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Slow Down on Lifting Covid-19 Mandates – Children Under Five Still at Risk

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3-Year Old Daycare Program.

Mask and vaccine mandates are being rolled back by Mayor Eric Adams, Governor Kathy Hochul, and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy. They are moving too fast. Mandates should not be universally lifted until 100% of our populations including children younger than five had an opportunity to at least choose to be vaccinated and that is not the case right now.

Children under the age of five are not eligible to be vaccinated for Covid-19. There are over half a million children in this age group in NYC alone. The F.D.A will not meet until at least April to decide if a Covid-19 vaccination is safe and effective for children younger than five. This means that babies and toddlers, who may require 3 rounds of shots, won't have a chance to be fully vaccinated until most likely Memorial Day. If this is the case, why are we talking about removing mandates now? These mandates, especially mask mandates are the only defense our babies and toddlers presently have against Covid-19. Our leaders are not paying enough attention to protecting this age group by removing mandates in daycares and for all children 2 years old and up.

There have been 307 deaths nationwide among children 4 years old and under and many others have experienced severe reactions according to the CDC. Even those with mild cases have developed long term effects. By removing mandates, we are drastically limiting the ways parents can shield their babies from Covid-19. We are taking away parents' choices and creating situations where they must live in fear that their children will become one of those statistics.

Removing mandates too soon makes children under five extremely vulnerable. Although I believe covid-19 vaccines should be required for all children, some parents may not. By lifting the mask mandate too soon, parents are left with absolutely no choice. I can try having my 3-year-old wear a mask still, but he will want to copy his friends who choose not to. And my 5-month-old in daycare, who is too young for a mask will be completely exposed. The risk of contracting Covid-19 becomes greater when those around you are not masked even if you are.

Parents with young children are still living as if it were March 2020. Parents can still get Covid-19 and give it to their kids, even if they wear masks and get triple vaccinated. Mandate removal exposes the parents more, which in turn expose their children more, as well as their caregivers. These parents feel forgotten and left behind. They are being told its time to return to in person work, it's OK to ride mass transit, its safe to send children to daycare. But when the parents, children or teachers are exposed, daycares close, and parents have to take extra personal days while the unvaccinated children have to quarantine, in some instances for as many as 21 days. Even as other Covid-19 statistics are improving, these issues are still a regular occurrence for those families with children under the age of 5.

As leaders are weighing the benefits to lifting vaccine and mask mandates to please take a pause and a good hard look at how these decisions will affect families with young children unequipped with the choice to protect themselves. Although it may be time to ease back some mandates, such as in bars and restaurants, please make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Scaling back mandates for places like daycares, mass transit systems, movie theaters, and indoor children recreation facilities should be left in place until at least summer 2022 when we can hope vaccines will be widely available for everyone. Please make the choice to protect those who cannot yet choose to protect themselves.

By: **Brian J. Kaszuba**, Associate Director of the Center for NYC Law at New York Law School.