

CCRC feature: What about kids under 12? The importance of prioritizing young children and listening to their perspectives when lifting Covid restrictions

By Robyn Aaron, CCRC Board Member

Much of the public focus around COVID-19 vulnerability has been placed on seniors in our communities, and rightfully so. Research, and sadly, experience, has shown that the likelihood of hospitalization and death greatly increases with age. Thankfully, many of the oldest members of communities across Canada have started to receive COVID-19 vaccinations, and in some cases are now fully vaccinated. There are gaps and concerns in vaccine delivery: not all seniors are able to book appointments online, those living with disabilities may have challenges getting to clinics, underserved communities need to be prioritized, those living in high-risk neighbourhoods need accessible vaccination clinics, and specific efforts are required to ensure the hardest to reach are included. However, creative efforts to overcome these challenges appear to be making a difference, as the percentage of adult Canadians who have received their first dose continues to increase. And now, children and youth 12 – 17 years of age are starting to access COVID-19 vaccines as well.

The media has been doing a fairly good job of covering the challenges related to equitable vaccine roll out, and policy makers seem to be responding as difficulties arise. As more of the population is vaccinated, talk has turned to reopening. People are looking forward to reconnecting with friends, family, and neighbours. Communities want to support local businesses by shopping in person and people want to attend social gatherings. Children and adolescents want to be able to attend school safely. “Reopening” is a complex and multi-faceted discussion.

Often lost in the broader reopening discussion is the best interests of children under 12 years old, who are not yet eligible to receive a vaccine, along with their views, perspectives, and voices. Though some clinical trials are underway, at the time of writing, children younger than 12 are not on the cusp of being vaccinated and remain uniquely vulnerable. Their best interests must not be forgotten and their voices must be heard. One of those voices, is that of James. James, age 10, from Toronto, says that during the pandemic, he has missed playing soccer, seeing friends, and going to school in person. He is worried about his grandparents, and wishes he could go to sleep away camp this year.

Children and youth have paid a high cost during the pandemic, with school closures, increased stress and uncertainty within families, limited or non-existent access to extended families, friends, peers, and other significant adults in their lives, as well as heavy restrictions on accessing outdoor spaces for recreation and play. These impacts have been disproportionately felt by children and youth who are marginalized – those from Indigenous and racialized communities, newcomer children and youth, those with disabilities, and those living in poverty.

As vaccine rollout continues and reopening begins, it is important to remember that it is the responsibility of all of us who are eligible to be vaccinated to get a shot. Doing so helps protect young children who have sacrificed so much already to help keep all of us safe. This is particularly important for infants and young children who are immune compromised.

Many people in Canada have already had their first vaccine. Soon, people 18 years of age and older will be fully vaccinated and many children 12 - 17 years of age will receive their first dose. As we see a continued rollout of vaccines, we will start to resume a more normal lifestyle. As we do so, let's not forget to take precautions to protect our youngest children and to listen to their concerns and opinions about reopening - while also ensuring children's right to play and to [access outdoor spaces safely](#). Children have a right to physical and mental health, a right to protection, a right to play, a right to education, and a right to be heard. These rights belong to all children - including the very youngest.