

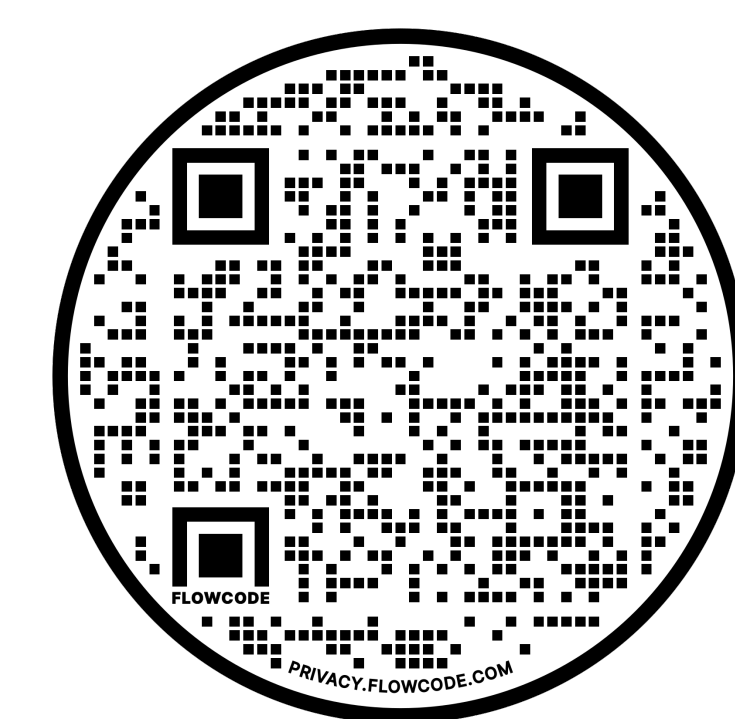
The Impact of a Pandemic: Influence of Wearing a Mask on Therapist Communication

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Background

- SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) was identified as a respiratory virus in December 2019, quickly evolving into a global pandemic by March of 2020.
- This virus and its resulting variants can be spread to others through respiratory droplets from the mouth and nose.
- To mitigate the spread as the pandemic continues, the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization recommend the use of face masks.



Research Objectives

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention established novel infection prevention recommendations, resulting in hospital systems adopting universal mask-wearing for employees.
- The purpose of this study assess the perceived impact of mask-wearing on provider communication during wheelchair (WC) education.

Methods

- Allied health professionals completed a self-report survey on the impact of provider mask wearing on communications with patients/caregivers during wheelchair education
- Survey questions evaluated the perceived impact of mask-wearing on communication efficiency and effectiveness during WC education, frequency of communication strategies used to enhance communication, and proper implementation of communication strategies.

Results

- Data collected from the survey revealed that clinicians recognized that mask-wearing impacted communication at least “some of the time” for clarity, efficiency, and establishing rapport. (Table 1)
- Strategies used to limit miscommunication included repeating statements, raising voice, increasing proximity to patient, using nonverbal cues, changing environment, using pictures/videos, and written communication. (Table 2)
- Clinicians concluded that further training in printed resources, integration of communication tools, nonverbal communication techniques, and vocal hygiene strategies is needed to improve WC education with mask-wearing. (Table 3)

Table 1. Perceived Impact on Communication

Extent to which mask wearing impacts the following at least some of the time ...	%	N
Clarity	80.3	53
Efficiency	78.8	52
Ability To Establish Rapport	60.6	40

Table 2. Reported Communication Strategies Used by Clinicians

Extent to which communication was changed at least some of the time by...	%	N
Repeating Statements	84.8	56
Raising Their Voice	78.8	52
Increasing Patient Proximity	78.8	52
Using Nonverbal Cues	75.8	50
Conducting Sessions In An Alternative Location	68.2	45
Using Pictures Or Video Supports	47.0	31
Using Written Communication	40.9	27

Table 3. Clinician Agreement on Integration of Communication Techniques in the Workplace

Extent to which the following would be helpful in addressing communication while mask wearing during wheelchair education....	%	N
Further Training In Printed Resources	68.2	45
Ways To Integrate Communication Tools	51.5	34
Nonverbal Communication Techniques	31.8	21
Vocal Hygiene Strategies	30.3	20

Limitations

- Due to the context of the survey focusing on WC education, there may have been some overlap with clinicians reflecting and reporting on other PT and OT sessions outside of WC education.
- The method of data collection was a self-reported survey from clinicians. The definition of breakdown in communication is subjective based on each clinician’s perception. Future research could utilize observation of the clinician during WC education to standardize the definition of communication breakdown.
- No input was gathered from the patient or caregiver’s point of view. There may be different perspectives of the limitations of mask-wearing that require further study.
- Patient diagnosis was not considered for this data analysis. Cognitive limitations due to the patient’s diagnosis may impact patient-provider communication regardless of mask-wearing.

Conclusions

- Upon analysis, mask wearing does impact patient-provider communication during wheelchair education.
- These lapses in communication resulted in clinicians relying on alternative methods to improve communication such as verbal and nonverbal strategies to maintain efficiency of patient education.
- Participating clinicians agreed that further training in alternative methods of communication was needed to improve communication and avoid disruptions in provider education.

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