

What can make mask wearing a struggle and how to respond

For both teenagers and adults, face masks can be confronting or overwhelming – a constant, visible reminder of how COVID-19 is still affecting our daily lives and communities. Also, when people wear face masks, you can't see their facial expressions, and this can be unsettling especially for those students who have experienced prior trauma and are hypervigilant for signs of threat. It can affect the way everyone interacts with others. Wearing masks for long stretches can be a real struggle, especially for those who learn and think differently.

Here are some of the reasons why it's hard for some young people to wear a mask, and tips for helping.

1. Impulsivity and wearing masks

Impulsive young people often act without thinking. They may pull off their mask to talk to friends or teachers without realizing they're doing it. They don't mean to be defiant. But they struggle with self-control, which makes it hard to stop and think about the rules or risks.

Quick tip for families

Clip a breakaway lanyard to one of the elastic ear straps of the mask. That way when it's pulled off, it's hanging around your child's neck as a reminder to put it back on. (It also won't drop on the ground.)

Quick tip for teachers

If we are able to remain calm then we are more able to respond in an informed way whilst also reducing further escalation on the part of the young person. You might be feeling stressed or upset about the situation yourself – that's natural. A few deep breaths before you talk can help you feel calmer.

Instead of giving orders, give options, such as: "if you're finding that mask difficult to wear do you want to get a disposable one from the office that may be a bit more comfortable". You can also reiterate the expectations around mask wearing.

Be aware of your body language and vocal tone, and make sure the person feels heard. Let the young person know you are not a threat.

2. Sensory challenges and wearing masks

Wearing a mask can be very upsetting for young people with sensory processing challenges. They may not be able to tolerate the feel, smell, or closeness of a mask. That extreme discomfort can cause them to take off or fiddle with their masks. Or it could lead to dysregulation.

Quick tip for families

Invite your child to try on a few different kinds of masks. Ask your child how the masks feel. Is there one mask that's more comfortable than the others? If so, consider having a few extra of those masks on hand. Silk masks (which are a little pricey!) can be very comfortable to wear and last a long time with gentle washing, so this might be a good investment.

Quick tip for teachers

Check in with parents and carers about how the young person has been tolerating wearing masks in other places. If you know a young person has a hard time with masks, allow for regular outdoor mask breaks.

3. Trouble with focus and wearing masks

Young people who struggle with focus and memory can have a hard time following rules. They may miss directions the teacher gives about mask-wearing or quickly forget them.

Quick tip for families

First, make sure your young person knows why masks are important. Look at the school's guidelines, and then create a list of rules for where and when to wear a mask at school. You can do this in writing or using pictures. Go over the rules every morning before school.

Quick tip for teachers

Be open with young people about the fact that we all forget things sometimes. As a class, talk through how you can respectfully remind others to put their masks on. You can also use when-then sentences to model what needs to happen. ("When you put on your mask, then you can meet us in the art room.")

4. *Trouble with motor skills and wearing masks*

Poor motor skills can make it physically hard for young people to get masks on and off and adjust them to fit well. Young people may struggle in a few ways. They might have trouble making the right movements. Or they might find it hard to grasp and manoeuvre the elastic ear bands. Some young people may have trouble following the steps involved.

Quick tip for families

Give your young person lots of practice getting masks on and off.

Quick tip for teachers

Talk to parents and caregivers about practising at home. Tell families where young people are getting tripped up in the process, so they know what to practice. And share the different types of face coverings your school allows.

5. *Other potential reasons:*

- Need for control
- Unity with peers – rejecting authority may allow to show allegiance to peers whilst also establishing status with peers
- Not understanding the reason for mask wearing
- If the consequence for not wearing a mask is being sent home then this may be a preferable outcome for those students who struggle in school

Additional Strategies:

Empathise with their feelings

If a young person is reluctant to wear a mask, you can empathise with, label and validate their feelings. Being curious as to the reason underpinning the refusal helps them to feel listened to and understood.

- 'I get that you feel embarrassed and uncomfortable about masks. I felt like that at first too, but I got used to it after a few wears. I've been reminding myself that the sooner we slow the spread, the sooner the need to wear masks in schools will be stopped'
- I get that you are worried about the impact wearing a mask all day will have on your skin. (Silk masks are also good for this – see above.)

This can be followed with limit setting and problem solving during which facts are re-iterated *e.g. in order to be together in classrooms we have to wear masks to ensure everyone's safety. How can we make mask wearing easier for you?*

In order to respond in a way that does not exacerbate the situation or reinforce the action of not wearing a mask you will need to find out why they can't or don't want to wear it

If they find a mask uncomfortable then masks of different materials, shapes etc can be tried including those with a tie behind the head rather than around the ears. If it's fogged glasses that are causing a problem, a better fitting mask and anti fog spray can be helpful.

Does the young person show signs of anxiety and avoidance of school? If so then the cause of the avoidance needs to become a focus rather than the means they use to achieve the avoidance. Staffordshire EPS guidance surrounding school avoidance can be found here [Emotionally-Based-School-Avoidance-Guidance-SCC-EPS-Sept-2020-PDF.pdf \(staffordshire.gov.uk\)](#)

We need to consider that sending a child home for not wearing a mask may reinforce this behaviour rather than acting as a deterrent.

Discuss the reason why masks are being worn

Young people need to be informed and regularly reminded of the reasons behind the need to wear masks. The clearer the students are about the impact of not wearing a mask, the more likely they are to comply. We have to acknowledge that students may receive conflicting viewpoints regarding the need to wear masks and we have to be respectful of this. There are some good videos online that illustrate what happens to the microparticles we breathe in and out, when we wear and don't wear masks.

It's good to talk about where young people are getting their information from and how reliable it is. This can help teenagers adapt to the situation and reduce any anxiety. It's a good idea to start by asking the young person what they know about face masks, how they (and their friends) feel about it and whether they have any questions.

Make mask wearing a 'habit'

Staff can also play a role in helping to ingrain the practice into normal behaviour. It's thought that we have to do a new thing many times over before it starts to become a habit. So if every lesson only ends once all students have put on their masks, it won't be long before students are reaching for their masks before their teacher even says a word.

Positive recognition using the principle of intermittent reinforcement

You could introduce a mask lottery. Raffle tickets could be handed out to those wearing masks. Tickets could be entered into a weekly draw and all winners get prizes. The more times you get spotted in your mask, the more tickets you get and the greater your chance of winning. This idea stands or falls on the quality of prizes – prizes have to be something the students really want.

These are tricky times for everyone and so it is helpful to be aware of our own emotional states before we engage with a young person surrounding mask wearing. When calm we are more able to contain the emotions of the young person whilst also being able to respond using our thinking rather than emotional brain.

Dr Adele Thacker

Educational Psychologist for Staffordshire Virtual School

Acknowledgements to:

Raising children.net.au - [Face masks, teenagers & COVID-19 | Raising Children Network](#)

Understood - [Trouble Wearing a Mask: How to Help Kids at School | Understood - For learning and thinking differences](#)

