

From Toddlers to Teens: How to Talk to Kids About Wearing Masks

<https://www.healthline.com/health-news/from-toddlers-to-teens-how-to-talk-to-kids-about-wearing-masks>

Experts say modeling good mask behavior is one way to get your kids more excited about doing the same.

- **Medical experts recommend wearing masks to slow the spread of COVID-19, alongside social or physical distancing and handwashing.**
- **Children of all ages are more likely to embrace wearing masks if their parents are modeling that behavior.**
- **As children get older, you can be more transparent with information about COVID-19.**
- **It's important, however, to monitor your child's anxiety levels and adjust your conversation based on their individual needs and age.**

Most adults understand the need to wear face masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the science behind several [studies](#) that have proven their effectiveness.

However, getting children to comprehend the importance of wearing masks during the pandemic can come with its own set of unique challenges depending on a child's age.

Here's how experts advise parents should approach the topic of mask wearing to children at different ages in order to help them best understand how to keep themselves and others safe during the COVID-19 crisis.

Practice makes perfect

Dr. Shauna Gulley is a pediatrician and parent serving as chief clinical officer at Colorado-based Centura Health. She is on the front lines managing the COVID crisis and has personal experience getting her own kids on board with mask wearing. For kids and adults, she acknowledges the need to get used to mask wearing.

"As with most things, comfort will come with time — think of jeans as an example. Once broken in, they're really comfortable, but getting there takes time," she said.

She suggests allowing children that time to build up to regular wearing, perhaps practicing for increasing intervals each day. Gulley also said it's important to customize the language you use about masks to meet individual age ranges and needs.

Talking to toddlers

For 2- to 4-year-olds, Gulley says the most important thing parents can do is wear masks themselves.

"Every toddler is different, but the majority will want to do as others are doing — particularly those they care the most about. If mom, dad, and siblings are wearing masks, they'll want to wear a mask too," she said.

She added that style and design matter at this age, something developmental psychologist Cynthia Northington-Purdie, PhD, of William Paterson University's College of Education agrees with.

"For toddlers and preschoolers, the wearing of masks should be made into a fun game, like peekaboo," Northington-Purdie explained. "Masks for toddlers should be colorful and related to things that they recognize."

Examples might be animal prints or characters from books and television shows they love.

“For older toddlers, masks can also represent facial expressions, as emotional intelligence is now part of the preschool curriculum,” Northington-Purdie said.

She suggests letting kids this age have fun with masks that have smiles and frowns, or even ones that look like animal faces once they put them on.

Gulley added, “The approach at this age is to lead by example and make the process of wearing a mask as fun and comfortable as possible — but also, give yourself a break if your child isn’t tolerating the mask. The worst thing you can do at this age is turn mask wearing into a power struggle.”

If your toddler seems scared or fearful of wearing a mask, Gulley suggests showing them pictures of other kids wearing masks, drawing masks on characters they’re coloring, or putting a mask on a favorite stuffed animal.

“Even though it’s not necessary to wear masks at home, with toddlers it’s a valuable exercise to get them more comfortable with the idea in public,” Gulley said.

Early education: Kindergarten to second grade

With kids in kindergarten through second grade, Gulley said the greatest impact is still being made by those around them.

“Modeling good mask behavior will get your kids more excited about doing the same,” she explained. It’s also a good time to start talking to kids about the “why” of mask wearing.

“Parents can explain we’re all wearing masks right now to keep our germs to ourselves,” Gulley said.

“Consider something like, ‘By wearing a mask, you’re protecting your friends from getting any of your germs, and the masks they wear are protecting you — it’s a nice thing to do.’”

Kids this age are gaining a better understanding of taking care of others. They are compassionate and want to do the right thing, which is why framing the conversation like this may help them get on board.

Gulley said early education kids also have a firm understanding of rules, so reminding them that masks now need to be worn just like shoes to the store can help them better understand and embrace this new directive.

“Parents can also consider using a relatable analogy as part of their child-friendly language,” Gulley suggested. She gave this example, “Like Batman wears a mask and cape to shield him from the bad guys, we’re now going to wear masks when we’re out in public too.”

Elementary school-aged kids

As children grow a little older, the differences in what they are able to understand may vary widely.

“For that reason, it’s imperative that parents gauge their child’s unique ability to understand and process the realities of the pandemic and make decisions on how and what to share accordingly,” Gulley explained.

In general, she said parents of elementary school-aged children should be clear and factual with them, using terms that minimize worry while maximizing the behavior you want.

Gulley suggests telling your kids that we have some germs in our community that are making some people sick. You can then add ways we can help, such as wearing masks, keeping distance between ourselves and our friends, and washing our hands.

“And then pour on the reassurance,” Gulley said. “Let your kids know that there are lots of smart scientists and doctors working hard to help, and they need us to wear masks, wash our hands, and not get together in large groups.”

Terms like germs versus virus can be adjusted based on your child’s unique ability to understand.

Northington-Purdie added that mask wearing can be encouraged for all school-aged children by allowing kids to make their own masks.

“The craft of designing and/or creating their own masks will facilitate ownership. A child might be more likely to wear a mask that they customized with water-based markers and stickers than one that was not,” she said.

Preteens

By the time your kids reach middle school, they will likely have a better grasp of what is going on in the world.

But Gulley said parents should keep in mind that every middle schooler is different and parents may need to be aware of individualized needs, particularly for those who exhibit higher levels of anxiety.

“In general, talk with your preteen using information about the state of the pandemic in your community, without using alarming terms. We want to minimize worry while maximizing compliant behavior,” Gulley said.

Gulley also said it’s important to make sure preteens understand this is a rule, not an option.

“Set clear expectations for your preteen and get them to buy in on being part of the solution to fighting the pandemic. Parents should also consider limiting exposure to the news or media outlets at this age.

Be mindful of bombarding kids with COVID fears or myths,” she said.

Preteens are also prone to embarrassment and following the path led by their peers. That’s why Northington-Purdie said it can be helpful to provide evidence of everyone else wearing masks to your tween.

“Beyond the safety of it, the case must be made that mask wearing is culturally and socially relevant,” Northington-Purdie explained. “Find photographs and video examples from TikTok or pop culture celebrities. If their favorite musical artists or social icons are featured online wearing masks, it might be viewed more favorably by tweens.”

Teenagers

By the time kids reach their teen years, they are pretty adept at getting information for themselves.

That’s why Gulley said it’s important to steer them toward trusted sources.

“Share the CDC’s website and then have a family meeting to discuss what they read and how they feel about it. Once your child understands what’s happening, you can then discuss the value of mask wearing and why it’s so important,” she said.

At this age, Gulley said kids also need to know that while they may not be at heightened risk for getting sick from the virus, they could potentially pass it on to someone who could get very sick — someone they love, like their grandparents.

Understanding the danger to those they care about, and the responsibility they have to help keep others safe, may help with mask compliance.

If your teenager is still resisting, Northington-Purdie advises parents to keep incentive-based motivation in mind as a possibility to get them to wear a mask.

“Perhaps access to something of value to them can be strategically linked to wearing a mask,” she said.

“I do not recommend monetary compensation, but access to the PlayStation, Xbox, or car keys, for example, can be linked to mask wearing.”

Most kids want to do the right thing. If you’re modeling good mask wearing behavior yourself, and if your family is having conversations about why masks are important and how they can help to keep others safe, you’ll likely find that your child follows suit pretty easily.