

## Helping Children Learn to Wear Masks

Wearing masks in public settings can be difficult for everyone, and children and adolescents may struggle with this critical safety skill. The good news is that kids learn to wear new clothes all the time (coats and gloves in the winter, shoes in public, etc.) and we can use the same teaching approaches to support your child to learn how to wear masks and stay safe:

- **Be strategic.** Pick a mask that is comfortable (soft, fits well, doesn't tug on the ears, etc.) and appeals to the child (favorite color, themed fabric, personalized with their own additions, etc.). Let the child pick out their mask from a few choices. Some children may do better with a mask alternative (e.g., cloth wrap, face shield, shirt with built-in mask, or costume-style mask).
- **Practice makes perfect!**
  1. Start by practicing for short amounts of time (a few minutes, or even 10-15 seconds if it is hard for the child). Some children may even need to start with just touching the mask to their face. Use a timer or visual cue so the child knows how long they need to keep it on. You can also "mask up" with them to model the right behavior.
  2. Praise them during the interval for keeping the mask on, and when they've finished get even more excited! You can also set up a "First – Then" to help motivate the child to practice with the mask ("First we do mask practice, then you can play outside").
  3. Gradually increase how often you practice and how long the child is expected to wear the mask (e.g., once a day for 1 minute to three times a day for one minute). Then you can start doing practice in other settings and during routine activities (wear mask during first 15 minutes of screen time, wear mask while walking around the block, etc).
- **Rehearse the rules and recognize success.** Before entering public places, re-state the new rule (e.g., "Masks on in public"). Be on the look-out for success—this is your chance to encourage good behavior! Praise the child periodically for keeping their mask on, not pulling it down, etc. (e.g., "Your mask is looking great!" or "Nice job talking with your mask up!"). As needed, you can provide reminders ("Keep your nose covered – great!"). You can even provide privileges after outings (e.g., "Since you kept your mask on for the whole shopping trip, you can have extra screen time").

**Remember: any mask wearing is better than nothing, and slow and steady practice (plus encouragement) can help your child get better at this new skill.** Consider who else can be part of the practice team, and provide this information to school, childcare or therapy settings so that adults there can help too. Wearing masks might even become a "behavior goal" for children who receive special education services.

In-depth resources for helping children learn to wear masks:

Video teaching guide: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6T75jZ6v3I>

Toolkit: <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/MediaLibraries/URMCMedia/strong-center-developmental-disabilities/documents/Mask-Wearing-Toolkit.pdf>