Coronavirus: No, Esquire, We Don't Need to Lie to Our Kids About COVID or Hold Them Hostage Indoors

By Alex Berezow, PhD — August 3, 2020

There is a distinction between healthy concern for the coronavirus and deeply unhealthy obsession and paranoia. Guess which side Esquire magazine picked?

I'm now the father of an amazing little girl who is just now learning to talk. When I ask her to say, "Dada," she sometimes replies, "Mama." Despite this obvious prejudice, I love her to death, and my #1 job as her dad is to make sure she grows up healthy and smart.

Since February, our family has been stuck in Poland due to the massive travel disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Poland implemented a fairly harsh lockdown, but life now largely has returned to normal [2], though masks are required in public places indoors, 1.5-meter social distancing is expected, and mass gatherings are restricted.

I realize the situation is a lot different back home in the United States where the virus is out of control. But we now have a pretty good idea of the steps that all of us can take to mitigate its spread: Wear a mask, maintain distance, wash your hands. Coronavirus spreads far more easily indoors than outdoors, so going outside poses only a small risk.

Yet, an article [3] published in Esquire magazine sounds like it was written in preparation for the
Zombie Apocalypse. Its headline declares, "To Be a Parent Right Now Is To Be a Liar." Let's go through this bizarre article and inject some sanity into it. The author writes about his young son:

"After preschool was canceled and we all moved inside, he would look at the calendar and ask, 'When do you think the sickness will end?' He doesn't ask that anymore. Instead, when we go on a drive, once every Sunday, no stops, he'll point out places and say, 'Maybe next year we can go there.' The 7-Eleven. The library. The playground."

7-Eleven is pretty gross even when there isn't a pandemic, but there is no compelling reason to avoid the playground. If there are too many other kids not maintaining social distance, then leave. But to skip the playground entirely is nonsensical.

"His birthday was celebrated indoors. His grandma and cousins drove by, beeping."

I can understand not wanting a kid to see grandma (to prevent her from getting sick), but why should he be prevented from seeing other (presumably) young and healthy family members? Again, this is completely nonsensical.

"Think of the summers of your childhood: bike rides to the mall, icy movie theaters, endless time with friends. That's all gone this year."

True, we can't go to the movies right now. But we can still ride our bikes. And we can still see friends. Just pick the friends who are hygienic and obeying all the rules.

"Parents are left to make life and death decisions about whether to send their kids to school, or let them play on a playground..."

Letting children go to school or the playground is not a life-or-death decision for the kids. The data on this is unambiguous: The risk of death from coronavirus for kids is almost zero [4]. One estimate of the infection-fatality rate for 5- to 9-year-olds is 0.0016%. Kids are more likely to be murdered than to die of COVID-19. (Yes, really. In 2018, there were 289 kids in the age 5-14 demographic who were murdered [4]; so far this year, 19 have died of COVID.)

The biggest concern in regard to children is their ability to spread the virus to other people, like grandma or a teacher. An equally big concern is the damage that we're inflicting on them by preventing their social and educational development.
Being a parent during COVID is to be a liar. You tell your children not to worry while you stay up late, your bedroom lit by a never-ending doomscroll.

Stop. There is a distinction between healthy concern for the coronavirus and deeply unhealthy obsession and paranoia. The American media's penchant for pandemic porn [5] deserves much of the blame for the latter.


Links