

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S USE OF FACE COVERINGS/MASKS IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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Introduction

School communities have been working together to keep each other safe. Since December 2021, children from 3rd to 6th class have been asked to wear face coverings/masks in school. Some of the children in your class may have been wearing face coverings/masks previously, but for many, this may be a new experience.

This guidance aims to assist you in supporting the children in your class to wear face coverings/masks as they attend school. The document will address the following areas:

- Supporting children who experience discomfort with face coverings/masks
- Principles of wellbeing
- Exploring experiences of wearing face coverings/masks through SPHE
- Communicating while wearing a face covering/mask
- Teaching about face coverings/masks across the curriculum
- Further reading

Supporting children who experience discomfort with face coverings/masks

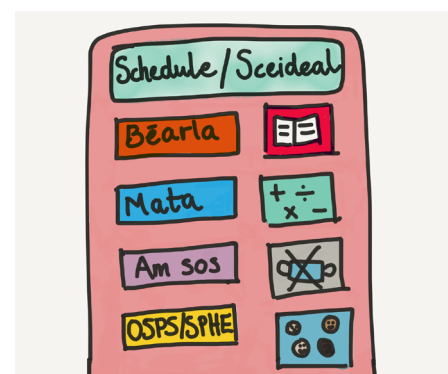
Some children may experience discomfort when wearing a face covering/mask.

While some children are exempt from wearing coverings/masks, there are children who do not fall into this description for whom wearing a face covering/mask will be challenging. This section puts forward ideas as to how best to support children who experience discomfort when wearing a face covering/mask.

Using a visual schedule with regular ventilation breaks:

Children are not expected to wear their face covering/mask outdoors, while eating, during Physical Education, or when playing a musical instrument or singing (see [Frequently Asked Questions](#) in relation to face masks/coverings in primary Schools). If you use a visual schedule in your classroom, you could use a "face coverings/

masks-off" sticker/image to show the children on the visual schedule when they will get a break from wearing their face covering/mask.



If you use ventilation breaks during the day, ensure that these are also included on your visual schedule so that the children will know exactly how long they are expected to wear their face coverings/masks and when they will be able to take a break.



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Breaks:

Some children may need additional breaks from wearing their face coverings/masks (in addition to lunchtimes and ventilation breaks). Give the children in your class a clear way to ask for a break if they need it. You might like to use a hand signal, check in with them verbally, use a new button on their communication device, or create a "break" card which they can hand to you. If there is adequate space in your classroom you can designate a zone that is 2 metres away from other children/adults and create a break area where a child can take a short break from wearing their face covering/mask.

Being a role model:



Adjusting to something new takes time, and as a teacher you can model a positive attitude towards face coverings/masks at school. Speak positively about your classes' efforts and acknowledge the feelings and emotions they may have around needing to wear face coverings/masks.

Validating all children's experiences:

Some families disagree with the guidance in relation to children wearing face coverings/masks in school. This can be confusing for children who are hearing one message at home and another at school. Be sensitive towards the challenging position this puts the child in. Using statements that validate their thoughts and feelings can help.

For example:

- "I know that it's frustrating that we have to wear masks in school, but I am happy that you are helping to protect everyone's health and safety."
- "I don't love wearing a mask either. But wearing one allows us to interact safely with each other."

Let children know that they can come and talk to you if they are worried, upset or frustrated about having to wear a face covering/mask at school.

Using social stories:



All children can benefit from the use of social stories as they remind children why it is important to wear face coverings/masks. It is always advisable to make social stories context-specific (for example, using pictures of your own classroom, etc.).

Principles of wellbeing

The wellbeing of the children in your class at this time of change can be supported through five key principles:

1. Promoting a **sense of safety** – explore what it means to be safe and discuss what helps us all to feel safe at school.
2. Promoting a **sense of calm** – acknowledge that wearing a face

covering/mask can be challenging but that everyone in the class/school is looking after each other and that this is a temporary measure.

3. Promoting a **sense of belonging and connectedness** – take time to build on and foster relationships in a supportive learning environment; *we're all helping and minding each other.*
4. Promoting a **sense of self-efficacy** – there are things we can and can't control. It can be helpful to identify these and discuss the ways children keep themselves and others safe.
5. Promoting a **sense of hope** – affirm the efforts we have all made during the pandemic and promote a sense of hope. Allow a space for children to voice their hopes.

Exploring experiences of wearing face coverings/masks through SPHE

Some children may still be uncertain about why they are now expected to wear a mask in school.

The following strands, strand units and learning objectives from the *Primary School SPHE Curriculum* may be used to support children as they adjust to wearing face coverings/masks through exploring the reasons for their use.

Through the strand *Myself*, children can learn about the personal protection a mask can offer against COVID-19, while the strand *Myself and the wider world* can enable children to explore the reasons we wear masks to protect those around us.

The SPHE Curriculum supports children to recognise and manage their feelings and emotions.

CLASS LEVEL

3RD AND 4TH CLASS5TH AND 6TH CLASS

Strands

Myself
Myself and the wider world

Myself

Strand Units

Taking care of my body
Developing citizenship

Taking care of my body

Learning objectives

- Realise that each individual has some responsibility for his/her health and that this responsibility increases as he/she gets older.
- Recognise how each person has both an individual and a communal responsibility to the community.

- Identify and be aware of the different ways in which the body may be protected against disease and infection.
- Realise that there is a personal and communal responsibility for the health and well-being of himself/herself and others.
- Recognise and examine behaviour that is conducive to health and that which is harmful to health.

Children will benefit from opportunities to reflect on and explore their feelings around wearing face coverings/masks. The emphasis is placed on exploring a whole spectrum of feelings without labelling them as either positive or negative.

Children and families will have different views and perspectives on wearing face coverings/masks and it is important that children can express their views and listen to other perspectives in a respectful way. This requires an atmosphere of trust and support where children know that their opinions will be listened to and taken seriously.

It is important to provide time and space to discuss wearing face coverings/masks as well as using teachable moments as they arise. Below are some strategies for actively exploring the wearing of face coverings/masks:

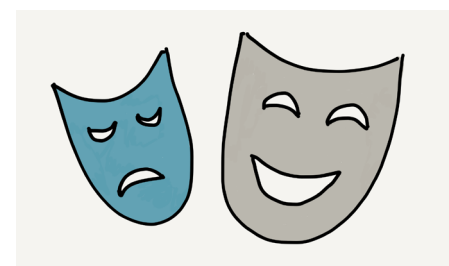
Using photographs and pictures:

Photographs and pictures can be a helpful means of presenting information to

children and can act as a starting point for discussions. Activities such as adding captions or speech bubbles to photographs or pictures can generate conversations and help you get a sense of the current understanding of the class around this topic. You might like to use some of the [HSE Covid-19 social media graphics and posters](#) as a stimulus for discussion, for example [Masking for a friend poster](#). Newspaper headlines can also provide a useful stimulus for discussion and offer opportunities to develop critical thinking skills for exploring different perspectives on the topic.

Using drama activities:

Drama can enable children to explore sensitive topics and gain a deeper understanding of other perspectives in a safe and non-threatening way. The children in your class might enjoy a mirror activity in pairs where they can practise expressing different emotions while wearing a face covering/mask. Conscience alley and role-play activities can provide an opportunity to explore different perspectives on the topic of face



coverings/masks in a safe environment by placing them in a fictional context. Younger children may be aware of older classes or siblings wearing face coverings/masks to school. Teachers in the early years of primary could acknowledge this by putting a mask on a large teddy in the classroom or by providing an opportunity for younger children to play 'putting the mask on the teddy'.

Scaffolding discussion:

Pair or group discussions can provide opportunities for children to share opinions or reflect with peers, exploring different perspectives and experiences. Strategies such as using open-ended statements, think-pair-share, KWL, circle time, question box, and the fish-bowl listening activity may be useful for

Communicating while wearing a face covering/mask

Communication can be more challenging when wearing a face covering/mask.

Face coverings/masks can inhibit lip reading and facial expressions, and speech can sound muffled. The *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* can assist in learning about social conventions and awareness of others when using face coverings/masks:

Adapt language style such as tone, pace, choice of vocabulary, gestures, facial expressions and body language for a range of audiences whilst

communicating orally (PLC, Oral Language, learning outcome 3)

You and your class might like to explore strategies to support communication while using face coverings/masks. Some might include:

- Speaking more slowly
- Speaking louder, taking care to avoid straining the voice
- Making sure to look at the speaker
- Using your eyes to express yourself
- Exploring ways to increase the use of body language and hand gestures
- Embracing outdoor learning where children can remove their face covering/mask
- Using visual aids and a visual timetable.

Teaching about face coverings/masks across the curriculum

Teaching about face coverings/masks across the curriculum

Children can learn about the use of face coverings/masks in areas of the curriculum beyond SPHE. Below are some suggested lessons for 3rd to 6th class, which aim to support children learning about the importance of face coverings/masks and offering opportunities for children to reflect on the experience of wearing a face covering/mask in school.

CLASS LEVEL

5TH AND 6TH CLASS

Subject: Science

Strand: Living Things

Strand Unit: Human Life

Learning objective:

Resources:

Learning experiences:

Working scientifically

Questioning
Observing
Predicting
Investigating and
experimenting

Designing and making

Exploring
Planning

Identify and understand ways in which the body protects itself against disease and infection.

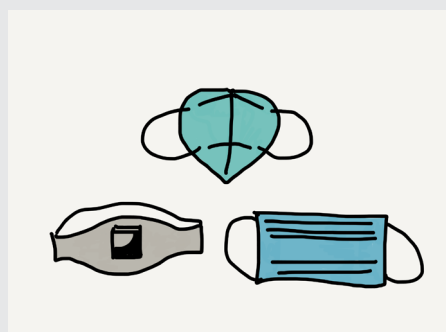
Different types of masks (surgical and cloth masks), spray bottles, water, food colouring.

Hypothesis: Pose the question "Which type of mask is best at reducing the spread of germs?" and allow children to discuss their opinions and their rationale for these.

Experiment: Outline the procedure for the experiment to the children and encourage them to brainstorm how they can make the experiment a 'fair test'. For example, ensure each pod has the same equipment, agree how many sprays of water they will put on each mask, agree how far away they will hold the spray bottle from the mask, etc. At the end of the brainstorm, add these considerations to the procedure. Provide each pod with a selection of face masks (surgical and cloth), and a spray bottle that has some water in it, which has been coloured by a few drops of food colouring. Using the collaboratively designed procedure, the children spray the inside of the masks until they notice that moisture has gone through to the other side. The children then check to see which mask lets the most water through to the outside of the mask.

Results: Ask the children to discuss their results and rank the masks most effective to least effective based on the evidence. Explain to the children that the main function of face coverings is not to filter the air we breathe, but to limit the spread of saliva and nasal droplets that we naturally produce and spread when talking, sneezing and coughing. The cloth mask allows more moisture through because overtime the cloth absorbs the liquid droplets, the surgical masks are generally made using plastic which prevents the moisture from travelling from the wearer through to the outside of the mask.

Conclusion: Building on what they have learned through the experiment, ask the children to design/draw a face covering/mask that they believe would be most effective in stopping the spread of germs. Ask them to offer a rationale for their designs.



CLASS LEVEL

3RD AND 4TH CLASS

Subject:

Visual Art

Strand:

Drawing

Strand Unit:

Making Drawings and Looking and Responding; Exploring portraiture

Resources:

Images of works of art with face coverings/masks (examples: Girl with a pearl earring, Mona Lisa, Van Gogh, Diptych Frederico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforzia, Summer of Air), paper, drawing utensils, images on Interactive Whiteboard.

Learning experiences:



Introduction: Show the children examples of famous paintings that have been altered to include facemasks. Discuss how the face coverings/masks alter the paintings – not being able to see someone's mouth and nose – where is the emphasis now placed? Do they prefer the paintings with or without the masks? Why?

Drawing: Ask the children to draw their own self-portrait and include a face mask. Using an Interactive Whiteboard ask children to draw masks on images on screen.

Conclusion: Invite children to share their drawings with their class.

Extension lessons:

- Design and create masks – construction with papier mache / fabric and fibre / create a mask in the style of Picasso.
- Looking and responding to masks in history e.g. Egyptian masks, African tribal masks, animals masks.
- Explore Venetian Carnival Masks, tribal masks, animal masks, Egyptian tombs.
- Explore putting a mask on a local statue/sculpture virtually.

Further reading

Additional information about children wearing face coverings/masks in school can be found in the documents/videos below:

Supporting the wellbeing of school communities: Guidance for school



Guidance on the use of face coverings in primary school



HSE When to wear a face covering



HSE How to wear a mask poster



HSE Video how to wear a mask



Department of Education and Science. (1999a). Social, Personal and Health Education. Dublin: Government Publications.

Department of Education and Science (1999b). Social Personal and Health Education Teacher Guidelines. Dublin: Government Publications.

Edutopia. (2021, December 7). Science Lessons That Tap Into Student Curiosity About COVID-19 | Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/science-lessons-tap-student-curiosity-about-covid-19>

References

Department of Education. (2021). *Frequently asked questions in relation to face masks/coverings in primary schools*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/43ba0-frequently-asked-questions-in-relation-to-face-maskscoverings-in-primary-schools/>

Department of Education and Skills. (2019). Primary Language Curriculum/ Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Eichler, S. E., Hopperton, A. P., Alava, J. J., Pereira, A., Ahmed, R., Kozlakidis, Z., Ilic, S., & Rodriguez-Palacios, A. (2020). A Citizen Science Facemask Experiment and Educational Modules to Improve Coronavirus Safety in Communities and Schools. *Frontiers in Medicine*, 7, 486.