Why these physicians signed their son up for COVID-19 vaccine trial

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Dr. Sarah Selby (left) and Dr. Luke Selby (right) with son Andrew after his first Moderna COVID-19

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vaccination.

Nine months after adult Americans began receiving their COVID-19 vaccines, children under the age of 12 are still ineligible for immunization, leaving parents worried their children might get sick or get others sick.

At the urging of federal regulators, Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna expanded the size of their COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials for children ages 6–11. That’s when AMA members Luke V. Selby, MD, MS, and Sarah T. Selby, DO, decided to enroll their 8-year-old son Andrew in a Moderna COVID-19 vaccine clinical trial.

More than 4.59 million children in the U.S. have become infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus since the COVID-19 pandemic began, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. That number has risen recently, though, with children making up a higher proportion of those who are seriously ill from COVID-19. With many adults vaccinated against COVID-19 and the highly contagious and dangerous Delta variant accounting for most of the infections in the country, about 180,000 children have been infected in the past week.

After the first appointment, Andrew was “actually most concerned about the blood draw … and that’s obviously a little bit more invasive and time intensive than a quick poke in the arm for a shot,” said Dr. Sarah Selby, an emergency physician in Kansas City. “Because he is over 7, he also had to provide assent for participating in this research study, so that was pretty exciting.”

“We were a little nervous that when he got the option, he would say no. But he was really excited, and he knew he could do it, so he listened to all of the consents and what was going to be done for the whole study, which is 13 months,” she added, noting that “he got to sign his own name saying he was ready for this study.”

“Then as soon as they finished, he was extremely excited and had a big smile on his face,” said Dr. Sarah Selby, adding that they took a selfie together to commemorate the moment.

“We each have the selfies we took when we got our coronavirus shots … and now we have a fun group selfie with Andrew, not only with the one Band Aid for the shot, but the Band Aid for the blood draw too,” echoed Dr. Luke Selby, a surgical oncologist, also in Kansas City. “And we’re all masked, but you can tell that he’s got a good smile.”

In a recent discussion, Dr. Luke Selby and Dr. Sarah Selby shared more about why they made the family decision to have Andrew participate in the Moderna COVID-19 trial.
This is the right thing to do

The biggest reason for enrolling Andrew in the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine clinical trial? “It’s the right thing to do because COVID-19 is bad,” said Dr. Luke Selby. “Even before the Delta variant, we knew that when it infected kids, it wasn’t a free ride.

“And the longer you study something, the more information you get about it, and it came with long-term consequences for children,” he added. While the Selbys didn’t have the opportunity to participate in any of the adult vaccination trials, Dr. Sarah Selby was among the first to get vaccinated in Ohio, where the family moved before moving to Kansas City recently.

Reasons kids should get vaccinated

“We believed in [the vaccine] and as we’ve learned more about the disease in children and the need to control and eventually eradicate it, it was clear that vaccination was something that was going to be coming to kids eventually,” Dr. Luke Selby explained. “This was sort of a put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is situation, where if we think it's important in the theoretical sense and we believe in medical research—we should do it.”

“We're lucky enough that our kids are young and healthy, so they have no contraindication—there are very few reasons to not get the vaccine and they don't have any of them,” he added. “So, if we want them to get it, we believe they should get it and we know the type of study that's needed to prove that they really should get it, why not put them in it?”

It's an educational opportunity

Leading up to their decision, they read Andrew the book Baby Medical School: Vaccines, by Cara Florance, PhD, and John Florance, MD. This helped provide an educational opportunity for vaccines.

“They get the normal childhood vaccines—whenever they’re due—and a flu shot every year, and like every kid, they don't love it, but they know it’s important and they know that we are doctors and that we get it and we think it's important,” explained Dr. Luke Selby and Dr. Sarah Selby. “In the run up to getting a shot, we’ve been talking a lot more about why it’s important to get the shot, but also why it’s important to help scientists do research—to see if the vaccine is safe and see if the vaccine helps kids not get coronavirus.”
“We have told Andrew that this is a really cool, important thing to do, and that he's probably going to be the first kid in his school to get the coronavirus shot just like mom was one of the first people at her hospital to get the coronavirus shot,” Dr. Luke Selby added, proudly noting that this is “something that he is going to get to tell people forever.”

The AMA has developed frequently-asked-questions documents on COVID-19 vaccination covering safety, allocation and distribution, administration and more. There are two FAQs, one designed to answer patients’ questions (PDF) and another to address physicians’ COVID-19 vaccine questions (PDF).