

Transcript of Oral History of Lizza Weir

Interviewer: Ellen Balleisen

Interviewee: Lizza Weir

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Abstract: Toddlers are natural explorers who run, touch and sniff as they learn about the world. But these behaviors can be dangerous during a pandemic. Parents of toddlers need to weigh the risks of catching Covid against their children's developmental needs. Lizza Weir, whose daughter Simone was 16 months when Covid first arrived in New York, talks about the hard choices she's been facing.

Ellen Balleisen 00:02

Hello, I'm Ellen Balleisen. And I'm here with Lizza Weir, who is going to talk about her experiences being a mom to a two year old, one and a half to two year old during the pandemic. So, to get started, could you just state your name, where you live and who's in your immediate family?

Lizza Weir 00:27

Sure, I am Lizza Weir I live in the northern section of the Bronx northeast section of the Bronx. And I live with my partner, Nicholas, as well as my now two and a half year old Simone.

Ellen Balleisen 00:43

Okay. And how old was Simone, when New York City shut down in March 2020?

Lizza Weir 00:52

She was about 16 months old. So just shy of a year and a half?

Ellen Balleisen 01:00

And in what ways was it fairly easy to parent Simone during the first few months in the pandemic?

Lizza Weir 01:12

Easy to parent might be an oxymoron for some. But of course, I think, you know, for us, you know, primarily a function of our kind of privilege, in many respects, but just awesome in the sense that we were both able to work remotely. And that both of our work sort of just like, seemed to slow down significantly during the transition. And the shutdown, I think, you know, we did have it far easier, more easy than than, I would say, most families. We live in a fairly kind of suburban area of the Bronx, so we have a yard. We weren't like cooped up, like many of my friends in in the city who were, you know, living with toddlers in one bedroom apartments, and I'm sure many who were even more cramped. So, yeah, I think we were kind of able to, like insulate ourselves more from the devastating reality of the world than many people. And also, you know, Simone was only I said, 16 months, and

then later, probably thought, from 16 months, and then for four months, so until she was about 20 months, we had her home because the daycare had closed. And she, you know, at 16 months, she was maybe a little sad and confused to like, leave school, but you know, she wasn't, she was definitely happy to be at home with us. I mean, that was kind of ideal for her. And she was completely oblivious to what was going on. I mean, she was just young. So we there was no explaining what was happening. And in her entire living memory was adults wearing masks, you know, there was no explaining what was normal, because this was her kind of only normal. And, you know, she, she just was too young for any explanations that you would have given another child. And in other words, she kind of just had like, no idea what was going on no idea what it was, what she was missing. And so I think that made it far easier for us, especially during the beginning of the year, when we had her home, as I said, from March through the beginning of July.

Ellen Balleisen 03:36

And how did that change as she got older? And what risks did you need to balance as a parent of a toddler during the pandemic?

Lizza Weir 03:48

It definitely changed. I mean, I think the greatest risk, of course, was the one that most everybody felt during the time, you know, primarily that we would get sick or die of COVID. And, you know, although the news was kind of there was definitely news certainly of severe reactions, you know, that children were suffering. I guess, in my mind, I felt like those were not as likely and I don't mean to diminish, you know, the suffering that that parents has had families have had. But I guess that it didn't strike me as our primary concern. I think I was mostly worried about our health. Nick and my health and and I think Nick is more high risk even. But anyway, so like, you know, as adults, we can control our distancing and, you know, do some measures of protection and follow the standards but with a toddler, you just like can't at all, I mean, it's very anti toddler to, to stay away from things or people or, you know, it's just, it's you just can't control that. So I think that age in particular is a challenge. Whereas with older kids, you can kind of teach them about a mask and how to stay away. And I think even, you know, I have friends whose kids are as young as three who were very responsible about distancing and kind of understood, generally why they needed to do it and remembered a time when they didn't have to do it anyway. So I think, you know, we had to kind of balance two questions, two major questions. One was, would we send her to school and take on that risk? And then two, would we have any degree of socialization outside of her school? So with the first question, I think it was just like, at some point, there, there felt like there was very little choice. We just felt as though in order for us to be able to work we had to send her to school. I know not all families have made that choice. But we did feel like it was kind of a necessary risks that we had to take on. And granted, you know, with the daycares, I think some daycares do require young young children to wear masks, I've later found out but our daycare did not. So this was just kind of like crossing our fingers. I actually read like a lot of studies online. As much as I could find that. I think were either CDC or other studies. I know that economist Emily Oster had written some articles, I tried to find as much of the research as possible, however little research there was on going

back to school. And it basically sounded as though it was a low risk, not zero, but a low risk. Anecdotally, I later found out that like at least seven people, I think, that I know, have had children who got COVID at school and brought it home to families. And so I kind of question now that research, but anyway, I did, you know, that was probably the biggest question that we had to ask ourselves was whether to send her to school. And then, you know, I think because she was in school, I think one of the things that did make it hard, and you know, I was sort of like constantly, I can't say I was afraid of her at all times. But I there was this tension that I felt, you know, she was sort of our little vector of potential illness. And there, you know, there was one time when she woke up crying in the middle of the night, and this was in December. So numbers were getting high, and I was already kind of on edge about sending her to school. And she woke up crying, and she said, so she kind of sat up in bed and said, I have a stuffy nose, my nose is runny, which is something she kind of says, if she's crying, and her nose is runny. But I was like immediately fearful, and kind of didn't know what to do. Like, should I take her should I get near her, should I bring her into bed with us, which is kind of what I probably would do if she was really upset. And I think it was like, a very defining moment for me as far as whether I would keep her in school or not. Because I certainly didn't want to be fearful of my own child. And even more terrifying for me was kind of whether she would perceive that I was afraid of her for any reason, or psychologically, if she would, you know, feel some kind of repulsion or, you know, sort of like something that she was doing wrong. I think kids usually just internalize everything. And so it really was an emotional experience for me. And in the end, I just took her into bed with me and, you know, kind of hoped for the best. But I just had this momentary, you know, reserve reservation and kind of like, uncertainty. And so it was it was later in that week and through another series of events to happen, but it was later that week that I decided to take her out of school. That was then at the beginning of January, when the numbers just got too high for my anxiety level. Anyway, so so. Yeah, I think just the risk of whether or not to have her in school was probably the biggest kind of like, decision we had to make And, and dealing with and sort of like just knowing that, you know, I couldn't really face not being able to take care of her or and I've had friends who had to quarantine from their children, toddlers during this time, and then I have other friends whose children got COVID. And they decided not to quarantine from their children. So different families and parents have kind of negotiated that differently. But it was a question that I didn't want to have to have to confront. So removing her from school felt like the least anxiety producing option.

Ellen Balleisen 10:48

How long did you keep her out of school?

Lizza Weir 10:50

So then we had her so we had a slowly out all of January, and probably like half of February, until I felt that the numbers were kind of starting to improve. It was maybe more wishful thinking than the reality of the numbers. I kept looking and expecting them to go down probably like all New Yorkers, like it's been sort of a- I think we've, we've been hopeful, but the numbers don't want to go down quite as much as we want or want them to.

Ellen Balleisen 11:24

And by this point, she was old enough, I think to have some understanding of what was going on, how did you explain it to her?

Lizza Weir 11:36

There are ways in which we can explain a general sickness and keeping each other healthy, and why we're wearing masks. As far as understanding, you know, even the idea of COVID, or this specific sickness, it's, I really don't think I've done either good job, or if or maybe it's even not possible for her age group. Still, what she does understand is that, you know, I mean, I think she understands more about sort of just social interaction, and I think she needs school more. I think that structures like, way more helpful now. And in fact, I think that's probably why I send her back mid February, as opposed to waiting longer. I think I just realized sort of emotional and socially, she really needed that environment, I felt it was best for her. And so the benefits of that social interaction could have outweighed the risks, you know, more. But, yeah, I don't, she's, she's still young. And I don't we've we've kind of tried to understand how to help her understand in very general ways, but again, she has no frame of reference. So this is not a child, who knows, you know, what? It was, like, pre COVID, she has no memory of that. So it, I think, because she has, you know, no comparison to a time when there wasn't this sickness. It is a little harder to explain, or at least I haven't found a way to help her really understand.

Ellen Balleisen 13:18

Has she asked questions?

Lizza Weir 13:28

You know, not so much about kind of, not so much about COVID. She didn't know I don't think she has a quite, she doesn't have a reason to ask sort of why we wear masks or for example, or why we do certain things, because this is this is her living memory. This is what she's known. So I can't she she asks questions when she notices changes. But in this case, you know, these are constants for her. And so she hasn't really, there are other things she's asked questions about, of course, yes, questions like incessantly about everything and why why why, but I think because she's no, no different. This is not something she would think to question.

Ellen Balleisen 14:22

So did you and your partner ever have different ideas about how to balance the risks, you have to approach?

Lizza Weir 14:29

I think by and large, we've been on the same page. So I would say, no significant kind of real changes or differences. You know, kind of as far as like the bigger decisions when we decided to send her back last, really beginning of July. I think we're both kind of on the same page. If that was the best thing to do, we

were both I mentioned, you know, I think I mentioned checking COVID data, like, you know, relentlessly and sort of like trying to figure out if we felt like this was, it was so hard to kind of interpret the risk, you know, understand the risk, but nonetheless, I think we both were really trying to and checked COVID data, you know, daily, and we're trying to decide if it was something we felt comfortable doing anyway. So. And I think we were both sort of equally worried for our own health, I think. Now, [REDACTED], is in a slightly higher risk group. Just due to his age, he's older than I am. And also he's he was [REDACTED] for at one point for quite a while, and very sickened And, and I think he felt as though he was in a high risk group, even though he didn't have other comorbidities, I just am more neurotic than he is. So even though, statistically, I may not have fallen into too many high risk groups I has I was self diagnosed, extremely high risk. And I do have very sensitive ones. But that's another issue. So anyway, so I think we were both kind of afraid to be honest, in that way, I think I think I've seen other couples and friends who didn't, who had very different risk aversion, and they had more disagreement, but I think, so for those bigger questions. And then in January, I think we both agreed to take her out again, he actually got his shot in early January. So I think, once he was vaccinated, he may have he he was supportive of my anxiety and concern, but I think he did start to feel more relaxed. But anyway, there was one time where we went to this, hol- the Holiday Train show in the Bronx, Bronx botanical garden. And in my mind, I had asked him beforehand, whether, you know, it was a safe thing to do, even though I think we both realized it was on the risky side of things. So we were both a little uncertain about it. But I, I, like went back and forth in my head and kind of stressed about it and asked him in my mind, I asked him multiple times whether he thought it was okay. And anyway, so we ended up deciding to go and we went with one other friend. And I think for the most part, we were, you know, of course, we were masked and we weren't in there for very long, we didn't have sustained contact with sort of outside people. But with her, we were around her, always in masks, but her son was younger than Simone didn't have a mask. Anyway, we had a, we had a scare right after that, where we had found out that that friend had been in contact with another friend the day before, who had then tested positive for COVID. And rationally 24 hours was probably not enough to like get to actually become contagion- contagious enough to then, you know, infect us, but it was a scare, and it was a scare enough so that like I was really counting the days after those- That interaction and that train show. Those 14 days were stressful. And I think we definitely- he definitely kind of blamed me for that whole episode. And we did have some tension where he, he definitely was kind of saying it was my responsibility that we kind of gotten ourselves into this situation. He's not entirely wrong, but I thought we had been on the same page about it anyway, so that that was a little tense, but we we got through it. Okay.

Ellen Balleisen 18:51

Did Simone enjoy the train show?

Lizza Weir 18:53

She did, she did. So hopefully it was worth it in the end. And I think yes, I think for both of them. Yeah. So it's, you know, it's a it's a small decision. It was really one of the very few, I would say it was the

only event that we kind of took part in. Certainly the only indoor thing we did all year long. And, you know, hindsight is 20/20 We didn't end up getting COVID So, therefore it was worth it.

Ellen Balleisen 19:27

And has it been difficult for your mother and for your mother in law to be a grandparent during the pandemic?

Lizza Weir 19:35

I think so, I mean, you know, in one just to be solid. Well, so my mother-in-law, my mother are in different situations. My mother lives alone. So that has been harder.

Ellen Balleisen 19:54

Is your father-in-law still alive?

Lizza Weir 19:56

My father-in-law is still alive. They don't live together, they're divorced, but my mother-in-law lives with her two kids. So she's kind of surrounded by family. And, you know, I think, I think for both of them, probably, especially for my mother, you know, she wants to be a kind of warm presence in Simone's life, and she wants to be a kind of, she wants to be really kind of close with Simone. And kind of- Yeah, I just think she, she, she has a very warm and open personality. And so I think she wants to have that kind of connection that she's had with other grand children with Simone, and did constantly feel as though Simone kind of must just think she's like, this cold hearted kind of human and just felt very uncomfortable with having to be in this position of removing herself or, you know, kind of going completely against the grand parental instinct of, you know, hugging and holding and nurturing a child. I mean, it really it goes against all of the kind of the instincts of caring for a child to have to distance oneself to have to kind of- Yeah, guard oneself where I think, you know, there's there's always a sort of subtle, subtle interaction at play, where you're kind of trying to distance yourself without letting the child like, know that you are or sort of, you know, finding ways to allow the child certain closeness because it's, it's, it's not it's not a it doesn't-It's not a kind or kind of natural feeling, sentiment or your thing to try to communicate with a child, you know, if you're, if they're coming near you to show you something that they're so excited about. You don't want to verbalize that they need to stay back. I mean, you want to share that enthusiasm, and more. You know, I think, I think my mom did find ways to allow Simone to interact with her in ways. I don't, you know, I can't remember a time when she would have ever verbalized, that she needed to say back or something like that, I probably said things like, Moni, give granny space, we remember, we want to keep people healthy. Right now, there's this sickness, you know, there was sort of ways that I tried to say, she needed to stay back. But I think my mom always felt more comfortable than I did with their closeness. And Simone would sometimes go, you know, there was definitely hugging of the knees. And there were a couple of times when she's kind of let her sit on her lap with a mask on outside at all of our interactions were outside. We did manage to go see her quite a bit. So in that sense, I don't feel so we've had a full year without. I have two siblings on the West

Coast, and they have not seen her for well over a year now. So that's a little different. Also, their kids are younger and have had more interactions. So I, you know, I don't I don't feel as though I think for Moni it was sort of this unique time period where it was like, it was this time period where she was even getting to know her grandmother, you know, she didn't have any real memories of her beforehand. And so I think that's what made it more uncomfortable for my mom. And I can't speak for my in laws so much. We actually haven't seen her grandfather at all, her, her paternal grandfather, but her grandmother has come a few times to visit in the yard and the of course. Yeah, I mean, we've definitely we've seen them. We've seen them quite a bit, I would say given the restrictions, which helps.

Ellen Balleisen 24:22

And when you and your partner got vaccinated, how did that change the situation with Simone?

Lizza Weir 24:28

Um, well, I mean, I can speak for myself that there was immense relief. Of course. Nick got vaccinated first in early January, and so I was fully vaccinated probably by early February. And so as we were deciding to put her back, I think he was even probably more, you know, enthusiastic about putting her back in school, or at least he did. And, you know, feel the types of risks that I was still feeling. If I had wanted to keep her out longer, I think he would have supported that. But I think I also wanted her back in school.

Ellen Balleisen 25:17

Was it difficult for- I'm sorry. Was difficult for you to work?

Lizza Weir 25:23

Yeah, I mean, or Yeah, I mean, I think the reason why I was able to take her out of school was because I knew I had a couple a few weeks that were maybe slower than they had been like, there was no way I could have taken her out of school, for example, in December, even if I would have wanted to, I mean, I can't say there's no way I, I probably could have just either made it work, I'm lucky to have a job that's more flexible. But it would have been far more stressful. So at a certain point, I wouldn't have been able to, or wouldn't have wanted to. Yeah, getting worked on is, is a really patchy affair when she's around. [Laughs] I mean, it's, it's, I mean, if Nick especially isn't here, I can get a few hours here. And there are not a few hours in a row. But I can get, you know, emails done here and there, and I can, but as far as sustained concentration, that's very challenging, and her nap time. I mean, I'm lucky she has a nap time is probably the best work time. And then after she goes to bed is by far my best work time. So I've been working like you know, the eight, when I didn't have her in school, I was definitely working from 8pm till about midnight, you know, when on and off. That's definitely the best stretch of time to get things done. So yes, and I probably would not have sent her back to school, I ended up getting a vaccination appointment pretty early as relative to my peers, just because of my job. And I don't think we actually ended up having to remove her from school again in February, to an unrelated because of an unrelated issue. Our daycare had a fire in it, which was just like 2020 2021, never ending stories of disasters. But

we had to remove her again. So we actually ended up having her out of school for I think until the beginning of till the beginning of March or even the middle of March, maybe because I was I don't think I would have put her back in school. If I hadn't in this new school if I hadn't been vaccinated. The new school was far larger, there's like 12 children, and I didn't know the families at all. I don't think I would have ever even considered having her back in school that early. I think I was fifth, I was partially vaccinated at that point. But even that amount of vaccination kind of gave me enough relief to put her back in school. Because I'm sure I wouldn't have done that otherwise. So it has changed that calculation. I'm, and I'm sure right now, and with all the variants and everything, I wouldn't have felt comfortable, which also wasn't sustainable for my work. And so that was one of the justifications I've kind of given myself for going to get the vaccine, even though I know another, you know, plenty of parents are in that position as well. And I honestly don't know how parents have sustained this year with children at home. My, my tolerance for parenting and working and doing that balance, is well I don't know if it's a tolerance issue. But my ability to juggle that is just- I guess everybody's is pretty limited. And to sustain that for a full year, which is more than a year, which is I know what people are now going on doing is amazing to me, because I, I didn't last more than those first four months. And then I certainly didn't last more than about a month and a half in January.

Ellen Balleisen 29:25

Do you have friends who had their kids at home this entire time?

Lizza Weir 29:36

No, no, no. I would say most of my friends have kids in regular daycares and have. I was actually on the more conservative side like we sent her back in July and I know a bunch of my friends that sent their kids back earlier than that one, one parent who I know who's have kind of, I guess I do know a couple people who have nannies. But I don't know if that kind of you I mean, it still is a risk factor that they take on. I know another family who has extraordinary means who has sort of had more of those, like learning pod, pod situations with, like, very, very limited number of people and who have hired teachers to kind of conduct lessons for their school aged children. But actually, I only know one person in that situation.

Ellen Balleisen 30:44

So is there anything else about parents, during the pandemic that you'd like to mention?

Lizza Weir 30:53

I mean, I guess, I mean, the only other thing is, you know, there was a time when Simone was sort of young enough. Where I wasn't really worried about the values, I was instilling when I was telling her to kind of stay away from people or stay away from her friends. Or if I scooped her up and kind of pulled her not to get too close to her friends, I kind of it, it didn't, I didn't think it kind of had any type of influence on how she thought about things. But they're, they're definitely over the course of this year. It's something now that I'm far more wary about telling her, it's something that goes against sort of the

values that I would want to instill in her or, you know, I certainly would not want her to be afraid of her friends. And I want her and her friends kind of feeling comfortable rolling around and wrestling together, or I don't know, whatever kids do, and you know, spitting in their hands and shaking them or whatever gross things kids do, you know. Sharing drinks, sharing, I don't know just I've always been somebody who like, if it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. Like she, you know, she's plays in the dirt and goes, and I want her to be kind of rough and tumble and not worry about kind of germs or something. And lately, I just have found myself kind of like worrying about germs, even even regular colds this year have become like, a huge concern for parents. Because if you get if your kid gets anything a runny nose, I had- Simone got a very, very mild runny nose in September. And she was out of school for a week, because anything. Any fluids, you know, are really not okay right now. And, you know, no, no daycare obviously wants to have children with any sickness, just because of the fears. So I've definitely become a little more like, I don't want to be as neurotic about those kinds of things. And I don't want her to feel afraid of her friends. So that's like, maybe a balance that I'm sort of trying to work through and myself. And as she gets older, I definitely I want her to feel comfortable playing with, you know I mean, obviously, I want her to feel I don't want her to have to think twice about giving your friends a hug or giving anyone a hug. So I think I'm more aware of that now. Because she understands those types of measures and will wonder and kind of I think she is sort of forming her idea of how to interact with others. And I don't want to have that type of anxiety be something that stays with her. So as we move forward, that's going to be something that I have to come to terms with.

Ellen Balleisen 34:04

Well, thank you so much. It's been really interesting.

Lizza Weir 34:09

Yeah. Thank you. I appreciate getting the opportunity to kind of think about things in a different way or, you know, kind of step back a little bit from the daily interactions and grind of parenting. So I appreciate that. Appreciate the questions.

Ellen Balleisen 34:33

Thank you so much.