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Technical Assistance Bulletin

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Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services | Supplement to TAB #20-07



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Tips to Support Mask-Wearing for Students with Disabilities

The use of masks or other face coverings can be challenging for some young learners and students with significant disabilities, extreme sensory issues, or other healthcare needs. For their own health and safety and that of other students and staff in the school environment, helping students increase their tolerance for wearing a mask is important. With intentional, proactive, individualized instruction and behavior support, many students can learn to wear a mask properly for sustained periods. The following guides considerations for gathering baseline skill information, the development and implementation of a plan, followed by some strategies and resources. As with any plan of instruction for a student with disabilities, family/parent participation, individualization, and the IEP should be considered. The IEP team may need to consider formal behavior assessments (FBAs) and behavioral intervention plans (BIPs).

While a small number of students may be unable to use masks for medical or sensory reasons, for most, mask-wearing is a skill that can be taught using effective instructional practices. New skills and behaviors are developed and improved through a systematic process. This process includes identifying the desired skill or behavior, understanding the student's baseline skillset, developing the plan to build or reinforce the skill, establishing the criteria for mastery, and evaluating progress. A recursive approach of data collection, review, and analysis to update and improve the effectiveness of the plan is a best practice. At times and for some students, a complete task analysis to outline the scaffolding of skills may be critical. This tips document is specific to mask-wearing; however, keep in mind the following process and think abouts can be generalized to other new skills such as physically distancing, appropriate greetings, and hand washing.

To identify the base line skill set, develop and improve the skill of mask-wearing or address behavioral concerns around masking, it is important to think about each student individually and to recall that behavior is a form of communication. Begin by engaging in authentic communication with the family to gather information regarding the present level of skill development and gather data about the factors impacting the behavior. Consider the following questions to guide the conversation.

- Is the wearing of a mask contraindicated due to a medical condition or developmental or safety consideration? Using the IEP team process, consider reasonable accommodations or modifications for these students as well as students who cannot achieve minimum safety skills due to their disability. Include the school nurse/local health official in the discussion.
- How often has the student worn a mask in the home or community?
- What is the length of time the student can tolerate wearing the mask before removing it?

- Are there any noticeable behaviors that suggest the student is about to remove the mask?
- Based on family input, observation, and other knowledge of the student, consider why the student might be refusing or removing the mask. Is the student tactile sensitive? Does the student have other behaviors, such as thumb sucking or touching their face, that is interrupted or inhibited by the mask? Are some masks (colors, styles, materials) tolerated better than others?
- What does the behavior of removing the mask communicate about the student’s needs? Does the student have or need a reliable, efficient way of communicating that they are uncomfortable and would like a break?
- What is the response when the student removes the mask? Does it result in attention, removal from a situation or task? Does the response unintentionally reinforce the behavior that is being changed?
- What is the individualized minimum length of time for the student to sustain and tolerate wearing the mask to successfully return to the school building? Are there particular environments and activities (e.g., riding the bus) in which mask-wearing is especially critical? Are there additional adaptations or accommodations that are appropriate? Can greater distancing be achieved in challenging environments?
- What is known about the student’s learning profile, and how does this inform the plan? What strategies and reinforcers have been successful in helping the student develop other skills and behaviors?

Use the information gathered to intentionally design and implement a plan for guided or direct instruction, modeling, and practice; utilize strategies known to be effective with the student, which the family can support. Design a simple data collection chart considering the daily schedule, behaviors, and minimum length of mask-wearing time necessary for the student’s safe participation in direct in-person instruction. For the student that has not achieved the minimum length of time to return to the school building, and if the school system permits in-home instruction, consider the home as the first environment for direct instruction for these critical safety skills.

To promote an effective and consistent implementation plan, remember to address necessary training for the use of the identified visual cues, hand signals, verbal reminders, etc., for all family members, service providers, bus drivers, and other staff that work with the student. Provide follow-up check-ins to promote sustained consistency.

The following chart provides some strategies to support skill development:

Skill Area	Strategies
Proactive strategies to teach and encourage mask-wearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a short video or use readymade content to share with families about how to put the mask on, how to take off, and store masks, for example, at lunchtime and explain why they are important. BrainPOP Videos • Use a personalized social story that is sent home for the family to read and discuss. Social Stories about Wearing a Mask • Develop and practice social stories to define/practice expectations for riding the bus, entering the building, participating in class, and interacting with others that include mask-wearing.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate into circle time or the opening routine, a social story, or mask song about wearing a mask while in school and the community. Wearing a mask to school • Use a timer, an alert, and a system of rewards to increase tolerance. • Incorporate student preference and choice by offering masks with different colors, preferred characters, different materials, etc. • Encourage families to experiment with different types of masks and different types of attachments: loops behind ears, tie at the back of the head, attachments to a button on a ball cap or headband, or neck gaiters. • Consider having students personalize their own mask or face shield. • Incorporate masks into art projects and play activities. Create a mask for a favorite stuffed animal, doll, or puppet. Generate self-portrait art, including the wearing of a mask. • Develop a story with a masked hero or the masked student as the central character. • Create photo badges of the student wearing a mask. • Teach the student an appropriate way to ask for a mask break and honor those requests. Incorporate cues or prompts into communication plans or devices when needed.
<p>Proactive strategies to teach and encourage tolerating others wearing masks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Who’s Who visual photo gallery, including photos of students, teachers, staff, and family members with and without masks. Seeing others wearing masks • Encourage everyone to wear a full-face photo badge or button. • For students with low vision, use braille or tactile markers on badges attached to flexible lanyards that identify personnel or peers entering personal space. Support notification with an audible alert. • Explore how different key people sound with a mask on/mask off, explore/record how the student sounds, make funny noises. • Consider the use of clear masks or masks with clear panels to improve the understanding of speech and facial expressions.
<p>Response strategies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide scheduled and frequent reinforcement of compliance. • Ensure the frequency of positive reinforcement far exceeds the number of corrective reminders. “Catch wearing the mask” and recognize. • Gradually increase the amount of time the student is expected to wear the mask. • Use verbal and non-verbal cues to remind the student of expectations. • Use “first-then” boards, visual timers, and other strategies based on the student’s needs to indicate times when the mask must be worn and when it can be removed. • Avoid inadvertently reinforcing mask refusal/removing or other target behaviors requiring modification.

Environmental modifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create intentional opportunities for regularly scheduled mask breaks for everyone. • Create alternative safe spaces where individuals struggling to wear masks can take requested breaks, consider increased physical distance. • Include regular outdoor time when masks can be removed. • Take advantage of outdoor learning spaces, such as existing pavilions, tents/canopies; add opportunities for small group outdoor learning activities that allow masks to be removed. • Teach and reinforce physical distancing, including the use of visual reminders and/or physical barriers to promote safety if masks cannot be worn. • Provide staff with enhanced protective equipment, such as face shields, in addition to cloth masks when physical distancing cannot be maintained (i.e., personal care, transferring)
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Additional Resources

[Guidance for the use of Cloth Face Coverings in Schools](#) (August 4, 2020, Maryland State Department of Education, and Maryland Department of Health)

[COVID-19 Guidance for Child Care Facilities](#) (August 28, 2020, Maryland State Department of Education, and Maryland Department of Health)

[Guidance for K-12 School Administrators on the Use of Masks in Schools](#) (CDC considerations for wearing masks in schools and public settings)

[Additional Considerations for the Use of Masks among K-12 Students](#) (CDC, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Factsheet)

[Office for Special Education Program’s resources related to COVID-19](#) (Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Update)

[Questions and Answers for K-12 Public Schools in the Current COVID-19 Environment](#) (USDOE, Office of Civil Rights, September 28, 2020)

For more information, call 410-767-0249
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