



WHY CLEAR MASKS ARE VITAL TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

JUNE 1, 2020

One of the impacts of COVID-19 on our society is the CDC guideline encouraging the use of face masks to help slow the spread of the disease. It seems everywhere you turn, whether at the grocery store, pharmacy, or your doctor's office, people are wearing face masks. Masks have become the new normal. Unfortunately, face masks that block the view of the mouth hinder communication. So much of what we say, and much of what we mean by what we say, is shared on the face, especially the lower part of the face, including the mouth. Deaf and hard of hearing people use a combination of lipreading, watching facial expressions, body language, and gestures to understand what the speaker is saying and intending. In fact, most people speechread, even people without hearing loss.



It is human nature to watch the expression on the face of the person speaking, and watching their tongue placement, lip and mouth movements provides us with information on which letter (t, s, c, etc.) or series of letters (wh, th, sh, etc.) has been said and with what emphasis. Mouth movements and facial

expressions communicate a full range of emotions including surprise, confusion, consternation, and delight. When we have hearing loss, the contextual information found on the face is even more vital. American Sign Language, the culturally rich language of the Deaf community, is entirely visual and depends heavily on facial expressions. Masks with clear screens reveal at least the mouth of the speaker, and sometimes more of the face can be seen, such as a smile.

Purchasing an item at the grocery store or pharmacy becomes much easier when both the cashier and the purchaser can see each other's mouths and faces. With less effort expended towards communication, interactions are more pleasant and meaningful. A welcomed customer is a customer who will return, over and over again.

It is important that reusable masks and their clear screens be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after use. There should not be any holes in the mask or clear portion of the mask. Make sure you can breathe through the mask comfortably and that the mask doesn't fog up. Masks with ties that secure in the back of the head, as opposed to over-the-ear loops, help ensure the hearing aid or cochlear implant will stay on or in the ear.

Using clear masks results in more effective communication achieved through less effort. Getting a person's attention, making eye contact, speaking slowly, and checking for understanding are mutually beneficial behaviors that can be practiced by both the speaker and the receiver, regardless of hearing ability.