research into the potential side effects.

They immunized their two younger children with only the DTaP vaccine — which includes protection for tetanus — after consulting with a pediatrician who told them the others, like the ones for polio and measles, were unnecessary. Newman said that he is not opposed to vaccines but that the government mandates are “coercive” and have undermined his trust in them.

“The mandates are the thing that makes it so political right now,” Newman said.



Madison holds a vaccination card that shows a significant number of shots in 2017. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

‘Trust is everything’

Several adults spanning different generations said their parents were skeptical of the need to vaccinate against diseases like polio and measles — which were once common but now are relatively rare — because they didn't personally know anyone affected by them. Some grew up in rural areas where there was spotty access to medical care, or with parents who did not regularly take them to the doctor. Others said their parents believed in [debunked conspiracy theories](#) about the shots.

“They were like, ‘You’re going to die, you’re going to get autism,’” Jackson Veigel, 38, said of his parents’ aversion to vaccines when he was growing up.

Veigel said his parents filed a religious exemption for his public school in Los Angeles and later moved him to a Christian private school that was “on board with the whole anti-vax thing.” When he started getting his shots in his 20s — including for polio, whooping cough and measles, according to medical records — he said it felt like an act of rebellion toward his parents, whose views he now vehemently disagrees with.

“I was just like, ‘Load me up, Doc,’” he said.

The tension around vaccines had a shattering impact on some familial relationships. One woman in her 20s, who works for a federal health agency — and spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of personal and professional retribution — said her mother grew so skeptical about conventional medicine that she stopped bringing her children in for routine doctors’ visits. Eventually, the woman said, her mother became an anti-vaccine activist herself.

“I know every time I get a vaccine it’s a crack in the relationship with my mom,” said the woman, who is now pursuing a career in public health. “It’s like a betrayal to her.”

When Madison decided to get vaccinated, her parents were supportive of her decision, she said. But when the coronavirus pandemic struck, her parents, Russ and Julie Pierry, were initially apathetic about getting the vaccine as they were quarantining in rural Montana.

Just like 30 years earlier, they felt like they didn’t have enough information from a person or source they trusted on the shots. But they were persuaded to get the vaccine after their daughter shared information with them about its effectiveness and potential risks.

They said their daughter’s persistence has since helped them embrace vaccinations in general. If they had a baby today, Russ Pierry said, “it would be different.”

Today there are “so many distractions that you really gotta pay attention, and not fall for the propaganda,” he said. “Just give us the information and let us make our own decision.”