

# Helping Children Return to School When Face Masks Are Required

## What to Know

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced families to adjust to an unusual “new normal,” impacting even basic everyday routines. While you might feel equipped to deal with these changes, your child might find the back-to-school transition challenging. The many changes and loss of routine and structure can be a source of anxiety and fear.

Returning to school can be stressful during the best of times, and with new and frequently changing COVID-19 safety guidelines in place, your child might be struggling to adjust. One guideline that many school districts have put into place is mandatory face masks while in school. Along with physical distancing and hand washing, face masks help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Most children are now used to seeing people in masks, but some children may still feel uneasy.

Wearing a mask can be especially difficult for children with anxiety, sensory differences, and autism. Your child may not want to wear a mask and have a hard time keeping it on, or they might be sensitive to the way the mask feels on their face, head, and ears. Some children may even feel panicked wearing a mask.

Children may also be confused as to why the requirements for wearing face masks keep changing. It is important to answer their questions honestly. You can say something like: “The Coronavirus changes and now people are getting a virus that spreads very easily. That’s why many people feel that wearing masks is important again.”

One of the best ways you can help your child is to prepare them for what is going to happen when they return to school. Although many aspects of the school routine will remain the same, some children are returning to school after more than a year of remote learning. Offering your child age-appropriate information can help ease their worry and answer any questions they have.

Here are a few ways that you can help with this transition:

- 1. Start at home.** Review social distancing rules and practice wearing masks at home. You can explain why they might need to wear a mask at school. Create a back-to-school routine and stick to it. Make learning playful by incorporating it into activities like cooking or while playing games.
- 2. Contact your child’s school.** Familiarize yourself with the updated guidelines that will be in place at your child’s school. Thoroughly review the school district’s safety plan in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Find out if children must wear masks all day.
- 3. Let your child talk about their worries and fears.** Ask questions and explore how your child is feeling about returning to school.

**4. Help your child identify strategies to regulate their emotions and reduce stress.** Deep breathing and mindfulness skills can be a great way for your child to cope.

**5. Make it fun.** Find fun, colorful masks with superhero characters, silly faces, or animal prints. Allow your child to decorate a plain mask with markers, stickers, beads, or sequins. Personalizing the face mask makes it a more normal part of their routine. Also, keep an extra mask in the pocket of your child's backpack.

**6. Give your child choices.** Giving your child choices can be empowering and make what they must do seem a bit easier. Get input on what they like and what feels right. For example, try straps over ears vs. using a mask extender.

Face masks are an important tool in preventing the spread of COVID. Don't hesitate to talk with your child's pediatrician or the school nurse if you have any questions about your child wearing a face mask.

Remember, to be effective, masks should:

- cover both the nose and mouth.
- fit snugly but comfortably against the sides of the face.
- be secured with ear loops or ties.
- have multiple layers of fabric.
- allow for unrestricted breathing.
- be washed and dried after use.

### **What to Do**

What are some things you can do at home that will make your child more comfortable wearing a mask at school? Explain.

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Contact your child's school. What are the updated guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19? Briefly describe.

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Do you have any questions or concerns about the guidelines? If yes, write them down.

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Who can you address your concerns with? \_\_\_\_\_

Schedule a time to speak with this person. How did it go? Were your questions answered and concerns addressed? Why or why not?

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Spend some time talking with your child about their worries and fears. Write them down.

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What are some ways you can help your child cope?

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Describe some strategies you can teach your child to reduce stress and anxiety while at school. For example, a simple deep breathing exercise or mindfulness activity. Check out [www.gonoodle.com](http://www.gonoodle.com), <https://parentswithconfidence.com/25-mindfulness-practices-for-kids-who-cant-sit-still/>, or <https://www.mindfulmazing.com/15-mindfulness-exercises-for-kids/>

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What are some choices you can give your child? Wearing a face mask at school might be non-negotiable, but what are some ways your child can have a say?

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## Reflections on This Exercise

What else can you do to help your child cope with wearing a face mask at school?

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After completing this exercise, is your child more comfortable with wearing a face mask? Why or why not? Explain.

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