Golden Gate Regional Center
Supporting Lives of Liberty and Opportunity

GGRC Face Mask Support Guide for COVID-19

*Please note that the following suggestions and resources should be individualized for each person. If an individual is medically unable to wear a face mask, please refer to the [California Department of Public Health](#) and local county Departments of Health for the most up to date guidance. Additional information and guidance may be available by speaking to your primary care physician.

See the below links for specific information related to mask coverings in your county.

[Marin County Public Health Order](#)
[San Francisco County Public Health Order](#)
[San Mateo County Public Health Order](#)

Wearing masks and why they could be uncomfortable:

During the current times of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, we all are trying to adjust to our new "normal," which includes social distancing, avoiding physical contact when possible, limiting exposure around others, etc. One of the important factors to reintegrating will be individuals wearing face masks to help protect themselves and those around them. Though necessary, wearing a face mask during day to day activities is quite different and can pose some challenges such as unfamiliarity, discomfort, confusion as to why some people wear them and some do not, and learning how to adapt to the new "rules" as they come out. Below are some strategies and resources to help families and caregivers support their individuals in learning how to wear and tolerate face masks.

These recommendations and resources do not substitute guidance that may come from a behaviorist, interdisciplinary team, local and state public health, and the CDC. Suggestions and resources should be individualized for each person.

Explaining the Situation

We are hearing a lot of information from news sources that is based off of new data, which can feel overwhelming. This can be difficult for the individuals we serve, family members, their caregivers, and/or direct support staff. Below are some suggestions and resources that may be utilized when speaking about COVID-19 and its protocols.

Be Clear and Consistent

Utilizing the most up to date public health orders, caregivers and families should communicate clearly and consistently to the individuals we serve what are the updated orders on masks and social distancing overall. Use these messages frequently and when discussing going outside of the home.

> Example:
> "On Friday, we will wear our masks and go to Safeway to get groceries"
> "Let's grab our masks and go on a walk"
> "I am going to put on my mask and say hi to the mail person as they drop off the mail."

Model the Behavior

Ensure that all those in the same home should follow the same guidelines that are expected from the individuals we serve. For example, if the house rule for the individual is that they must wear a face mask to get the mail from the mailbox, then that rule applies to all those who also ever get mail from the mailbox. When peers, families, and caregivers are all following the same guidelines, then it can convey to the individual that this is a new rule that applies to all people, not just those we serve.

Use Visual Supports

- Social Stories/Social Narratives – These tools can be helpful to explain the purpose of wearing a mask to an individual. To practice, pairing social stories/narratives with role playing (practice) can provide individuals with the supports they may need to practice wearing face coverings.
  Below are a few resources for social stories/social narratives that can be found online.
  - I Can Stay Healthy by Wearing a Face Mask (English)
    I Can Stay Healthy by Wearing a Face Mask (Spanish)
    The Boggs Center and Children's Specialized Hospital
  - MASKS Adult Social Story
    HMEA's Autism Resource Center

- o [We Wear Masks YouTube Clip](#)
  Mike McGovern via Teachers Pay Teachers
- o [Masks & Gloves: A Printable Story (adults)](#)
  Conscious Discipline
- Visual Reminders
  - o Posting visual reminders near the exit door, keys, or shoes to make sure everyone wears a mask before leaving the home can help promote following the public health guidelines. This can be done by posting a picture of the individuals living in the home wearing masks in these areas, posting a picture with masks and labeling it "Masks to wear outside", or placing the masks near the door. Example below.


Don't Forget to Wear Your Mask Outside!

Teaching How to Wear a Mask

Wearing a face mask may be aversive, or unpleasant, for the individuals we work with. Each person has their unique needs and working with an individual's team (social workers, behaviorists, OT's, etc.) may help in providing support to teach how to wear and keep on a mask. Below are some suggestions on how to teach individuals to wear a mask.

State Clear Expectations

When stating expectations, families and caregivers should communicate to individuals in a manner that can be understood. Tools such as visual boards, AAC devices, sign language, etc. may be needed to properly communicate expectations to an individual. Expectations can be shared by using "if/then" or "first/then" statements to better communicate what needs to happen. For example "if we put on our masks, we can go on a hike." or "first we will put on our masks, then we can go into the grocery store." Below is an example of a first/then visual board, where pictures of an individual wearing a mask can go in the first box, and the activity following can go on the second box.

first | then
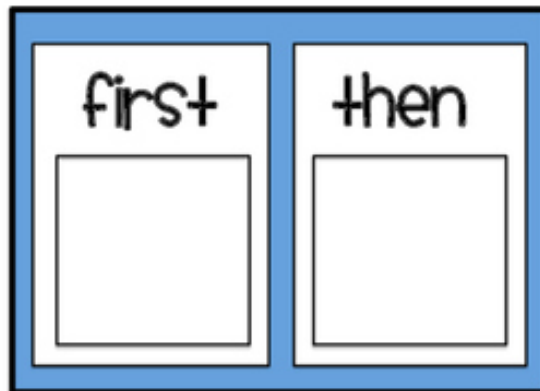
Example of a completed board:

Break Down the Steps, Start Small, & Be Positive

Breaking down the steps of wearing a mask and keeping it on can help families and providers identify not only the steps that may need to be taught to an individual, but also may identify which step an individual may have trouble learning or which step may be aversive to the individual. Below is an example of the steps one may take for putting on and keeping on a mask.

1. Pick up the mask
2. Hold mask with the inside facing you
3. Put mask over my nose and mouth
4. Put elastic behind my ears/tie the bands behind my head
5. Keep on (for a specific amount of time)

You can time how long someone can tolerate a mask by keeping a timer to identify what is the threshold. By learning this, family members and caregivers can both monitor what activities can be done during the tolerated amount of time and also use that as a starting point for increasing the time an individual wears a mask. If a person cannot tolerate the mask for too long, start practicing more at home with short times, slowly adding on time, and allow for the individual to have breaks.

When trying to increase the time that an individual can continuously wear a face mask, remember to start by increasing the time slowly and keeping the experience positive. You can

use a countdown timer as a visual support to help individuals identify how long they need to wear the mask. This may help in reducing anxiety and increase the time a person can tolerate the facemask over time.

Reinforce the Behavior

The act of wearing masks when socializing and engaging in everyday activities is a new experience (behavior). We all need time to adjust to the new expectations. Ensure that the individuals we serve are provided reinforcers for participating in mask wearing behavior appropriately, so that they may continue to follow these public health practices. Remember that reinforcers should be individualized. Below are a few examples of reinforcers that may be used:

- Choosing a preferred place to go after successfully wearing a mask at the grocery store.
- Listening to their favorite song on the drive home.
- Getting a favorite snack after coming home.
- Being able to choose a game from Target during a shopping run.
- If you are making masks at home, make it an event and have everyone in the household join in making their own mask.

Be Positive

The act of wearing a mask when outside is a new rule for all of us, so it can be helpful to stay positive about wearing the mask and following the appropriate protocols when out and about. This may look like praising how others are also wearing a mask, coordinating and complimenting how a mask looks with a person's outfit, or simply how great it is when see that our own tolerance of these things are increasing!

Other Modifications and Resources

Masks can be modified in multiple ways to help individuals feel comfortable and also enjoy the types of masks worn. Below, you will find examples of modifications that can be made for anyone who may need it.

- Buying masks that allow for others to see your mouth, which may help individuals understand others emotions or aid in communication

[Link to clear face masks](#)

- Making or purchasing masks at home with patterns that incorporate a person's favorite designs, characters, sayings, etc.

[Link to making face masks at home](#)

- With so many ways to make or types of masks available, there are many ways to tie a face mask. From elastic that goes over your ears, elastic that goes all the way around your head, to masks that require someone to tie the string, to neck gaiters, there are so many options that can fit different peoples comfort style. Work with your individuals to see what is more comfortable for them on a day to day basis.

- For those who are sensitive to the tie, a button can be sewn to each side to hold the tie.

"So I received a mask for my autistic son, but he didn't like that it went around his ears ...

I added a couple of buttons to his favorite hat, and BOOM - problem solved."

- If a person is having a hard time wearing masks but can tolerate pressure on their head (similar to a hat), consider using face shields if needed.

- A bandana can also be used as a facemask, per guidelines. This may help individuals who may have difficulty adjusting to a typical mask by having a more free flowing fit with the bottom of the bandana lying loose.

Other Resources

- [Best Practices for Teaching New Skills by ASERT](#)
  This website is for parents and caregivers and helps further break down and provide more details about how to break down steps, teaching skills, and reinforcing behaviors.
- [Helping People with DD Understand COVID-19: Social Stories](#)
  This resource has plenty of social stories for all parts of the COVID-19 pandemic
- [COVID-19 Social Stories for Children, Teens and Adults](#)
  HMEA Autism Resource Central