Why are people wearing masks? Why are people covering their faces?

By Rebecca Parlakian

Sometimes our toddlers ask us questions that are hard to answer—especially when we're not sure what the right answer is, like the situation many communities are facing with COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus).

For children under three years, it's best to answer their questions simply in language they understand. If children ask about people wearing masks or other face coverings, parents can explain:

- Sometimes people wear masks when they are sick.

- When they are all better, they stop wearing the mask.
  Sometimes children might ask follow-up questions like the ones below. At this age, it's important to answer only the questions they ask. Avoid sharing additional information (about germs, what is contagious, etc.) that they can't understand because of their age. Some common follow-up questions might be:

- Is the mask a costume? (No, sometimes people wear masks when they are sick. The mask just means they are not feeling well.)

- Can the person still talk? (Yes. The mask covers their mouth, but they can still talk. Just like if I put my hand over my mouth, I can still talk. [demonstrate])

- Are they scary or a "bad" person? (No. The mask covers up part of their face, but that doesn't mean they are scary or bad. They are wearing a mask because they are sick. That's all. When they are better, they will take the mask off.)

- Will I get sick? (Everybody gets sick sometimes. If you get sick, Mama/Dada will take care of you until you are all better. The doctors will help you, too.)

If you live in a community where many people are wearing masks, your child may want to "pretend play" wearing a mask. This is very typical for toddlers! Pretend play is one way that children make sense of their world, by "trying on" the roles and people they see in the world around them. As a parent, you can decide how comfortable you are with this play theme. You might also suggest pretend play around medical roles (doctor/nurse with a teddy bear) to focus on how people take care of others when they are sick.

During stressful times, what children need most is you—a safe, secure relationship where they can express their feelings and questions. Here are some tips:

- Keep daily routines (naptime, bedtime) as consistent as possible for your child.

- Limit your child's exposure to media reports about COVID-19. Remember, your child is soaking in the tension you're feeling as you watch the news.

- Discuss your own questions/worries about COVID-19 when your child is out of earshot.
- Practice good hygiene to limit exposure to COVID-19.
- The Centers for Disease Control Healthy Children link has helpful resources on this topic.