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Nurturing Resilience

Will Wearing Masks Affect Children's Emotional Development?

Children's psychological and neurological development depends on seeing faces.

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Let me be clear: During a public health crisis, wearing a mask does a lot of good for my own health, my neighbour's health, and our economy. But like any scientifically sound resilience strategy, there are trade-offs.

As we move towards large numbers of people wearing masks, even in schools, I've been wondering what the long-term consequences will be for our children. We've known for decades that children's emotional well-being depends in part on neurological development, which comes from watching faces and recognizing emotions. How all this works isn't entirely clear, but as Catherine Herba and Mary Phillips at the London Institute of Psychiatry have explained, there is enough evidence to suggest that normal child development needs children to see people expressing their emotions.

So what happens when most of the adult faces surrounding children are masked? In other posts, I have already lamented the way parents put iPads into the hands of toddlers sitting in strollers, removing them from interactions with the people around them during a phase of their development when they should be learning new vocabulary and developing awareness of social cues. With widespread masking, we may unintentionally be disadvantaging younger children from developing the necessary skills to discern emotions and the neurological changes that make it possible to distinguish one face from another.

None of this is meant to sound alarmist; just realistic. We are already hearing about a number of ways this pandemic is causing potentially long-term harm to our children. Educators are reporting that children's academic development is being compromised by lengthy periods of time away from the structure of the classroom, with the greatest impact being felt by children who were already in homes where educational achievement is not well supported and schools are chronically underfunded.

Clearly, after this pandemic, we are going to have to work very hard at repairing the damage we have done to children. That means:

- Providing teachers with the extra supports they need to help children return to appropriate grade level performance in reading, writing, and math.
- Encouraging children to get very dirty. Other than washing hands before eating, and after using the toilet, we are going to have to make it every child's right to eat food off the floor, roll around in the dirt, and generally enjoy a little filth if we are going to ensure they avoid the trappings of excessive cleanliness (and the negative consequences a lack of germs causes to their immune systems and emotional regulation).
- Reassuring children that they are safe, and that those they love are safe as well. The spike in anxiety disorders among children will need an active campaign of reassurance to be turned around.
- And we're going to have to look our children in the face and teach them again about a range of emotional expressions. They will need to again understand that people say things with their faces and that we shouldn't be shy about expressing openly what we feel.

The good news is that wearing masks is also a reminder to our children that they are part of a community, and people who care about others will tolerate a little discomfort when the gains for all far outweigh a minor individual inconvenience. That sense of belonging and responsibility for others is a foundation stone for resilience. Masking is a symbol of our shared respect for one another and an easy way children can exercise some measure of control in an uncontrollable situation. It is a simple way they can feel like they are doing something to make the pandemic go away.

But the consequences of masking are also waiting for us just on the horizon. While it is unlikely that masking will cause prosopagnosia, the neurological disorder which is characterized by an inability to distinguish one face from another, it is likely that younger children are not being exposed to the many different facial expressions which stimulate good neurocognitive development. While there are no studies of this dimension of children's lives during this pandemic (at least not yet), studies like that by Laurie Bayet and her colleagues from Boston Children's Hospital suggest that children between the ages of 2 and 4 learn about emotions by watching faces. Young children struggle to properly perceive emotions like fear and anger but are much better at identifying emotions like happiness.

What will happen to our children's development if, for a year, they have far fewer opportunities to watch faces and figure out which emotions are being displayed? No one knows. But, just like with academic deficits and way too much handwashing, the months that follow widespread vaccination for COVID-19 are going to demand of us a little extra effort to address children's delayed development.

None of this should make us prematurely remove our masks in public. But they should be a reminder that children need to see lots of different faces in different states of happiness, anger, and despair. This may mean spending a little more time being eye-to-eye with our children, and spending a little less time on our devices or leaving our children to be raised by their own net-nannies.

References

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