



## **Wearing face coverings: A guide for parents and carers**

### **Supporting my child or young person to wear a face covering**

The Scottish Government are now advising that everyone over the age of 5 should wear a face covering when it is not possible for people to physically distance from one another, for example busy or crowded places.

As of the 22nd of June, face coverings were made mandatory on all public transport, this includes, buses, taxis, trains, ferries, trams, subways, stations and airports.

As of 10<sup>th</sup> of July, face coverings were made mandatory in shops.

As of the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, face coverings were also made mandatory in most public indoor settings, except places where you eat and drink (for example, pubs, cafes, and restaurants). [Here](#) is the latest list of setting where you must wear a face covering.

However, if someone you support is particularly distressed by wearing a face covering, then this comes within the exemptions set out by the Scottish Government, and they do not have to wear one. If you are concerned you might be challenged, then there are cards which you can use to help communicate that the person you are supporting is autistic. See below:

[Autism Alert card – Covid-19](#) - for busy places and public transport

[First Bus “Please Be Supportive” card](#) - for public transport only

### **Why might someone I support display distress when I have asked them to wear a face covering?**

Some autistic people may display signs of distress if you ask them to wear a face covering. This could include removing the face covering or showing signs of distress such as making physical contact with yourself or others. There may be many reasons why your child will require to be exempt, here are some possible explanations:

1. The sight of the top of the face covering, over their nose, may be easy to ignore for most people, but can be disorientating to an autistic person’s visual field.
2. The face can be more sensitive to touch than other areas of the body, some autistic people are hypersensitive to touch.
3. The feeling of straps around the ear or head may scratch, tickle, or cause other distressing sensory stimulus.
4. A face covering may cause heat from the child’s breath to be captured and to sit within the mask, which may cause sensory distress.

5. A person's face may play an important role in their stimming, and a mask may disrupt this.
6. They may never have been asked to wear one before, and this change can be confusing and difficult to process.

Your person may also display distress or confusion in seeing you (the parent or carer) wear a face covering. They may pull the covering away from your face, or become upset. Does your child need to see your lips moving when you speak to them? Some autistic people may find listening to a person speak, without seeing the mouth moving, disorientating. You can create a social story to help them understand why *you* must wear a face covering, if *they* are exempt.

Here Peter Vermeulen explains more about this: [How to help autistic children afraid of people wearing mouth masks?](#)

## Explaining why we might wear a face covering in public

You may wish to start by having a conversation with the person about why we have been asked to wear them, and why it is important. It may help them to see you wear one first, or photographs of other people wearing them.

It is always best to design stories or infographics to best suit a person's needs. However, there are some pre-written versions that you can use too. These can be used to help a person understand why they have been asked to wear a face covering, or why other people have been asked to wear one.

[I can wear a mask story \(Autism Research Institute\)](#)  
[Wearing a mask social story \(Teachers pay teachers\)](#)

## Choosing a face covering

Face coverings can be purchased or made at home. You can choose one that the person is interested in or personalise a home-made covering. If they have a special interest (e.g. cats, superheroes), you may be able to find one decorated with images of their special interest. This can engage their interest in face coverings and allow them to take ownership of their new attire. This can help for other reasons too, such as sensory/comfort reasons; size and shape and/or visual appeal (e.g. made with favourite decorated fabric; drawing their own design with fabric paints or crayons or stick-on decorations). They may also have items of clothing at home which they may use as a face covering, such as a scarf or winter neck warmer. An item that they are familiar with may provide more comfort for them.

## Practice wearing one in a comfortable environment

If the person you support would like to wear one, you can offer them the opportunity to practice at home, or in a safe outdoor space. This can help you, or the person you're supporting, identify if they feel comfortable enough to wear one in public. Signs that a person is not comfortable includes fiddling, removing the covering, or other indicators that the person is uncomfortable or distressed. You may either need to refine the fabric, try a different face covering, or provide reassurance. If a person is displaying distress, please see our [face covering guidance](#) to identify if the person you are supporting is exempt.

## Other things to consider

If you are a parent/carer, you know your child or the person you are supporting then they may have a means of communicating their support needs in a way that only you understand. However, to identify if the person you are supporting needs extra support with the current guidelines, you may want to consider the following points:

- Do they work well with rules?
- Do they like to know the reasons and facts behind rules?
- Is it better to tell them the 'DOs' rather than the 'Don'ts'?
- Do they over apply rules and have difficulty altering them when circumstances require it?
- Does too much detail or information cause them anxiety?
- How is information best presented to them? By telling? Showing? Demonstrating?
- Pictures, photos, writing?
- Is it helpful to use their favourite interest/motivator when providing a face covering/telling them what to do/why, etc?

## Wearing and disposing of a covering safely

It is important to ensure that if wearing a face covering that steps are taken to ensure that it is being worn and handled safely. Some people may require additional support to understand and maintain this routine.

1. Washing hands prior to putting on the covering and removing it.
2. Washing or sanitising hands if touching it.
3. Do not remove it by touching the area that covers the face (mouth, nose, cheeks). Use the straps at the side, or if it does not have straps, use the side of the fabric that covers the ears or neck.
4. If using a reusable face covering to wash this at 60 degrees after use.
5. Placing it into a plastic bag without touching the area that covers the face.
6. Store face covering away until you need to use it next time.

If you, or the person you are supporting, finds difficulty in following this routine, the autism support team can direct you on how to access resources and tools to support with this. However, remember if wearing a face covering is causing distress then the person does not have to wear one.

*This document was updated on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020. This information has been written as clearly as possible for a wide readership. If you require support with this information then please make contact with our [Autism Support Team](#).*