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Do Masks Impede Children's Development?

By Perri Klass, M.D.

8-10 minutes

The Checkup

Scientists who have studied the ways children process and use the information hidden by masks say that children will find ways to communicate, and that parents and teachers can help.

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Nothing about masks and masking has come easily in the United States, it seems. There were mixed and confusing messages back at the beginning of the pandemic, then political discussion that got in the way of sane public health decision-making, as well as circulating disinformation, anger, and a certain amount of shaming and finger-pointing, by those who wanted masks and by those who didn't. But [evidence keeps accumulating that masks help keep us all safer](#).

Now, with many families thinking about the specifics of children returning to at least some classroom instruction and to child care, pediatrician colleagues who are helping to set guidelines are getting questions from parents about whether masks — on the children or on their caregivers — may interfere with children's development, including speech, language and social interactions.

[\[Click here for advice on helping your child wear a mask, and here for a coloring book about masks developed by a pediatrician.\]](#)

Kang Lee, a professor of applied psychology and human development at the University of Toronto, who studies the [development of facial recognition skills](#) in children, pointed to three potential problems masks might pose for children in interacting with classmates or teachers. First, he said, kids under the age of 12 may have difficulty recognizing people, because they often focus on individual features.

Second, and perhaps more important, he said, "a lot of our emotional information, we display through movement of our facial musculature." Because that musculature and therefore that information will be obscured by a mask, he said, children may have issues with "emotional recognition and social interaction."

And finally, Dr. Lee said, children may have problems with speech recognition; even though we tend to think of speech communication as taking place through sound, he said, a great deal of information can be communicated visually.

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David Lewkowicz, a senior scientist at the Haskins Laboratories and the Yale Child Study Center, has studied [lip-reading in babies](#). Around the age of 6 to 8 months, he said, as babies start to babble, they change the ways that they are looking at people who are speaking to them. Instead of concentrating on the eyes, he said, "they spend a lot of time looking at that person's mouth, trying to master their own native speech, getting not only auditory cues but visual."

In one type of experiment, people are asked to look at multiple faces on a screen, while listening to a voice talking — but the voice is synchronized with only one of the faces. Children as young as 3 already tend to show a preference for that synchronized face, and the preference gets markedly stronger as they grow.

Babies whose caretakers are masked will miss some of these visual cues, and it's possible, Dr. Lewkowicz said, that young children may have some trouble sorting out who goes with which voice.

"Masks are not a great thing for communication in young kids," Dr. Lewkowicz said. On the other hand, he said, the time children spend at home with people who are not masked will give them a chance to

practice picking up the visual cues. And there is opportunity to be creative, and to help children take full advantage of the information that they do get. He suggested that parents and teachers could “encourage their kids to communicate more through gestures,” and even make a game of helping children to find ways of communicating with their hands and bodies.

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Eva Chen, a developmental psychologist who is an associate professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, focuses her research on children's cognitive development with respect to social groups. “We should give more credit to our own children,” she said, “that being covered for a few hours every day isn't going to make them less able to recognize social expressions.” Voices, gestures and overall body language are all important for children, she said. While children typically pay attention to people's mouths while they are talking, “it's by far not the only cue children have to communicate and to learn,” she said, and referenced a [2012 study](#) showing that children were able to read facial emotions just as well when a mask was added.

In fact, all of the scientists I talked to who have studied the complex ways that children process and use the information hidden by masks also believe that children will find ways to communicate, and that parents and teachers can help them. Several of them also pointed out that children with neurodevelopmental issues such as autism will need special help and special consideration — but also that some of the techniques that parents and teachers already use to help these children learn to interpret social cues may be helpful for everyone when masks are in use.

Sarah Gaither, an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, said in an email, “With mask wearing now being required in most school settings, children and adults should start practicing being more explicitly verbal by stating their emotions out loud.” Children will get better at reading people's eyes, she suggested, and at understanding emotional content from tone of voice.

But in addition, she wrote, “parents and teachers may also want to ask children more often what they are feeling as well.”

Parents can focus on the time they have at home — unmasked — with their children, and emphasize face-to-face activities and interactions. “I am a huge believer in the importance of plasticity” — or adaptability — “in early development,” Dr. Lewkowicz said. “Despite the short-term deprivation, because of plasticity, there's lots of ways to compensate.”

Dr. Lee agreed. “I believe children are very, very smart,” he said. “They can figure out who a person is by using information still available to them, the shape of the eyes, the eyebrows, voice, posture.” Children will adapt quickly, he said, but teachers who are wearing masks should help them along by wearing the same eyeglasses, the same hairstyle, or perhaps by wearing personalized masks, or even characteristic clothing.

As far as emotional communication, he suggested that teachers emphasize their gestures, and pay attention to their tones of voice. “Make your voice more expressive, your gesture more expressive, your eyes more expressive,” he said. And finally, he said, “I would slow down my speech as a teacher, particularly when interacting with younger ones, so kids can pick up more from the auditory channel.”

There is no evidence, Dr. Chen said, that children from cultures with much more extensive face covering are any worse at recognizing faces or emotions.

In Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia, it's standard to wear masks as protection against illness or air pollution. Because there are always a fair number of people wearing masks in public, “culturally, there is not the same level of anxiety — not the urgency to see whether wearing masks interferes with children's development that we have heard from European colleagues and American colleagues,” Dr. Chen said. People understand, she said, that children will see the full faces of parents and siblings at home.

And given the adaptability of children's brains, it seems reasonable to hope that one effect of spending time masked and around masked people may be that children actually improve their ability to read those other cues. Children may end up “more sensitive to tones, more sensitive to someone's overall body language,” Dr. Chen said.

“Kids are very, very adaptive, more adaptive than we are — they learn very quickly,” Dr. Lee said. “I don't think parents should be too worried.”

Dr. Perri Klass is the author of the forthcoming book [“A Good Time to Be Born: How Science and Public Health Gave Children a Future,”](#) on how our world has been transformed by the radical decline of infant and child mortality.