

Not Just a Harmless Childhood Disease

Katie Smith

When I was a child, chickenpox was a very common disease. Most children got it, and it didn't seem like a big deal to me. You got some spots that were itchy, and a fever for a few days, then you were fine. I was almost seven when I contracted chickenpox. I got the itchy rash, the fever, and all the common side effects. I didn't feel well, but I knew I would be fine.



What I didn't realize, was my eighteen-month-old sister might not be okay. Laura was my only sibling, and I adored her. I wanted to play with her constantly and have her sleep in my room with me almost every night. When I had chickenpox, my mom kept Laura away from me. She told me that Laura was too young to get chickenpox, that it could harm her. I didn't understand. Chickenpox didn't seem that bad—I was just itchy. As a seven-year-old eager to play with her baby sister, I wondered: what could it hurt to play with her for a little while?

A few days later, Laura came down with chickenpox. The first couple of days, she was miserable, but had no scary symptoms. The next day, though, Laura had her snack and went down for a nap. She never woke up.

I still remember that day so vividly. I was playing in my room with my toys while Laura was napping. All of a sudden, I heard my mom screaming. I raced down the hallway to see what was going on, but I couldn't understand what my mom was saying. I looked at Laura lying in her crib. She looked fine. I didn't understand why my mom was crying.

She called 911, and almost instantly an ambulance and fire truck were outside of our house, the paramedics racing in. A group of neighbors started forming outside our home; **they were hoping we were all okay. But we weren't.** A neighbor volunteered to let me play at her house while my mom and Laura went in the ambulance. I didn't want to play. I wanted to know what was going on, and where my mom and sister were going.

A few hours later, my dad came to pick me up and take me home. That's when my parents told me that Laura hadn't been breathing when my mom went to wake her



up from her nap. My little sister had passed away in her sleep. A year later, the varicella vaccine was introduced.

At the time, I didn't understand why Laura was taken away from me. Eventually, as I matured, that confusion turned into guilt. What would have happened if I would have just stayed away? Would she still be here? I can't even begin to imagine the pain my mom felt (and still feels to this day). No mom should ever have to feel the pain of losing her child, especially to a vaccine-preventable disease.

I am a mom now—I have a daughter and an infant son. This year, on the anniversary of Laura's passing, I woke up and was going to get ready to spend the day with my mother, as I usually do on this day. I started scrolling through my Facebook news feed, and came across a post talking about a "pox party." I had no clue what this was, so I clicked on it. I learned that some parents organize parties when one of their children contracts chickenpox. They invite parents with children to come and get infected.

I was baffled. People actually went to these "pox parties"? I posted a question on Facebook, asking why they would want to do this—and was instantly attacked. Most of these women told me things like: "it's a harmless childhood disease" or "it will strengthen the children's immune system" and even "vaccines are deadly."

I had no idea people were intentionally avoiding vaccines, especially since the vaccine-autism myth has been thoroughly debunked. **If the varicella vaccine had been introduced just one year earlier, perhaps Laura would still be here.** For the life of me, I could not understand why someone would choose not to vaccinate their children.

Now I was fearful for my unborn son's health and safety. That's when I began really getting into the pro-vaccination movement, and I found Voices for Vaccines. I was hesitant to share my story, because it still causes me so much pain and guilt, but I came to realize that my story, and stories like mine, must to be shared. We must share our stories to help parents "on the fence" about vaccines truly understand that these are not "harmless childhood diseases." These vaccine-preventable diseases can cause real and lasting damage. I know this firsthand. If this story helps only one person choose to vaccinate his or her child, I will be happy.

Read more at www.VoicesForVaccines.org/blog

