

Social Interaction in the Era of Face Masks

9/22/2020

Sarah here. Last week, Lisa talked about how parents and their kids can differ in introversion and extroversion and how that may impact parents' views of their kids' social relationships. This week, as we continue to focus on social relationships, I'll be focusing on something that can impact communication and interactions for both kids and adults: face masks.



Wearing face masks in public is now a routine part of life for many kids and adults across the country. But, having a large part of our faces covered up can impact how we perceive and interact with each other. After all, a lot of communication is non-verbal, so by wearing face masks, we are losing a lot of valuable information. This can cause a lot of misunderstandings and social headaches for kids *and* adults alike.

Think about your recent experiences out and about in the world- have you jumped to a conclusion about the attitude or intention of someone wearing a face mask? I sure have. Last weekend, my family and I walked past a woman who was wearing a face mask while sitting by a fountain. She looked up at us and made eye contact with me when we were passing. My first thought was, "Ugh! She is so judgy- what's her problem?!" I replayed the "exchange" in my head. The woman had been passively looking down, then looked up when she heard us approaching. Her eyes were "neutral" as she looked at us- she didn't have eyes wide with fear or narrowed in disdain. She was sitting with a relaxed posture. This woman was sitting

peacefully minding her own business and in seconds, I had created a whole story about what she thought about me and my family. I had immediately assumed that she was being judgmental based on...neutrality.

I came to a pretty extreme conclusion based on minimal information in this situation. Now, you may be better at reading other people's cues than I am. Maybe you always give people the benefit of the doubt. You may consistently slow down enough to think about the context and take in all available information before jumping to conclusions about others. But even if *you* have that kind of social savvy, my guess is that your kids (like most kids) may hit a snag or two when navigating social interactions involving face masks. After all, when someone is wearing a face mask, that person's *experienced* emotion and *expressed* or *perceived* emotion may not really match...



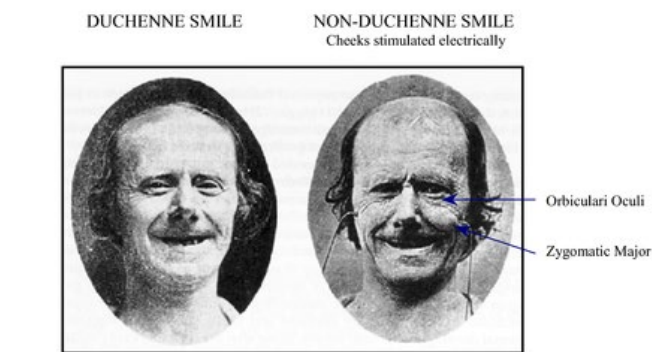
The good news is that people *can* interpret social information pretty effectively, even in the absence of complete information. So, it's possible to have positive social interactions and build social relationships, even when protective face coverings are in the mix. The less good news is that when face masks are involved, effectively communicating requires a more deliberate approach from both parties (the "listener" and the "speaker").

So now, why not test out your social prowess? Check out the side by side pictures below. Without giving it too much thought, which image shows the child smiling? How could you tell since you couldn't see his whole face?



Remember that smiling doesn't *just* involve your mouth- various face muscles actually coordinate to create "true" smiles (also known as Duchenne smiles). Genuine smiles lift our cheeks and touch our eyes. "Real" smiles were coined "Duchenne smiles" after French neurologist Duchenne de Boulogne, who famously used electrical stimulation to recreate and catalog facial expressions in human subjects. He found that although the muscles could be stimulated to create a wide "smile," that smile looked artificial.

FIGURE III



Source: Fridlund, A. J. (1994). *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View*.
(Photographs made by the French Neuroanatomist G. B. Duchenne de Boulogne)

"Fake smiles" are more likely to only involve our mouths so the rest of our face doesn't "light up" with happiness. Incidentally, "fake smiles" have been described as Pan Am smiles, because historically Pan Am flight attendants were reportedly trained to constantly wear this smile.



But, if I'm talking about social interaction and communication while wearing face masks, who cares about smiles, right?! Well, it turns out that while there are person-to-person and culturally based variations in facial expressions and in how expressive people are, there are also fairly universal microexpressions. Vanessa Van Edwards over at the Science of People describes microexpressions as brief, involuntary expressions that happen when we experience an emotion. According to Vanessa, microexpressions, which are hard to fake but vital to understand, include: fear, surprise, sadness, happiness, anger, disgust and contempt.

When you think about the social situations that you and your kids may find yourselves in, remember that for right now, masks are here to stay. Educate *yourself* on how to be socially savvy in the era of face masks. Teach your kids what to look for (literally) when reading the emotions of others. Then you can practice reading each other's emotions or role-playing social interactions so they know how things may look and feel. By helping your kids slow down, pay attention to context and take in all of the available information, they'll be able to interact with the world more effectively and interpret interactions in these ambiguous times.

Today, instead of me reinventing the wheel, I suggest you head over to Science of People and check out Vanessa Van Edwards' post about reading microexpressions while people are wearing



face masks. She includes descriptions of each microexpression along with pictures of what each looks like with and without a face mask. And, for those of you who love quizzes, there's one that tests your face reading skills. Find her post at: <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/masks/>

I also recommend that you check out Cassie Stephens' blog. Cassie is an art teacher who created a lesson plan for 1st graders about face masks and reading emotions. You can check out her post at: <https://cassiestephens.blogspot.com/2020/08/lets-make-mask-emotions.html>