

- Virus

A priority to protect kids from Delta

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As people struggle through lockdown, parents of young children have an extra worry on top of everything else. Children aged over 12 can at least now be vaccinated alongside adults. But what about younger family members?

The positive case of a five-month-old baby at Middlemore draws attention to the question of whether children under 12 should be vaccinated.

In Fiji, a six-month-old baby and an 11-year-old have been among hundreds of people to die from Delta. There have been cases of young children in hospital on ventilators in New South Wales, where hundreds of children aged under 10 have been infected. The US is currently grappling with a surge in cases among children.

In Auckland up to Sunday, 141 out of 922 cases have involved infected children aged nine and younger; that's 15.3 per cent of the total. Under-30s make up 64.9 per cent of the overall number. Data suggests Delta is more transmissible among people aged under 40 than the original virus. The younger age group is least likely to have been vaccinated, and are highly social and mobile. Young kids in particular generally struggle with the protective tools adults have been using such as masks, social distancing and good hygiene. They

also have family members who can spread it to them. But health experts say while children can get infected and spread the virus, their cases are usually quite mild.

The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that five million US children have been infected and at least 444 have died. There have been no deaths of people aged under 50 from Covid in New Zealand.

For all the reassuring numbers this is an emotional matter for individual families. There's a vulnerability in relying on others to not put yourself or loved ones at risk. What if children are unlucky enough to fall on the wrong side of fate?

The general approach health authorities have taken is to stress the need for teens and adults to get vaccinated as a shield for the young.

Director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield said a US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention study showed how important high vaccination rates were. "This study shows emphatically that US states with high vaccination rates had fewer hospital admissions in younger children than states with lower vaccination rates." Vaccine trials in young children expected to be completed this month. Medsafe has yet to receive an application from Pfizer to vary approval of its vaccine for the under-12s. Reuters reports Pfizer will soon have data covering children aged five to 11.

Currently the best defensive wall children can have is for those older than them to get vaccinated. If vaccine safety is established for the under-12s, and regulators and the Government approve the shots, kids will get personal protection.

Ultimately, as with everything in this pandemic, it comes down to human nature and people either doing what's best for them and others — or not.