

Dear Families,

We recognize that you and your children, like so many families across the United States, are in the midst of deciding the safest way to return to school this fall amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For children in many school districts, this may include being expected to wear face masks throughout the day. There are very few situations in which we would recommend that a child *not* wear a mask in school. These would include for children with severe lung or breathing problems where the mask would make breathing more difficult or for children who would not be able to remove the mask without assistance. Young children, children with autism spectrum disorder, and children with other developmental or behavioral concerns may face challenges in adjusting to mask-wearing as a result of not fully understanding why masks are now required, or because of sensory sensitivities. With proper planning and practice, however, many children may successfully learn to master mask-wearing.

Learning to wear a mask can help teach our children a valuable lesson about how they can contribute to public health and community efforts to keep themselves — and their friends, teachers and family members — safe. Mask-wearing and frequent hand-washing are now recognized as critical behaviors to help slow and reduce the spread of the coronavirus, and are being widely encouraged by public health agencies in our region and across the country. Our children can be empowered to contribute to these efforts.

We would like to offer families some tips about preparing for the upcoming school year, including how to help children become more comfortable with wearing a face mask. Because each district is developing their own re-opening guidelines, and because these may be adjusted as viral counts change, you should carefully monitor the school reopening plans in your district to understand what will be expected of your child in terms of distancing in the classroom and school bus and mask-wearing.

For children who receive behavioral or other therapeutic supports in the classroom provided by an outside agency, you should check on whether your district is permitting these outside contractors into the classroom. For children with hearing concerns or speech-language concerns who rely on lip-reading, you may be able to request teachers and other staff use transparent face masks.

To help your child with mask-wearing, we recommend the following:

- Allow children to select their own mask pattern or design.
- Beloved stuffed animals, dolls or action figures can also practice mask-wearing.
- Parents can model mask-wearing behaviors in the home and community.
- Practice wearing a mask in a safe space before your child leaves home.



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- You can gradually increase the amount of time your child is expected to wear a mask, emphasizing wearing it during times when social distancing is most difficult.
- You can provide positive rewards each time your child practices mask-wearing.
- Your family can read social stories about mask-wearing. We've provided several resources for you below.
- If your child is receiving behavioral or occupational therapies, you can ask that mask-wearing and adequate hand-washing be added to therapy goals. These can be added as goals to school-based individualized education plans (IEPs), as well.

We know that despite these practice efforts, some children with disabilities or behavioral health challenges may still be unable to tolerate masks for all or even part of the day. In these cases, you can discuss your concerns with your child's educational service coordinator, school nurse or other district representative to determine what accommodations can be made. You can also speak with your child's doctor or nurse about your concerns, and they may be able to provide documentation that your child is unable to comply with mask-wearing measures. Please keep in mind that according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health Order, documentation is not required that your child meets one of the exceptions for mask-wearing, but it may help to share that documentation if your child is asked to put a mask on. **However, we cannot stress enough that wearing a mask, if tolerated, is the safest option to minimize the risk of exposure to the coronavirus for children and their families.**

The benefit of in-person education and therapies, social exposure to peers, and daily routine and structure are immensely important to all children — and especially those with special needs. We hope that with practice and select accommodations, children can safely return to school and all of these opportunities that can help to foster their development.

Sincerely,

The Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics



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## Resources for COVID-19, including spread prevention and mask wearing

Below are links to resources related to mask-wearing, including videos by specialists about how to work with individuals with autism and/or with sensory sensitivities to get more comfortable with wearing a face mask.

CDC: recommendations for preventing spread of COVID-19

[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fprevention.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fprevention.html)

PA-ASERT's social story on mask-wearing, also available in Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Burmese and Russian: <https://paautism.org/resource/wearing-mask-social-story/>

Autism Little Learners:

Many social stories about COVID and masks – general and more specific — including wearing/seeing masks at school, the doctor's office, the bus, on an airplane; going back to school, staying home from school, social distancing

<https://www.autismlittlelearners.com/search/label/COVID-19>

Autism Speaks COVID-19 information and resources for families:

includes links to social stories, videos and articles

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/covid-19-information-and-resources-families>

Autism Speaks Social story: “We Wear Masks”

[https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/We\\_Wear\\_Masks\\_COVID-19.pdf](https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/We_Wear_Masks_COVID-19.pdf)

Video-recording:

CHOP PolicyLab webinar: Ensuring Support Services for Youth with Disabilities & Special Healthcare Needs Amid COVID-19

<https://policylab.chop.edu/webinars/ensuring-support-services-youth-disabilities-special-health-care-needs-amid-covid-19>

Video:

Making Mask-wearing Easier for Autistic Adults and Those with Sensory Needs | Autism Speaks

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_Q6OI\\_ij-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_Q6OI_ij-o)

Video:

Caregiver tips to make mask-wearing easier for people with autism | Autism Speaks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1I4BcpTfIk>



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