

Mask Guidance for Children and Youth

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, masks are required of adults in public settings and recommended for children three and older, with exceptions for eating, drinking, and medical requirements. The general principle is that masks are used to limit potential harm to others by helping reduce their risk of infection (and they may have a secondary benefit to the wearer as well).

Until there is a vaccine, masks, hand washing, and physical distancing are key practices that will help prevent the spread of the virus. Masks are not a substitute for physical distancing, which is still the most effective practice to prevent infection and should be employed as much as feasible, but physical distancing can be a challenge with younger children.

There are almost always meaningful exceptions to even well thought out rules and we should be especially mindful of those for young people. Part of keeping children safe is to also safeguard their emotional well-being. Teachers should use their professional judgment; if the emotional harm done by wearing a mask outweighs the potential physical benefit, a mask should not be worn.

Children with severe cognitive or respiratory impairments may have a hard time tolerating a face mask, so special precautions may be needed with these children. These children may need to maintain greater physical distance from others or may need special equipment to monitor their oxygen levels (e.g. pulse oximeter). Children who are considered high-risk or severely immunocompromised are encouraged to wear an N95 mask for protection rather than a cloth mask.

Children between the ages of 3 and 5 must be supervised if they are wearing a mask. Providers should use their best judgment on when to remove a mask if it is creating discomfort or resulting in a child touching their face frequently. If a child cannot remove the mask on their own, without assistance, even if they are over the age of 3, they should not wear a mask.

Children and staff with fever or respiratory or gastrointestinal symptoms like a cough, congestion, runny nose, diarrhea, or vomiting should stay home and not attend school. Parents/Guardians should contact their primary provider or nurse hotline to discuss these symptoms.