

Research Shows Masks Can Impair Babies Speech and Language Development

The coronavirus pandemic has changed many aspects of everyday life, and with covid-19 cases being front-page news, many of the repercussions of trying to combat the pandemic, have been swept under the rug.

New research has shown that wearing masks can impair children's speech and language development as they begin to see and hear communicative signals. Babies of different ages were shown videos of people talking while their attention was tracked with an eye-tracking device.

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Researchers discovered that babies begin to lip-read around eight months old, corresponding with development in their own language skills. This indicates that babies begin lip reading when they become interested in language and speech.

Crucially, once lip-reading emerges in infancy, it becomes the default mode of speech processing whenever comprehension is difficult. This is illustrated by our latest studies in which my Spanish colleagues, their graduate student Joan Birules and I found that 4–6 year-old bilingual children lip-read more when they are confronted with speech in an unfamiliar than in a familiar language.

Masks Can Be Detrimental to Babies' Speech and Language Development

Beyond eight months, babies and children use visual speech cues to understand what people are saying. Obviously, visible

speech cues are undetectable with masks. Unfortunately, not all parents are in a position to stay at home with their children all the time, and many children are spending most of their time with care providers who are often masked for the entire day.

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