



**Teaching
your child
with special
needs to
wear a mask**

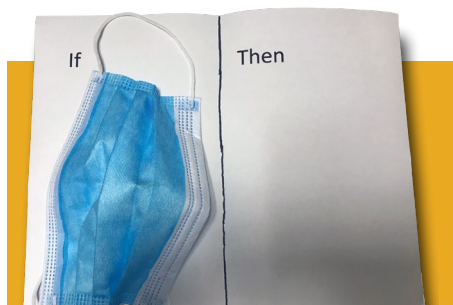
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Wearing a mask when leaving the house helps prevent the spread of COVID-19. But children with special needs may have a difficult time wearing a mask and may not understand why they need to do it. Below are some practical tips to help your child wear a mask successfully. We don't recommend placing a mask on any child under age 2.

Preparation:

- Brainstorm ideas about activities or items your child really likes. Seek input from their school team, family members, babysitters, etc.
- Gather some items that you already have or that are easy to create, such as pictures of fun activities, or download favorite videos.
- Consider purchasing small items your child is likely to enjoy, such as toys or stickers from your child's favorite TV shows. These new items may be more likely to motivate your child.
- Limit access to these highly preferred items or videos so you can use them when motivating your child to wear a mask.
- Make a simple If This/Then This visual support.



- » This type of visual is commonly used in classes for special kids, so your child may already understand this concept.
- » If This/Then This shows your child that if they do the task on the left (in this case, wearing the mask) then they will earn the reward on the right.
- » The reward can be anything your child is motivated by, such as a prize or video.

- Your child might benefit from the photo social story “Wearing a Mask.”
- Pick a time of day to teach and practice when your child will have few distractions.
- Siblings may be models and included in practice sessions.
- If available, provide a few masks for your child to choose from — cloth masks may be more child friendly.
- Most masks either loop around the backs of the ears or have a band that loops around the back of the head. Some children may prefer one type of fastener over another. If you only have masks with ear loops and your child is bothered by them, you may need to adapt with yarn or an elastic headband, so it fastens behind the head.
- If your child uses a chew fidget, they may be less likely to keep their mask on. Consider using a bandana that remains open at the bottom but covers their mouth and nose.
- For some children, you may need to start with just having the mask on their neck without covering their nose and mouth.
- Initially attempt trials during situations where preferred environments and people are available.
- Some children may benefit from seeing a photo or video of themselves wearing a mask. Consider using photo editing software. If your child will let you hold the unfastened mask in front of their face, snap a picture. Or use a picture of your child (such as a school photo) and lay the mask over the image of their face.
- You will most likely need to gradually increase the amount of time your

child wears the mask or gradually increase the placement of the mask over nose/mouth.

- If your child has worn a mask for brief periods, use the estimated time as your baseline for expanding to longer times.
- If your child will not currently tolerate a mask at all, reward other aspects of mask wearing, such as putting on one ear loop.
- Keeping a log or chart will help you and your child monitor progress.

Here's a sample session:

- If your child wears a mask for two minutes, the first goal would be to wear the mask for three minutes.
- Start by saying: "Let's practice wearing your mask."
 - » Your child can be offered an activity to do while wearing the mask, such as watching a cartoon, favorite show episode or YouTube.
 - » Your child can be presented with If This/Then This with a selection of rewards that will be provided after wearing the mask.
 - » If possible, let your child pick a mask to wear. You can also let your child pick a mask for the parent or sibling to wear.
 - » Your child will put on the mask with help from the caregiver.
- After they wear the mask for three minutes, give the selected reinforcer along with verbal praise: "Good job wearing your mask!"
- Plan to do this a several times a day at various times of day.
- After a few days of success at this short period of time, gradually increase the time your child is wearing the mask.

Wearing a mask in the community

- Take photos of your grocery store, pharmacy and/or available public settings where your child will need to wear a mask. Use these photos on the If This/Then This board and say, "Wear your mask and we can go to the park."
- Use a no-nonsense manner and language at your child's communication level: "Yes, we are going to _____, if you wear your mask."
- Plan initial brief practice trips in the community wearing a mask.
 - » Start by trying to take your child only to preferred places, like the park or a toy store, so they learn to associate the mask with doing fun things. Once your child is used to wearing a mask more easily, you can work on short trips to less fun places, like the grocery store.
 - » Provide praise and powerful reinforcers after the successful brief trip.
- Have an extra additional adult or older sibling available to assist, if possible.
- If your child removes their mask, remind them that being at the park or earning a reward means they must wear the mask. For example, you could say, "Keep your mask on or we have to leave." Use a consistent message across caregivers.
- If you need to leave, remain calm. Simply remind your child the next time you leave the house to try to keep the mask on longer.

While these tips will help start the learning process for your child, success may come slowly. Remember to focus on small changes. Progress will come with consistency and practice!

This guide was developed and written by faculty and staff at Geisinger's Autism & Developmental Medicine Institute including Barbara Haas-Givler, MEd, BCBA, and Cora Taylor, PhD.

This material has been produced by Geisinger with generous support from The Rite Aid Foundation.



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Safety

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