

Bucks County teen traveled to Philadelphia to get vaccinated against his parents' wishes

February 21 2022, by Nina Feldman



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

High school junior Nicolas Montero stays busy. He runs track, works night and weekend shifts at Burger King, and keeps on top of his schoolwork at Neshaminy High School in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

But Nicolas' packed schedule is also strategic: It's a way to stay out of the house.

Nicolas and his parents are separated by a widening political and cultural rift: His parents are a part of a small but vocal minority who oppose COVID-19 vaccinations and have refused to let him get the shots.

"The thing about these beliefs is that they alternate by the day," said Nicolas, who is 16. "It's not one solid thing that they're going with, so it's just really baseless. It's like one thing they see on Facebook, and then they completely believe it."

The impasse eventually led to an act of quiet defiance: Nicolas traveled to Philadelphia, where a little-known regulation permits children 11 and older to be vaccinated without [parental consent](#).

Not all states require parental consent for vaccination. In Oregon, teens 15 and up can consent to their own medical care, including inoculations. Rhode Island and South Carolina allow 16-year-olds to get COVID-19 vaccinations on their own. In Delaware, you need to be only 12 to get vaccines related to sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

That's the case as well in California, for those 12 or older who would like to get vaccines for STIs. But now California state lawmakers are considering a bill that would allow those minors to consent to all Food and Drug Administration-approved vaccines, including the COVID vaccines.

In Alabama, the law tightened during the pandemic. Though the age of consent for all other medical care is 14, a new law says Alabama youths under 19 need parental consent for COVID vaccines.

A November 2021 KFF poll found that 30% of parents with 12- to

17-year-olds said they will definitely not get their children vaccinated. In light of this, two National Institutes of Health scholars wrote a piece in The New England Journal of Medicine advocating for states to expand their statutes to include COVID vaccines as a medical treatment to which minors can consent.

A House Divided

Nicolas said he thinks most of his parents' beliefs about the vaccine come from social media.

"I try to explain to them that the vaccines are safe. They're effective," Nicolas said. "I try to explain that we know people that have been vaccinated, even our own family members who've been vaccinated for months and experienced no side effects. But nothing seems to get through to them."

Nicolas' parents did not respond to multiple attempts by WHYY News to speak to them for this article.

Though he found a way to change his own situation, Nicolas worried about teens who can't travel to a place where the laws are different. "I know that this is something that teenagers all across the country are experiencing right now," Nicolas said.

So he penned an op-ed in his [high school](#) paper, The Playwickian, advocating for the age of consent for vaccines in Pennsylvania to be lowered to 14.

Last summer, after school let out, he didn't need to be in the suburbs to go to class, so he asked his aunts if he could visit them in Philadelphia.

"He gets to roam the city, get the city life. He loves that," said Nicolas'

aunt Brittany Kissling, who lives in Philly's Port Richmond neighborhood. "The kid did not want to leave."

A week turned into the entire summer.

While Nicolas was staying in Philadelphia, bouncing between his two aunts' houses, his friends were getting their first COVID shots. He was worried he might get sick. Worse, he was concerned he might transmit a coronavirus infection to his elderly grandmother.

"My abuela, she's completely vaccinated, boosted and everything," said Nicolas. But he said he was still worried he could transmit a breakthrough infection.

So he started doing some research. And he found the handful of states that allow teens to get vaccines without parental consent.

To his surprise, Nicolas discovered that a bill to change the law in Pennsylvania had been introduced in the state House of Representatives. If the measure were to become law, it would mean that anyone 14 and older could give informed consent to be vaccinated for any vaccine recommended by the U.S. Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.

As his research deepened, he learned that not only was it possible for minors to get vaccinated without parental consent in other states, it was legal in Philadelphia.

In 2007, the city's Board of Health passed a regulation that allows any minor who's at least 11 to get vaccinated without a parent, provided the young person can give informed consent.

Philadelphia Health Commissioner Cheryl Bettigole said the regulation

is designed to remove any additional barriers to vaccination.

"It can be very difficult, especially for lower-income parents, to get time off work to go to those appointments," Bettigole said. "These are low-risk interventions. It just makes it easier for parents and families to be able to make sure their kids are vaccinated."

The regulation took effect the year after the FDA approved a three-shot regimen of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine for young people, recommended in the years before they become sexually active.

It is common for states and municipalities to create specific legislation for minors with the aim of increasing access to vaccines that prevent sexually transmitted infections, said Brian Dean Abramson, an author and adjunct professor of vaccine law at Florida International University College of Law.

"The rationale behind this was that you may have children who are being abused and don't want their parents necessarily to be informed of the fact they're seeking medical interventions for that, or children who may be sexually active and are afraid that their parents will react very negatively to that if they seek some kind of medical treatment," Abramson said.

In turn, said Abramson, those policies have laid the groundwork for children to get vaccinated in the event of a disagreement like the one between Nicolas and his parents.

Practicing Self-Care

Nicolas was thrilled to learn of Philadelphia's regulation. One summer afternoon while his aunt was at work, Nicolas found a Philadelphia pop-up clinic offering vaccines. He was anxious on his bus ride there—not

about needles or side effects, but that his parents would somehow catch him and prevent him from getting his second shot.

He knew his aunts would support his being vaccinated—both of them had been, and Kissling manages a pediatrics office. But he was worried that if his aunts knew, word would get back to his parents. So, he didn't tell them ahead of time.

He returned to Bucks County for the start of the school year and arranged for a weekend visit in early September to see his aunts and grandmother again. He planned the trip just in time for his second dose.

"I did feel really liberated when I got my second shot," Nicolas said. "I felt like I was protected."

After that second shot, Nicolas told his aunts he had gotten vaccinated; they were amazed.

"He was so proud," recalled Kissling. "He had his card, and we were like, 'Wait, when did this happen? How did this happen?'"

Just before Thanksgiving, Nicolas' parents found out. They reacted the way Nicolas and his aunts worried they would: Kissling said Nicolas' mother accused her sisters of influencing him and of being neglectful enough to allow him to get vaccinated. The tension has grown to the point where Nicolas says he can't even speak to his parents.

Kissling said her family rarely discussed politics until recently. Now, she said, it's hard for the whole family to spend time together. She has left in the middle of dinners to drive home to Philadelphia because the discussion got so heated. She's not expecting a resolution anytime soon—her family is one that's more likely to sweep conflict under the rug than resolve it, she said.

"Now, there's a divide," said Kissling. "It's sad because, at the end of the day, family should be family."

To cope with the tension at home, Nicolas has doubled down on his extracurriculars: He's learning to pole-vault for the track team. He joined the school paper, on top of taking part in environmental and language clubs.

Each evening after school, he lays claim to one of the private rooms at the public library, where he spreads out his books across a small desk and diligently does his homework. Recently, he was working on a paper about the history of U.S. involvement in Puerto Rico, where his grandmother is from. He was thumbing through a thick book on the Puerto Rican independence movement, marked with dozens of sticky notes every few pages.

"When I started reading this book, like almost every single page, my mouth is just wide open," Nicolas said. "Like, I couldn't believe that these things happened to my people."

He hopes to visit the island one day, and his grandmother is teaching him to cook Puerto Rican dishes in the meantime. They can now spend time together without him worrying as much that he might infect her.

Nicolas has ambitions to go to college in Washington, D.C. From there, he said, he wants to go to law school.

Kissling said she's inspired by her nephew's independence. But she knows he's still a kid who needs support and guidance. That's why she tries to stay in touch with him every day: texting, joking, asking him what he wanted for Christmas. (She expected AirPods or Amazon gift cards. Instead, he sent her a wish list of more history books about Puerto Rico.)

"He plays it off with a smile, and he laughs about it, and he said, 'Aunt Britt, it's just giving me more motivation to do what I need to do and get where I want to get,'" Kissling said of her nephew's fraught relationship with his parents. "But, deep down, I know it has to affect him. I'm 34. It would affect me."

©2022 Kaiser Health News.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Bucks County teen traveled to Philadelphia to get vaccinated against his parents' wishes (2022, February 21) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-bucks-county-teen-philadelphia-vaccinated.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
