

Communicating with Masks

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I am probably not alone in saying that I have a love-hate relationship with masks. There are so many reasons to love masks - most importantly, they decrease the chance of getting or spreading an infectious disease. As someone who is used to getting sneezed, coughed, and spewed on by my patients on a daily basis, I really love the fact that I haven't gotten sick in almost 2 years (knock on wood). I also like that masks keep my face warm when the weather is cold. In Korea, where I grew up, mask wearing is common, particularly in the winter - both for infection prevention and for warmth. It is considered rude to not wear a mask if you have cold symptoms.

There are also things that I don't necessarily like about masks: they are hot in the summertime; I can't see if a person walking past me is saying hi or smiling at me; and it's sometimes harder to hear people talk. Even though these disadvantages, to me and to the people around me, are a small price to pay when talking about infections that can mean the difference between life and death, they are real issues that we have to deal with, whether it be in the hospital, in school, at work, or in other settings.

This week, *Pediatrics* is early releasing a Family Partnerships article by Dr. Sarah McCarthy and Dr. Brenda Schiltz from the Mayo Clinic, entitled "Masks, Empathy, and a Pediatric Cancer Diagnosis during COVID-19" ([10.1542/peds.2021-051696](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-051696)). For those of you who are unfamiliar with our [Family Partnerships articles](#), each of them tells a story, shares an experience, or focuses on an issue relevant to patient and family-centered care. In addition to the viewpoint of the clinical care team, we also hear the voice of the patient's family.

In this article, the issues surrounding mask-wearing for Molly, a child who is newly diagnosed with cancer, provide a framework for discussing the potentially harmful impact that masks and other personal protective equipment - because they interfere with touch and other expressions of emotion - have on communication, especially when used with frightened children with serious or chronic illness.

However, the story does not stop with the negative impact. The authors detail how together, the parents and the care team developed new, creative strategies for staying connected with family members and for communicating empathy and caring for their patients and patients' families.

Although all of us have developed some strategies regarding mask use with children and others, reading this story will likely provide you with additional, important insights that you may not have had before - and with some new strategies that you can use with others.

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