

Increasing Safety for Your Child during COVID-19

Behavioral Directions LLC recommends the following strategies for helping children with special needs learn the necessary skills to increase their own safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hand washing

- Use pump (not bar) soap and no-touch trash cans
- Use disposable towels
- Follow a task analysis to teach your child step-by-step how to wash his/her hands. Ask supervisor as needed.
- Be sure your child rubs his/her hands vigorously and continues for 20 seconds (adult or child counts or sings through a favorite song). Make it fun! Offer incentives/praise for good hand washing.
- When entering or leaving our office or any other location, be sure your child washes his/her hands.
- Introduce proper use of hand sanitizer (e.g., rubbing until evaporated, back and front of hands, not wiped on clothing).

Wearing a Mask

- Start off with modeling and gradual exposure. Work on desensitizing your child before you ask them to put on the mask. Have masks out and visible in your child's environment (normalize it). Note: asking your child to put on a mask and then discontinuing may lead to a stronger pattern of resistance and anxiety. Have other family members wear masks, even if just briefly to pair it with new, non-medical settings. Make positive, but accurate comments about the mask, such as "*I'm wearing my mask while on a walk to keep safe.*" Caregivers play a huge role in setting the tone that wearing a mask is acceptable and not scary.
- Show your child pictures of yourself or other family members wearing a mask and talk about it in a positive way, such as "*I'm wearing a mask to keep safe. We all need to do that when we leave home.*" Encourage relatives and friends to wear a mask on virtual interactions. Our staff can also model and expose your child to our own "*mask wearing*" during telehealth.
- Introduce the mask slowly to your child. Explain your expectations and start with small steps:
 - Use a fun pattern for the mask. Let your child select the pattern or color. Show your child your own fun pattern/colored mask, too, with a positive tone.
 - First, spend time talking about the mask (off the face) during progressive 15 sec., 30 sec. and 1-minute intervals. Use a timer if it helps. Keep it brief, fun and accurate. Build this into your session, if recommended. Plan for routine practices each day to gain skill development.
 - Be sure to select the right time and place to practice (e.g., not rushed, free from distractions and anxieties for yourself and your child, undivided attention, easier time of day). For some, it may be best to work practice in with more natural expectations. We recommend you try to tie it to a fun activity (first few minutes of a walk, while watching a favorite video during the practice interval or another engaging task) that can make it more tolerable.
 - Next, have your child touch the mask and talk positively with him/her about it.
 - Next, show your child how you put your own mask on (only briefly) then remove it. Be sure to smile and engage.
 - Finally, have your child practice putting the mask on for 15 sec., 30 sec., and 1-minute intervals. Go slowly (e.g., stay at each time for a few days.) A timer may help. Try having your child touch it to his/her face or head first, or hold the mask over his/her mouth and nose without securing it over the head or ears. Go slowly with your expectation, rather than presenting a step and backing down when your child resists. Set clear expectations "*Mask first, then (video/walk).*"
 - Continue with increased time. Use a **token board** to make reinforcement salient and powerful.

- Also, model and practice proper removal of the mask: avoid touching the front at all times, remove the straps first and discard, then to wash his/her hands.

Review this Mask social story with your child:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=lnP-uMn6q_U&app=desktop

Social Distancing

- Explain that we need to “Step back from others when we leave home to keep safe.”
- Use the term “step back” and demonstrate by locating your child the 6-foot length from others. Since you may be guiding your child to the right space “away”, another partner will probably be needed. Practice with other siblings and keep it fun. You can demonstrate as a game. Ex: “Show me how you step back.” and take turns. **Praise your child’s successes !**
- Practice with tape on the floor at home and use the words “Let’s practice stepping back when we see friends (on our walk). Step back this far.” and reference the tape.
- Use the same key words when outside the home. Use proactive reminders while guiding and modeling with your child. For example, locate your child and yourself to the other side of the walkway to allow distance when approaching someone coming towards you on a walk. Narrate out loud “Let’s step back to be safe.”
- Take practice walks and reinforce your child’s efforts at social distancing. Give your child enough practice to learn the skill. They may need many opportunities to understand the concept, but it is teachable. Use a token board to make reinforcement salient and powerful. Make sure your child knows you are proud of them for trying.
- If your child invades the space parameters, gently guide him/her back and use the key words. Avoid giving a mixed message of sometimes allowing it and other times not. Stay consistent when outside the home during the pandemic.
- Share the verbal and model cues you are using with others who are in contact with your child so that these are practiced across the day with many opportunities.