

Teaching Your Child to Tolerate Wearing a Mask:

Tips and Guidelines



We are all living in a new reality with a lot of changes, and we all know that some children and young adults with autism will face challenges associated with these changes. The CDC and government officials are recommending that everyone wear face masks when going out into public. Here are some tips and guidelines to help your child be successful if they are hesitant or resistant to wearing face masks.

Important Things to Consider

- When first starting out it will be best to start working on mask tolerance at home before attempting trials out in the community. You will have more control over the situation at home to start.
- Know your child's behaviors and early warning signs. **If your child is displaying early warning signs that may lead to dangerous behaviors such as aggression or self-injury, end the session immediately.** It is important to be successful, but it is far more important to keep your child and family safe.
- This may take time, so don't get discouraged!
- Always reach out to your teacher/consultant if you have any question or concerns, we are always here to help!

General Desensitizing Guidelines

Your child may benefit from a less formal approach, following these general desensitizing guidelines. Try these first as they are easy to implement and don't require a formal plan or protocol. Remember to REINFORCE your child! See Reinforcement section below. If your child is NOT successful using these guidelines, or you are unable to get your child to put on the mask at all, please see the section below on implementing more formal protocols.

- Allow your child to choose their own material or mask
- Allow your child to interact with the mask in comfortable environment
- Encourage your child to wear for very short periods of time and multiple times per day
- Determine any areas of discomfort and make adjustments
- Increase amount of time and number of times per day
- Continue to increase amount of time every few days as tolerated
- If you have a social story, read it regularly and prior to an outing in which face mask will be worn (social stories can be provided by your child's behavior consultant or teacher)

(information provided by Debbie Schutt, MS, of Parent Network of WNY, presentation April 27, 2020)



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Guidelines to Implementing a Structured Protocol

Your child may require a protocol to desensitize them to wearing a mask, if the desensitizing guidelines above are not successful. Please note that the following guidelines **are to be utilized with the support of your child's behavior consultant or teacher.**

Establish a Starting Point (Baseline)

- Correctly place the mask on your child and time how long your child wears the mask.
 - Once the child removes the mask or adjusts it in a way that it is no longer correctly on their face, stop the timer.
- Timers on phones work fine, but if you don't have access to a cellphone or timer, mark what time you started using any clock and then mark the time when they removed the mask.
- If your child refuses to put on the mask or immediately takes it off, place the mask near your child and record how long they will tolerate the mask near them.
 - Once your child moves away from the mask or moves the mask away from them, stop the timer.
- During this baseline phase you are **NOT** verbally reinforcing (i.e. great job wearing your mask) or providing reinforcement items (i.e. snacks, iPad). These will come later, after you begin working on increasing their ability to wear or tolerate the mask.
- **Once you have determined the length of time your child can tolerate the mask, contact your teacher/and or behavior consultant and they will help you develop the steps to increase the time your child tolerates putting the mask on/having it near them or if you have any questions about the process.**

Reinforcement

Regardless of your approach, it is important to determine a reinforcer motivating enough for your child to want to work towards in return for tolerating the mask. Here are some general guidelines about using reinforcement effectively at home.

- Reinforcement can be tangible (i.e. iPad, video games, television) or edible (i.e. preferred snacks). Being able to remove the mask may be reinforcing enough by itself!
- If possible, whatever reinforcement is the most highly preferred, try to use that reinforcer specifically for mask tolerance only. This may not always be necessary for each child. It may be a good discussion to have with your teacher/consultant.
- Set your timer. While your child is wearing the mask or allowing it to be near them, provide periodic verbal praise and reminders to them about what they are working for to help motivate them to keep going.
 - “You are doing a great job wearing your mask!”
 - “Remember if you keep wearing your mask, you can get the iPad!”
- Once the timer expires, if your child wore or tolerated the mask for the set amount of time, praise them and give them their earned prize (i.e. “I love how you kept your mask on, you can have the iPad now!”)
- If your child was unable to keep the mask on or tolerate it for the set amount of time, you can still provide them with verbal praise; however, withhold the reinforcer until a successful trial is completed (i.e. “I love how you wore your mask, but remember we need to keep it on longer if you want the iPad. Let’s try again!”). You may need to lower the timer to help them become successful.

