



## Supporting Children with wearing Face Coverings in Primary Schools

Our school communities have been working very hard to keep each other safe. Everyone has been following new rules and routines and now we are asking older pupils in primary schools to join with adults in wearing a face mask in school.

Children may have different reactions to wearing face masks in school. Many children will adapt readily to this new requirement because they will have become used to wearing them in other settings. Some children, however, may need a little extra reassurance and guidance to help them to feel comfortable with wearing a face mask in school.

Talking to children about their feelings and listening to and answering their questions about wearing face coverings can help. Children need accurate, age-appropriate information to help them to understand why wearing face coverings in school is important at this time. When talking with children it may be helpful to remind them that this is a short term measure so that children are able to attend school regularly.

Parents and school staff are important role models for children. Modelling calm responses and coping strategies will help children manage any fears or worries they may have.

Some children with additional needs will need more time to adjust to wearing masks than others and may benefit from more tailored support.

These are some ways that might help:

- Use approaches such as visuals/story-based approaches to highlight the steps involved in putting a mask on as well as explaining the reasons and the benefits for wearing masks. (See Appendix 1)
- Play and/or drawing can be a good way to make children more comfortable wearing face coverings.
- Try to make face coverings appeal to the children's special interests.
- Parents could experiment with face coverings made of different fabrics and materials and/or different ways of holding the mask in place. For example some children may tolerate elastics around the ear well while others may prefer a fabric tie around the head.
- If necessary, parents could practice the wearing of a mask at home using a gradual exposure approach where the child is most at ease and where demands are low (e.g. during screen time). Gradual exposure could involve



steps such as initially just holding the mask, then holding the mask against the face, then placing the elastic around one ear before extending to full use. (See Appendix 2)

- Praise the child for wearing the mask. If appropriate, consider reinforcing mask wearing behaviour using a reward/incentive system.
- Face masks present specific challenges for children who are Deaf/hard of hearing. Perspex visors may be more 'Deaf friendly' and will support communication.
- Children with a visual impairment and those who are blind will require support and practice wearing a mask that covers the mouth and nose. Those with a visual impairment (VI), but with some vision, may have difficulty with glasses fogging up when wearing a face mask. The top of a mask can also lower peripheral vision and cause a visual distraction; in such cases a visor may be a more suitable option.
- In school engaging in calming and regulating activities, such as physical activity, drawing, music and relaxation/breathing exercises may support children who are struggling to adjust to this change.
- Incorporate outdoor breaks from mask-wearing into the school day.
- Remember, despite support some children may struggle to get used to wearing masks. Continue to be patient and empathetic.

The good news is that, with the right support and reassurance, most children will adapt to wearing face masks.



## Appendix 1: Sample Story-based Script about Wearing a Mask

COVID-19 is still here in Ireland.

It is a virus, it is very small and we cannot see it.

It can pass from person to person when we sneeze or cough.



Wearing a mask can help to keep us safe.

It stops the virus from spreading through the air.



My teacher wears a mask in school.

People wear masks in the shops.

I can wear a mask as well.



There are lots of different kinds of masks.

They are all good at keeping me safe.

My mask covers my nose.

My mask covers my mouth and chin.

It has loops that go around my ears.



I can get help to put my mask on.

I can practice wearing a mask at home.



It can feel different to have a mask on my face.

My face may feel warmer and that is ok. It is my breath that is warm.

I can breathe with my mask on.



I will take off my mask to eat my snack. When I am finished I will put it back on.

I can have fun with my friends when I am wearing my mask.





## Appendix 2: Middletown Centre for Autism Resources

	<p><i>The following resources are available to download from the Middletown Centre for Autism website:</i></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Resources to support mask-wearing</u></a></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Information around mask desensitisation</u></a></p> <p><a href="#"><u>Social story around wearing a mask</u></a></p>
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