**Vaccinate for The Children of Alabama**

**By: Dr. Marsha Raulerson, Pediatrician in Brewton, Alabama and Vice Chairman, Children First Board of Directors.**

A month ago, we thought things were getting better. We could take off our masks around vaccinated friends, we could go out to eat— we felt safer going to church and to the grocery store. Then the Delta variant hit and it’s a game changer, especially for children. Because of low vaccination rates the virus was circulating widely in our community—then it mutated, and we have Delta Covid. We are on the verge of having schools shut down again. Delta Covid is so much more contagious, and it seems to be hitting children much harder. Covid patients are filling up our hospitals again. Children and teachers are being sent home. Last week in the United States there were more than 121,000 new cases among kids.

The Covid-19 pandemic has taken its toll on all of us. We have felt powerless to deal with daily frustrations including loss of work, inadequate childcare, putting off family vacations and for some having adequate food. But for many this pandemic has also meant seeing family members and friends get very sick and even dying.

In the last few weeks, we have seen a dramatic uptick in cases of Covid mostly due to the Delta variant. This virus seems even more contagious and is infecting children in increasing numbers. Because people infected with Delta carry much higher levels of virus it can spread quickly and infect more people. We have just learned that people who have been fully vaccinated can have a milder illness but still spread the virus.

Late on an August Saturday night I saw a 7-week-old baby in the Emergency Department. She was fussy, had a 102 temp and was Covid positive. She was feeding well and seemed stable. But because this is new to me, I consulted a pediatric infectious disease specialist. He told me the child needed several blood studies to rule out inflammation of the heart. He is treating a three-week-old hospitalized with the Covid virus who has serious heart issues. Although the baby had already been stuck several times, I was forced to draw more blood myself for those studies. Thankfully, they were normal. I explained to the parents that she would need to be followed very closely for several weeks for any of the serious complication’s children are known to have after an acute Covid infection. All last week I have needed to test children for Covid—several are sick with this virus and have exposed others.

We need all hands-on deck to keep our schools open. This is urgent. Everyone age 12 and over need to be vaccinated. It takes 5 weeks to be fully immunized after that first shot. And we all need to wear masks. Kids do this very well when they follow the lead of adults. Masks are safe and have shown over and over that they decrease the spread of respiratory viruses.

There is not yet a vaccine for children younger than 12. How can we protect them? First, stop this circulating virus by everyone 12 and over being vaccinated. Wear a mask, which is recommended for everyone ages 2 and older. Wash hands frequently and practice distancing as much as possible

What makes Alabama special? We are a caring bunch. We look out for our neighbors; we love our kids. We can do this! Get vaccinated, wear a mask!

I went to college for four years, did two extra years of premed courses, went to medical school for four years and then did three years of pediatric residency. I have served as president of the Alabama Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics, The Medical Association of the State of Alabama, and VOICES for Alabama’s Children. I’ve chaired the Committee on Federal Governmental Affairs for the American Academy of Pediatrics and testified before Congress several times as an advocate for children. Currently, I serve as Vice Chairman on the Children First Board of Directors.

I continue to feel called to my role as a physician for children in Brewton, where I have practiced since 1981. It has been a great privilege to care for your children. Please trust me now and get your vaccine as soon as possible. Together, we can stop the spread of Covid-19, but it is up to you.

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Children First is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to improving the lives of Alabama's children and families through advocacy, awareness, and accountability on legislative issues that directly impact their daily lives. Children First has been one of, if not the, leading advocate for the well-being of children in the state of Alabama. Children First was formed because our states’ leaders and child advocates saw a need to advocate for children in the halls of Alabama’s legislature. For more information, please visit [www.alabamachildrenfirst.com](http://www.alabamachildrenfirst.com/).