

# Teaching Young Students about Wearing Masks

Teaching the skill of wearing a mask can be taught in the same way as any other skill. Since this is a routine that is unfamiliar and potentially uncomfortable, especially for some students with disabilities, delays, or sensory sensitivities, remember to keep it simple, go slow, and be realistic.

Refer to district guidelines to get information about the types of masks that are allowed, required, and determine roles and responsibilities for providing and cleaning masks.

**Collaborate with families** to help their children to become familiar with masks and to assist in finding the right mask. Encourage families to show options of different masks that might interest their children. Try to establish a “buy-in” from the beginning. Continue to encourage and assist the students upon their arrival at school.

If students are allowed to wear masks that they bring from home, be sure that families are aware of district guidelines. If a specific student needs the support of wearing a familiar mask, try to use the strategy of a special interest mask, while teaching and transitioning the student to the type of mask that adheres district guidelines.



## Strategies for teaching students about wearing masks:

- Gradually have students who resist wearing masks practice wearing them for a longer and longer period of time.
  - Start with 5 minutes (or even 5 seconds at a time) and gradually increase the time.
  - Build in rewards and praise.
  - Set a timer and use a first/then statement to help remind students about keeping masks on and let them know the times (eating, going to playground) when they can take them off.
- Take selfies so that students can see how they look. Share with families and remind them to praise their children.
  - Use video calling with family and friends while wearing the mask so others can give them positive comments as well. “Wow, you’re doing a great job wearing your mask.” “You look like a superhero!”
- Print out pictures or find pictures online of their favorite characters wearing masks. Print out a regular picture and draw a mask together on the character.
- Offer a small reinforcement for wearing the mask if necessary, such as screen time or a special book to read, or a choice of a favorite activity. Remember that specific praise is a powerful reward.

**Make it comfortable.** Different masks can be less tolerable for a variety of reasons. The less comfortable the mask is the less likely a student is to wear it. Some students might be sensitive to having their faces covered, or sensitive to the straps around their ears. Others might be sensitive to odors or textures of fabric. Be creative about ways to address the difficulties students might have with comfort.

Masks extensions are designed to reduce the sensation that the mask is tight and to keep the loop off the ears.



Example: This student’s family problem-solved to attach the loop to a button on his hat rather than put it behind his ears. As with all strategies, refer to district guidelines while supporting students who are learning to wear masks.



**Model.** Do not assume that students know how masks function even though they have seen others wearing them. Plan a lesson to specifically show your students how your mask operates.

- Talk them through how you can still breathe, you can still smile, and you can still laugh, even though others can't see your mouth moving.
- Show them how your mask must cover both your nose and your mouth.
- Show how you remove it to eat and drink.
- Let them see that it is safe to wear. Familiarizing your students with how a mask operates may help reduce their anxiety about actually wearing one themselves.

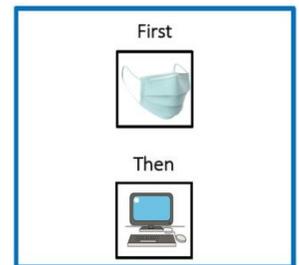


**Allow exploration.** Allow them to touch, play with, and sample the mask that they will eventually wear. Have it rub against their skin and hold it up to their face. This gentle exposure can help them in becoming comfortable with their mask.

**Explain the purpose.** Use social scripts and videos to explain why masks are needed. Be sure to use developmentally appropriate stories. Reinforce these lessons daily with stories, visuals, and reminders.

**Reinforce students for wearing masks.**

Remember that specific and intentional praise is a powerful reinforce. However, since wearing masks is a new skill for many students, it might sometimes be necessary to pair your praise with a reward of an activity. Make putting on masks part of the routine and schedule of the day. Reinforce students for “following the schedule”.



**Give them something to do.** As soon as students are wearing their masks, give them something to do with their hands. Legos, magnets, high fives, a fidget item, whatever it takes to keep their hands engaged. Not only can it make the whole experience more tolerable, but it can distract them from trying to take the mask off.



Adult interaction is important in encouraging students to wear masks. It is vital that students know from words and tone of voice that adults are supportive of them.



Resources about wearing masks:

[Flip Book Story online](#)

[My Mask Schedule](#)

[Social narrative - Wearing a Mask](#) from Autism Little Learners by Tara Tuchel

[Wearing A Mask says I Love You](#) - video link of author reading the book. Also on the page is a podcast by the author about safety and health for young children. The author, Jen Welch, is the first female coach in the NFL.

[Wearing Masks - Helping Children Understand Emotions \(Pyramid\)](#)

[Wearing Masks - from Pyramid's challenging behavior.org - Spanish](#)

Patrick Mulick, [Inspiring and Equipping Special Educators](#)