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SECOND & FLUME

by **Melissa Daugherty**
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Best laid plans

One recent evening, I told my son the good news. I explained that scientists had come up with a way to help him get the protection he'd need to be able to return to school after a nearly two-year absence. The rub: He'd have to get a couple of shots.

Henry knows all about needles. When he was a toddler, he had an extremely difficult time walking. Unfortunately, though my husband and I sought out specialist after specialist in Chico and elsewhere, it took years and one of the top hospitals in the country to get answers and the proper care.

Eventually, doctors at Stanford diagnosed Henry with advanced juvenile arthritis. Since then, every week, his dad and I administer a life-changing treatment, an injectable medication that reduces joint inflammation and pain.

Looking back, it makes sense that Henry had an autoimmune disease. From preschool onward, he picked up every illness that ran through each classroom. In his young life, he's battled six bouts of pneumonia, a few of them quite scary.

And that is why, when I began reading about the coronavirus in China back in January 2020, I became nervous about its potential spread to the States. Shortly thereafter, about a month before the state lockdown, I pulled then-8-year-old Henry from school.

On the bright side, he has never been physically healthier than during this time of isolation. Socially and emotionally, however, Henry has struggled. It's an understatement to say he misses his friends and teachers.

A few times, when I was exhausted and frustrated and he was sick of my company, I've briefly wondered if keeping him home was the right call. But then I thought back to his bouts with pneumonia. His labored breathing. His body going limp as I rushed him into the emergency room. The urgency with which doctors treated him.

I remembered what an Immediate Care physician said the first time Henry had pneumonia: It's the leading cause of death for kids with underlying health conditions.

According to a report published in the journal *Nature*, COVID-19 pneumonia is longer lasting and more harmful than other forms of pneumonia. In explaining how it attacks the body, researchers from Northwestern used an analogy about wildfires spreading throughout a forest—that this coronavirus takes hold in multiple small areas and lingers.

Children aren't immune to it. In fact, they can suffer long-term effects, including a condition called multisystem inflammatory syndrome (or MIS-C) that can result in severe symptoms, such as organ failure. Scientists are still figuring out the lasting effects in juveniles diagnosed with COVID-19. What they know is that those with underlying medical conditions—kids like Henry—are most at risk for severe illness.

I was elated when the Pfizer vaccine was approved for kids in his age range, feeling hopeful that Henry could soon return to school. But that feeling has been supplanted by concern about the Omicron variant, since vaccines haven't been tested against this brand-new strain.

Our plans for the coming months are now up in the air. I dread telling Henry. He was so brave when he got the first vaccine, all stemming from the idea of going back to school.

I know there are plenty of people who think our family's response to the pandemic is over the top. Some are easy to spot: They proclaim their "Faith over fear" or say things like "I trust my immune system." People with those convictions used to enrage me, but now I'm grateful they're outing themselves.

Fact is, they're the kind of folks who've helped the virus persist and evolve. They pose a danger to Henry and aren't welcome in his life. Whatever judgments they have about me are irrelevant.

I know what's at stake here and why it's important to trust medical experts who've dedicated their lives to saving others. I know what it's like to feel the life draining out of my child's body. Perhaps that's what it'll take for some people to understand how critical it is to defeat this disease. For their children's sake, though, I hope it doesn't come to that.

Melissa Daugherty is editor-at-large for the Chico News & Review