



## Face masks and coronavirus (COVID-19): supporting children 0-12 years

### Key points

- **Children will have mixed and varying reactions when they see people wearing face masks.**
- **Talking with children about face masks can help.**
- **Children need accurate, age-appropriate information, plus opportunities to ask questions and talk about feelings.**
- **Play can help children learn about face masks and explore their feelings.**
- **If wearing a mask affects your ability to communicate with your child, try extra eye contact, touch, head movements and more.**

### Face masks and coronavirus (COVID-19): requirements in Australian states and territories

Check your [state or territory health department website](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/coronavirus-covid-19-guide/coronavirus-health-department-information) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/coronavirus-covid-19-guide/coronavirus-health-department-information>) for advice about whether you and your child are required to wear a face mask. It's important to stay up to date because recommendations might change quickly in your local area.

Children under the age of two years should never wear a face mask. This is because face masks can be [strangulation and suffocation risks](https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/safety/choking-strangulation/strangulation-suffocation) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/safety/choking-strangulation/strangulation-suffocation>) for this age group.

### Children's reactions to face masks during coronavirus (COVID-19)

The way children react to and feel about seeing people in face masks during coronavirus (COVID-19) can depend on age.

**Babies and younger children** pay a lot of attention to faces. So they might feel anxious or upset when they can't see your face or the faces of other carers and familiar people. Or they might feel that you or other people look 'scary' or 'strange'.

**Older children** might be more comfortable with face masks. They might not have strong feelings about them at all.

Children of all ages might have questions about why people are wearing face masks and whether they need to wear one too.

And for both children and adults, face masks can be confronting or overwhelming – a visible reminder of how coronavirus (COVID-19) is affecting our daily lives and communities.

The good news is that **most children will adapt to seeing you and other people wearing face masks**, especially with the right support and reassurance.

If you or your child feels very anxious, it's a good idea to get help. Speak to your child's GP, paediatrician, teacher or school counsellor. Children over five years can call [Kids Helpline \(https://kidshelpline.com.au/\)](https://kidshelpline.com.au/) on 1800 551 800. You can get support for yourself by talking with your GP, or calling [Lifeline \(https://www.lifeline.org.au/\)](https://www.lifeline.org.au/) on 131 114 or [Beyond Blue \(http://www.beyondblue.org.au/\)](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/) on 1300 224 636.

## Talking with children about face masks

Talking with children about face masks can help them cope and explore their feelings. Here are some suggestions for age-appropriate ways to talk with children.

For **very young children**, you can use simple language to explain face masks and what they're for. For example, 'This is a face mask. Over my nose, over my mouth. Where's daddy? Here I am!'

For **older children**, you can work through the steps below.

### 1. Make time to talk about face masks

The best time to talk about face masks is when you can give your child your full attention. This could be at dinner, bath time, or bedtime. If you can, have a mask ready to show your child.

### 2. Use a calm, reassuring and positive tone

If you sound calm and reassuring when you talk with your child about face masks, your child is more likely to feel safe and secure.

### 3. Find out what your child knows

Start by asking your child what they know about face masks, whether they've seen people wearing face masks and whether they have any questions. For example:

- 'This is a mask. I wear it over my nose and mouth. Do you know why I have to wear a mask when I go outside?'
- 'Have you noticed that people are wearing face masks now?'

### 4. Explain face masks in a way your child understands

This is about sticking to the facts and focusing on the positives. For example:

- 'When we talk, breathe, cough and sneeze, snot and saliva can come out of our nose and mouth. Face masks can stop the snot and saliva getting on other people. It's best to keep snot and saliva to ourselves!'
- 'Healthy people wear face masks. Lots of people, like doctors, nurses and teachers, wear face masks to do their jobs. Wearing masks is one way we can help to keep everyone safe from COVID-19.'
- 'You don't need to wear a face mask. But you're helping just by washing your hands, coughing and sneezing into your elbow, and remembering not to touch your face.'
- 'I don't need to wear a face mask at home. People only need to wear them when they leave the house.'

### **5. Tune into your child's feelings about face masks**

Ask your child how they're feeling and listen to what your child says. Let your child know that their feelings are OK. You can also ask your child what they need to feel better. It might reassure your child if you share your own feelings and let your child know what you're doing to cope.

For example:

- 'How did you feel about seeing everyone in face masks today?'
- 'I know that face masks can look strange. It's OK to feel unsure. I bought some face masks in fun colours and patterns. Why don't you help me choose one to wear?'
- 'It sounds like you're worried about not wearing a face mask. It might help to know that it's mostly adults who get and spread the virus. And most children don't get very sick if they get it.'

### **Talking to children with autism, learning disabilities or developmental delay**

If your child is autistic or has developmental delay or learning disabilities, your child might need developmentally appropriate information. [Social stories](https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/social-stories) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/social-stories>) or [visual supports](https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/visual-supports) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/visual-supports>) might be particularly helpful for autistic children or children with learning disabilities. You could ask your child's health or disability professional to help you develop something specific for your child.

### **Using play to get children familiar with face masks and reduce anxiety**

Children learn through [play](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/why-play-is-important) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/why-play-is-important>). So play can be a great way to help children feel more comfortable with seeing people in face masks. Play can also help children express and explore feelings about face masks.

If you want to introduce face masks into your child's play, you need to **take some simple precautions**. Always supervise your child to avoid strangulation and suffocation risks from masks and mask straps. Make sure you're playing with clean masks. And if you're wearing a mask, discourage your child from touching it.

Here are **ideas for play with masks**, which you can adapt for your child's age or developmental stage:

- Make up silly songs or rhymes about face masks. Use plenty of actions.
- Make up stories about masked characters who are superheroes.
- Play a game of peekaboo with your mask. Make funny faces each time you take your mask off.
- Give your child a face mask to touch and play with during everyday activities like bath time. For example, your child might like pretending to wash a mask during water play.
- Dress up your child's favourite soft toys in a face mask. You could use the toys to put on a [puppet play \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/puppet-play-activity\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/puppet-play-activity).
- Get your child to [draw a picture \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/drawing,-scribbling-and-writing-activities-for-children-3-6-years\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/drawing,-scribbling-and-writing-activities-for-children-3-6-years) of family members wearing face masks. Or [make a collage \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/collage-activity-for-children-2-6-years\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/collage-activity-for-children-2-6-years) using pictures of face masks.
- Turn a face mask into an art and craft project. For example, stick streamers to your face mask to turn it into a jelly fish. Or let your child decorate a face mask for you to wear.

Your child might find it easier to express feelings if they feel in charge. It's always a good idea to [follow your child's lead with play \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/letting-your-child-lead-play\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/letting-your-child-lead-play).

### **Communicating with your child when you're wearing a face mask**

Face masks hide some of our facial expressions, so they can affect the way we communicate, especially with children.

If you feel that wearing **a face mask is affecting your ability to communicate with your child**, here are some things you can do with children of different ages:

- Turn to face your child and use lots of eye contact.

- Try speaking more loudly, slowly and clearly so your child can hear you through the mask.
- Use exaggerated expressions so that your smile or surprise shows in your eyes.
- Use body language and gestures like nodding and touching your child gently to show you're listening.
- Play 'guess the expression' with your face mask on, using your eyes and eyebrows to show different emotions.
- Play charades to give your child practise in understanding and using body language, hand gestures and movement to communicate.
- Give your child a lot of cuddles and face time when you're at home together and you're not wearing a mask.

**Children with additional needs** who rely on facial expressions for communication, like some deaf children, might need extra support. Clear face shields or face masks with clear mouth windows might be options. Depending on your child's needs and age, you could also try written communication or visual aids.

### **Physical distancing, face masks and children**

Physical distancing (<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-how-to-avoid-infection-faqs>) is a key way to protect your child from coronavirus (COVID-19) and prevent the spread of the virus in your community. Physical distancing includes:

- staying at least 1.5 m away from other people when possible
- using good hand hygiene (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/coronavirus-covid-19-guide/hand-washing-in-pictures>) and personal hygiene
- staying at home if you're sick.

**Face masks can be part of physical distancing** when recommended or required by health authorities. They act as a physical barrier to the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) when you breathe, talk, cough or sneeze.

If you're wondering whether your child should be wearing a face mask in addition to other physical distancing measures, **it's important to consider:**

- your child's age and developmental stage
- your child's medical history
- your child's ability to put on, wear and remove a face mask correctly and safely (<https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/faqs-community-use-face-masks>)

- your ability to provide close supervision while your child is wearing a face mask.

For more advice about whether face masks are appropriate for your child, talk to your [GP \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner), [paediatrician \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician) or [child and family health nurse \(https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/child-family-health-nurse\)](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/child-family-health-nurse).

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## Acknowledgements

This article was developed with the assistance of the Child Life Therapy Department, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne; and Associate Professor Nigel Crawford, paediatrician and immunisation medicine specialist, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, and the University of Melbourne. The article was reviewed by Associate Professor Gehan Roberts, paediatrician, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

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#### Last updated or reviewed

06-08-2020

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SUPPORTED BY



Raising Children Network is supported by the Australian Government. Member organisations are the Parenting Research Centre and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute with The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.

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