

**Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities**  
in the Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics  
*at the University of Rochester Medical Center*

# A Toolkit

## FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD WEAR A MASK DURING COVID-19

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*Wearing a mask is important and will help us stop the spread of COVID-19. Most places are requiring people to wear a mask right now. As you start to go out more, you may worry about your child's safety and ability to wear a mask.*

*Your child may not want to wear a mask and have a hard time keeping it on. Wearing a mask can be really hard for children with anxiety, sensory differences, and autism. Your child may be extra sensitive to the way the mask feels on their face, head, and ears. Some children may even feel panicked when a mask is put on them. Some kids won't like the way mask looks on themselves or others, and might feel scared. Other children just won't like it because it is different and doing something different is hard for them.*

\*THIS TOOLKIT HAS BEEN UPDATED AS OF AUGUST 19, 2020

# TIPS FOR SUCCESS

*Here are some ways you can help your child feel comfortable:*

## 1. Consider the type of mask you get and how your child wears it:

Your child may be more likely to wear a mask if:

*The mask has their favorite color, sports team, character, or special interest on it:*

- [ShopDisney.com](https://ShopDisney.com) is selling a variety with prints of some of its most popular characters and movie themes
- [Amazon.com](https://Amazon.com) is selling a variety of mask with prints and characters such as Spider Man, the dinosaurs, camouflage, flags
- [OldNavy.com](https://OldNavy.com) sells packs of multiple reusable masks in different patterns
- [Etsy.com](https://Etsy.com) has many sellers with different types of designs as well such as CarpeDiemWorkshoppe which sells masks with popular characters also.

*Your child finds the mask more comfortable:*

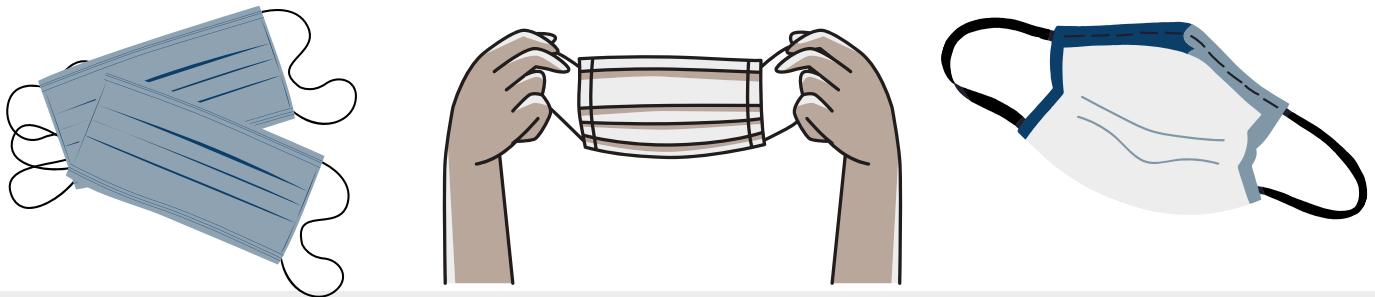
- **Face Mask Extenders or Ear Savers** can be found online on sites like Amazon or Etsy. These put the pressure on the back of the head (like straps for glasses) instead of on the backs of the ears.
- **Using a Headband with Buttons** that the mask attaches on. These also take away stress from the backs of ears by hooking mask straps onto buttons on a headband. Of course, this does mean having to wear a headband and a mask.
- **Face masks with around-the-head tie straps.** This option is exactly what it sounds like. These are masks that tie around the back of your head much like you would tie a shoe. The ties are sometimes fabric while some makers use more “stretchy” material. Many of these also can be found on sites like Amazon or Etsy. They come in many prints and styles.

*\*Gaiters used to be recommended as a comfortable alternative mask for kids. However, new research says that gaiters as masks may not be effective and might not stop disease spread.*



## *You give your child choices:*

- Having a choice can be empowering and make what a child “has to do” seem better. If your child can tell you, get input on what they would like and what feels right. You may even want to try out some options before buying. For example, try to get them to use a disposable mask you already have but in different ways (straps over ears vs. you holding the straps as if held by a mask extender).



## **2. Prepare your child for wearing a mask:**

It will be important to set your child up for success before your child needs to wear their mask. Although this varies by child, it may take repeated prep and practice. Consider starting at least a week or so before needing to go out in a public setting.

- **Explanations:** Explain to your child why it is important to wear a mask. Some children really like to know the reason why they have to do something. Try to make this explanation positive, so your child doesn't get scared. For example, you could tell your child “We wear a mask to keep ourselves and other people safe. When we wear a mask, the virus can't jump from person to person. Masks stop the virus from moving.”
- **Modeling:** One of the first things you may do is show your child how you wear your own mask. Watch for your child's reaction to this, and comfort level around you when you wear your mask. Does your child avoid looking at you, or become upset? Does your child show any other changes in his or her behavior when you are wearing a mask? If so, you can help your child associate positive, fun things when you are wearing the mask. Save a special activity or game for when you wear the mask.
  - Your child also might like if you involve their favorite dolls, stuffed animals, or characters in this. You could let them put the mask on these toys, and talk about how their favorite toy/character also wears a mask to stay safe.



## *Using visuals*

- **Pictures:** You could show your child pictures of other people in masks. Certain people, like doctors, may wear more protective gear, such as a face shield and gown. Some children might find this scary. It can help to show them this before they go out and prepare them.



- **Social Stories:** There are many social stories available describing COVID19 and use of masks that are available online. It may help to change a social story to use words that you use regularly. Putting your own pictures into the story may be helpful as well.

- **Videos:** Some YouTube videos have been created that help explain using a mask.
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnP-uMn6q\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnP-uMn6q_U)
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgaKLpSxQag>

### **3. When models and explanations aren't enough:**

Some children might need lots of practice with the mask to feel comfortable. You might have to start introducing the mask slowly to your child to help your child be comfortable. Here are steps that might help you (you can start at whichever step you need to):

#### ***Step 1:***

Encourage your child to first just touch and hold the mask. You can show them how you touch and hold the mask too ("Watch me... Now you try!"). You can give your child lots praise for doing this. If it helps, you could also give your child a reward for doing this, such as a favorite treat or time for a favorite activity. Try to make this fun for your child.

#### ***Step 2:***

Help your child get used to the mask touching their face, without putting it on. You could make a game of touching the mask to different parts of your and your child's face ("Touch nose... Now you do it!"). Eventually, you could hold the mask to your child's face in a way that mimics wearing it, without actually putting it on. Remember to keep using lots of praise and a reward each time you do this!

## *When models and explanations aren't enough cont...*

### **Step 3:**

When your child is comfortable enough with Steps 1 and 2, it may be time to try the mask on your child's face. You can start by just putting the mask on your child and taking it off right away. Again, you can demonstrate doing this and make it playful. This step may be harder for your child, so you might need to have a reward for them each time they try ("first put on mask, then M&M!"). Having a visual to show them what they will earn might help.

### **Step 4:**

Once your child lets you put their mask on them, they will need to start getting comfortable with it being on for longer. For this, start low and go slow! Start by having your child just keep the mask on for a few seconds, and then let them take it off and reward them. Slowly, you can encourage them to keep it on for longer and longer. Timers might be very helpful for this. There are lots of fun children's timers and countdowns you can download on your phone or find on the internet.

#### Website for timers



### **Step 5:**

Once your child is comfortable wearing their mask for a little while, try to get them to wear it while they are doing something else in the house, like watching television or playing a videogame. You might also want to get your child to move in their mask, like going for a walk in their mask. This will help them get really used to it so they are ready to go out with it on!

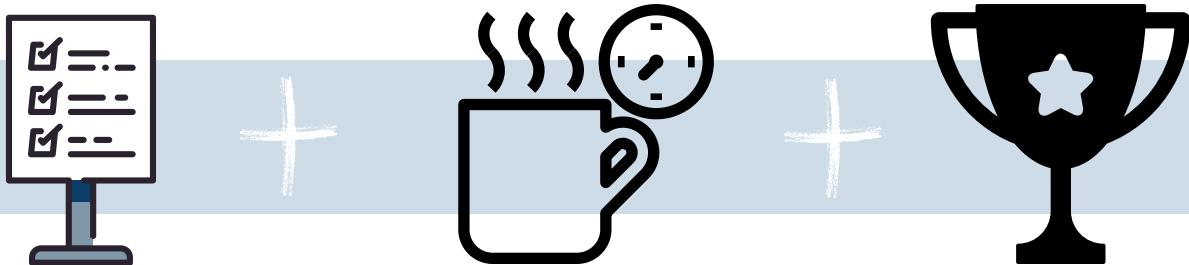
If your child is feeling really anxious while doing any of these steps, you might need to help them relax. Having calming items available, such as stress balls or bubbles, might help. You could also try to help your child take deep breaths and relax their body- there are lots of breathing apps that could help you with this.

Some children may take longer than others, or may have a lot of difficulty with a certain step. You might need to practice a step a lot before your child feels comfortable. Give your child lots of time to work through these steps and be patient!



## 4. Try out these things when your child goes out with their mask:

- **Rules:** You may find it helpful to make clear rules for your child about when, where, and why they may need to wear a mask. Using visuals as reminders or to explain what you want them to do may be helpful. For children who understand language well, simply reviewing the rules before you go out as a family could also work.
- **Breaks:** Your child may need breaks from wearing the masks. Make sure you give your child a clear way to ask for breaks if they need it. You may agree on a hand signal, checking in with them verbally, using a new button on their communication device, or creating a “break” card to hand you. You could give your child a break from the mask by taking them out of the place you are (e.g., leaving the store to go into the car for a few minutes), or by asking other people present to leave (e.g., ask the doctor to step out of the room for a minute).
- **Rewards:** Just like getting your child comfortable with the mask, rewards can go a long way in getting a child to cooperate. Wearing a mask in the “real world” can be treated like a chore and “getting a paycheck” for doing it may help quite a bit! Let your child know what they can earn for doing a good job keeping their mask on. You may need to set this up for them ahead of your outing, or bring something with you that your child would like to earn.



### *Where Can I Get a Mask?*

- **Online:** There are numerous options online. Below are some more popular websites, and a web search can lead you to many other vendor: OldNavy.com, zazzle.com, cubcoats.com, amazon.com, etsy.com, fanatics.com, Disney.com
- **Medical Appointments:** Once you arrive for your appointment you will likely be offered a mask. If not, you can request it from the front desk, or whomever you see first. You could also see if they can send you the mask ahead of your appointment, so you can practice with your child.

## *Where Can I Get a Mask? cont...*

- Local County/Town Options: A quick search on the internet can give you specific ideas for where to get a mask in your county. Sometimes at no cost. Calling your local fire department, town hall, or local community center may also be a good place to start. You can also reach out to your social clubs or religious groups you may belong to and ask if anyone is making them. If your neighborhood uses Nextdoor or has a Facebook page you can ask for suggestions there as well.



- Local Stores: Most grocery stores and pharmacy chains now offer protective gear such as masks.

### *One Final Note:*

*Wearing a mask is hard for a lot of people, and can be really hard for children. You can pick and choose what tips here might work best for you and your child. If your child has special needs, we encourage you to talk to your child's therapists and healthcare providers before exploring these options.*

This toolkit was developed by licensed psychologists at the Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities in the Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

*For more resources and support related to intellectual and developmental disabilities, please visit our website at the link below*

• [www.SCDD.URMC.edu](http://www.SCDD.URMC.edu) •

Toolkit designed by Jennifer Ward



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