

Helping Children Wear a Mask – Revised January, 2022



Most children have become used to wearing masks during COVID 19. Currently, with the fast-spreading Omicron variant, it is more important than ever that children and their families practice safe masking. Public Health has updated the guidelines for safe masking. <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/masks/>

When talking with your child about COVID 19 and mask wearing, it is important to use language that is simple and straightforward. Reassure your child that we are doing everything we can to keep everyone safe. Explain to your child that people wear masks to protect themselves and each other from the germs that could make us sick. Wearing a mask helps us stay healthy and everyone at school will be asked to wear a mask. Let your child know that even if they are wearing a mask, their teacher knows who they are. You may find using a Social Story helpful in explaining wearing a mask. You can find an example of one here: <https://famiestogetherinc.org/forms/covid-19/WearingAMaskStoryforChildren.pdf>

Here are some tips to help you teach your child to wear a mask properly.

1. Model wearing a mask

- You are required to wear a mask when you go shopping or into other buildings and your child will likely already have seen you wearing one. At home, show your child how to put on a mask. Model this for them by putting on your own mask. Use positive language when you are putting on the mask. Talk to your child about how you can still breathe and talk easily when wearing a mask.
- Suggest putting a mask on your child's favourite stuffed animal. Take a picture. Take a family picture of everyone wearing a mask.
- If your child video chats with relatives, ask them to put on a mask and wear it for a few minutes while they talk to your child.

2. Learning to Wear a Mask

You will be able to assess your child's comfort with a mask. Some children will have no trouble at all wearing a mask while others may need some time to adjust.

For a child who has not worn a mask before or is apprehensive, start small and build up gradually so your child can stay relaxed. You may have to begin with just having a mask visible on a table in the house before you ask your child to try one on.

Begin by showing your child how you put the mask on. Show them how to take it off and where to put it when they are finished with it. Public Health has guidelines for how to handle your mask. <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/masks/#wearing>

Here are some steps you can take to help your child get used to a mask. Make sure your child is comfortable with each step before you move to the next. If you start with one step for the first day that is fine. Comfort is key to success.

- Have your child hold their mask up to their face. Do this several times. Then have them practice looping the mask over their ears. This may require some adjustment to get a comfortable fit.
- If your child is apprehensive, start practising by having them wear the mask just covering their chin, then add the mouth, then all the way up to just below their nose. Finally, have them wear it in the proper position, covering both their mouth and nose.
- A good fit for the mask is important. Explain and show your child how to make sure the mask fits properly. Make sure that the mask is large enough to comfortably cover the nose, mouth and chin without gaps and fits close to the face so as not allow air to escape from the edges. Tell your child this is the way they will be wearing their mask at school.
- Depending on your child's comfort level, have your child wear their mask for a few seconds, then for a minute or two longer and build up in small increments until they can wear it for extended periods of time. This could take several days. When your child can wear a mask for five to seven minutes, try increasing the time in five-minute increments. Always let your child know how long they will have the mask on. (You may be able to build time up more quickly than this. Follow your child's lead.)
- Have a clear signal to let your child know how long they need to wear the mask. Count down or use a timer (digital or visual) to signal when your child can take a break or take off the mask.
- Let your child engage in an activity while wearing the mask i.e., reading a book, listening to a story, watching a favourite video or TV show.

- Your child may feel more comfortable with a favourite toy or stuffed animal wearing a mask along with them.
- It is important when wearing a mask to try not to touch it or pull at it. Let your child know this.
- Use lots of positive praise throughout!
- If your child takes their mask off before the time period you have set, pause and restart. Praise what went well. If your child is upset wait until they are calm. Try to end each practice session on a positive note: For example, if your goal was a minute but your child didn't quite get there, end the practise with them wearing the mask for 5, 10 or 30 seconds, or just have them bring the mask to their face. It is important that your child ends on a positive note.
- Try using a First _____, Then strategy. First, we will practise wearing a mask and then you can _____.

3. Practise Wearing a Mask Outside of the Home

When you child is comfortable wearing a mask for approximately 30-35 minutes start having your child wear a mask in different settings i.e., during a video chat, in the car, at a store. You can help normalize the experience by taking pictures of family members or friends wearing their mask. Don't forget to wear your mask too!

4. Wearing the Mask at School

Work with your child's teacher and/or other education staff to support your child wearing a mask at school. A Student Planning Team may help to develop a plan to help your child adapt to wearing a mask at school.

