

Family Tip Sheet

What to do if your child cannot wear a mask

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Holland Bloorview
Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Please note: The information in this tip sheet is for reference only. It is not a recommendation or endorsement of organizations, news sources, agencies or private businesses, or as a comprehensive resource list.

During the coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic, wearing a mask reduces the spread of droplets (small drops of moisture) when someone:

- Coughs
- Sneezes
- Speaks

For the person wearing the mask, it can help stop breathing in droplets that may contain the virus.

But for some children with disabilities, whether physical, cognitive, or intellectual, there are medical reasons that may prevent them from wearing a mask.

On July 7, 2020, the City of Toronto implemented a by-law that states that all individuals must wear a mask inside public indoor spaces.

This tip sheet was created to aid you in answering some concerns you may have about mask-wearing, particularly if your child is unable to do so, and how to respond to questions other people may ask.

Important things to consider

Mask-wearing, when done correctly, can help stop and slow the spread of COVID-19—but masks must be worn properly to work well and to keep your child safe.

- Kids under the age of two **should not** wear a mask, due to the risk of suffocation.
- You know your child best. If your child is between three to six years of age or has a disability, use your judgment when it comes to whether they should or should not wear a mask.
- Reasons your child may be unable to wear a mask might include:
 - they have difficulties taking their mask off,



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- they show signs of distress (crying, screaming, panicking) while wearing one
- they have difficulty breathing while wearing the mask
- This **poster from SickKids** shows the steps for proper mask-wearing. It is important to note that touching, moving, and playing with a mask while worn, can make the mask less helpful.

What do I say if people ask me why my child is not wearing a mask?

At times, people may question why your child isn't wearing a mask. If ever faced in this situation, you can offer one of these suggested sentences:

- My child is unable to safely wear a mask. Please stay 2 metres away.
- My child has a condition that impacts his/her ability to wear a mask properly. We are still using social and physical distancing of 2 metres or more, so that we are creating a safe environment for those around us.
- Please be supportive. My child has a medical condition that exempts him/her from wearing a mask.

Reasons children may not wear masks (exemptions)

Some children have exemptions (reasons) not to wear masks:

- The City of Toronto [references exemptions and the Human Rights Code](#)
- The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) also [outlines exemptions](#)
- [Masks can be uncomfortable](#) especially for those with autism

Above all, safety is the most important thing to consider when masking your child. Safety risks include:

- **Anxiety:** Wearing a mask is a “new normal” for some children and may induce stress.
- **Sensory processing:** Some kids may dislike the texture of the mask and the elastic on their skin. Similarly they may also be hypersensitive and be extra sensitive to smells/scents and may be triggered by the smell/feel of their breath within the mask.
- **Heat:** The hot summer weather can cause kids to feel uncomfortable in a mask
- **Epilepsy:** A mask can make it hard for a parent/caregiver to see if their child is showing pre-seizure facial expressions.

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- **Reduced ability to communicate:** For some children with hearing impairments, lip reading is important for communicating and a mask would prevent them from using this method.
- **Bringing germs close to the face:** Children who are very unfamiliar or uncomfortable with mask-wearing may touch their face more often to adjust their mask.

How can I support my child in mask-wearing?

Depending on a child's age, the idea of masks and mask-wearing can sometimes be confusing. To assist your child in their new normal, consider the following suggestions:

- Talk to them and explain it at their level
 - Use words and concepts they will understand.
 - Use a mask on one of their favourite toys to show as an example
 - Show them videos on masks:
 - [Masks for Kids by Dr. Olaf Kraus de Camargo \(CanChild\)](#)
 - [Dr. Cheddar on Wearing a Masks \(TVOKids\)](#)
 - There are more links below!
- [Be a role model by showing your child what a mask looks like and then wear a mask correctly as an example](#) (Children's Specialized Hospital)
 - It is important to remind your child not to touch the mask too often and to keep their hands away from their face.
- [Make COVID-19 mask-wearing a habit by using these suggestions from some social scientists](#) (CBC)
- [Try a pair or shape technique, like a reward system for wearing their mask](#) (Nationwide Children's Hospital)
- Help your child practice putting a mask on and wearing it within your home, before going outside.
 - This [video on Facebook](#) helps make mask-wearing easier for those with autism or sensory needs.
- Give them a choice: if using fabric masks, consider asking your child to choose a fabric in a colour or pattern they like.

Resources to help your child wear a mask

Booklet:

- [I Can Stay Healthy by Wearing a Face Mask](#) (Children's Specialized Hospital)
The booklet has three blank paper mask examples your child can colour and decorate, to help familiarize themselves with a mask

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Videos:

- [We Wear Masks – A Social Story About Coronavirus](#) (A PDF version of the story can be downloaded for free [here](#).)
- [Superheroes behind the mask: personal protective equipment \(PPE\) for kids](#) (Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario)

If my child cannot wear a mask, what safety practices can I use?

You know your child best. If they need to be exempted from mandatory mask-wearing, think about the following solutions:

- Talk to your family doctor to see if they can write a note exempting your child from wearing a mask. You can carry it with you anytime you leave the house.
- Continue to practice social distancing when out in public, staying 2 metres away from other people.
- Try to avoid being out during busy hours.
- Wash their hands regularly or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer where soap and water are not available.
- Bring hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes wherever you go.
- Consider these supports if your child is immunocompromised:
 - Tip sheet: [COVID-19: Information for parents of immunocompromised children and children with chronic medical conditions \(About Kids Health\)](#)

We encourage you to visit our **website** to access all of our COVID-19 or Coronavirus specific family tip sheets, which include virtual activity ideas, explaining COVID-19 to your kids, an example of a home schedule, emergency supports, and more.

If you are looking for other family resources that have to do with childhood disability, please visit www.hollandbloorview.ca/resourcecentre.

*Created by the Family Support Specialists and Family Leaders at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital; the Evidence to Care team, and Health Science Library & Archives on **July 10, 2020**. If you have a question or a resource to share, please feel free to reach out to us at resourcecentre@hollandbloorview.ca*

Holland Bloorview’s Grocery Foundation Family Resource Centre is a place where you can find information and resources on childhood disability that are helpful to you and your family. We have information on: respite, recreation, housing, funding, education, parenting and more. All Holland Bloorview workshops and events are listed on www.hollandbloorview.ca/familyevents Questions? Please e-mail resourcecentre@hollandbloorview.ca

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