

# Mountain Parent

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# WHAT IF HE WERE YOUR CHILD?

By Allison Johnson

Most parents look forward to snow in the mountains with joy. They revel in the promised pleasures of skiing, sledding, and sipping hot chocolate by the fire.

I am not one of them.

I look at those snowflakes and that ever-descending snow line on the mountains above my house and wonder, *how bad will it get this year? How many days will it be this time?* For me, winter is not a celebration of snowy wonder but a time to batten down the hatches, stock up on orange juice and Kleenex, and pray that this season will be kinder to my child. Perhaps this year we'll manage to reverse the trend of increasingly serious illnesses that have plagued us for the past several winters.

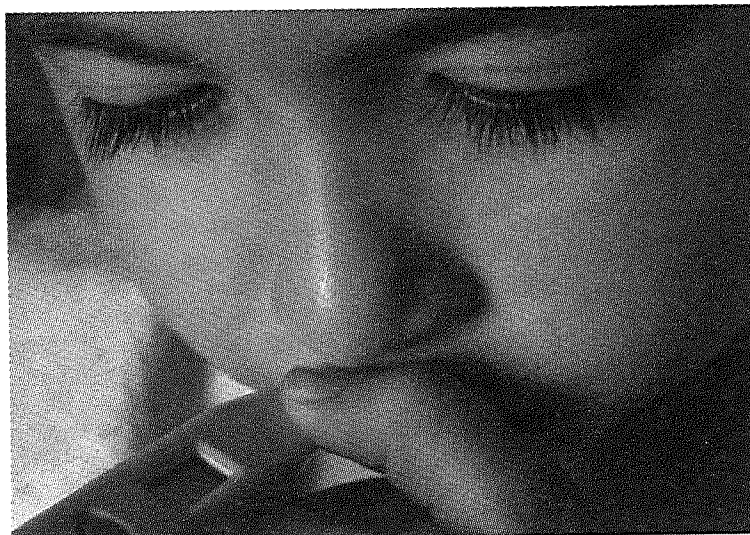
When my son was only a month old, he contracted Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). RSV is a highly contagious and common virus that is the leading cause of bronchiolitis, pneumonia and serious respiratory problems in young children. In most cases, the virus only causes cold-like symptoms, but in children under four it can lead to hospitalization.

Since infancy, Nathaniel has had RSV three times, pneumonia twice and three separate hospital stays resulting in 13 combined days at Aspen Valley Hospital. I can't even bear to think of how many days of preschool he missed due to colds last year or how many hours he spent hooked up to a nebulizer receiving medicine simply so that he could breathe.

Due to Nathaniel's history, each cold must be taken seriously. We have a detailed medical plan to help him through the cold and flu season, but any new cough shrills like a fire alarm in my head. Will this one progress as just another cold, or will it return him to the hospital? Has that cough worsened? Is his breathing labored? Can he catch his breath? The strain of standing on that knife's edge and never knowing at the onset if he'll recover like a normal child or need hospitalization by the week's end is unbearable.

Why share my story now? Because each winter the question inevitably comes up: when is a child too sick for school? I've often heard parents and even doctors suggest that it is perfectly acceptable to send a child to school with the common cold. In response, I say this: one child's cold is another's hospitalization.

Until parents have had to pin down their screaming child's head while nurses stick a six-inch-long suction pipe up his nose, they cannot appreciate the anguish a simple cold can inflict. Until they have watched that child's oxygen rate plummet to dangerously low levels and endured the emergency wail of that oximeter machine hour after agonizing hour, I can understand why they might think a cold is just a cold.



And until they've had to answer their child's petrified request to "please don't let them put me in the bubble tent again," parents can't understand the horror and dread that a common cold can cause. Nathaniel's hospital bills easily topped \$20,000 last year, and his situation is not unique. Annually, 125,000 children are hospitalized due to RSV.

The first time Nathaniel was hospitalized, my husband was on his way to his grandmother's funeral. He had to make the excruciating decision of whether to honor his grandmother's death or his son's

health. No one should have to make such a choice, but sickness inconveniences everyone. At the same time, no innocent child should have to suffer what mine has.

Having seen first-hand the damage a common cold can wreak, I find it irresponsible to suggest that sick children should be sent to school. Such a position ignores the numerous factors that influence the spread of colds, such as the sanitary and hygienic conditions and practices of various schools and children's diverse levels of interaction and schedules. When doctors weigh in with such generic advice, their declarations can be viewed as a *carte-blanche* excuse to send a child to school no matter how sick he is. And since RSV only can be diagnosed through a nose swab test, parents cannot know whether their children have a cold or this potentially more harmful virus.

Keeping a child home from school when obviously sick is not about the total elimination of illness. It should be about containment, courtesy and responsibility to others in the community. It's about minimizing the odds of a cold's spread and realizing that sickness creates a chain of inconvenience and stress that at the very least may be slowed down by conscientious parenting. If just one child is spared hospitalization, isn't that worth it?

At age four, Nathaniel has progressed the way his doctor predicted back when he caught RSV the first time as a newborn. He's been diagnosed with a cold-triggered reactive airways disease and could have asthma for the rest of his life. Asthma has many causes and triggers, but it was what looked like the common cold that sent him into this awful spiral in the first place. So on behalf of my son and others like him, please ask yourself this question before bringing a sick child to school this winter: what if Nathaniel were your child?

Allison Johnson lives in Carbondale and could easily win an amateur chicken noodle soup cook-off with all her experience nursing her family through the cold and flu season.



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