Title: Face Masks in Children

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Face masks in Children

Background

At its meeting on 25 November 2021, the NPHET recommended the wearing of face masks/coverings by children aged nine years and above on public transport, in retail and other indoor public settings as already required for children aged 13 years and over. Additionally, it was recommended that this be introduced for children in 3rd class and above in primary schools. This measure was introduced on a temporary basis with planned review in mid-February 2022. Following its consideration, Government introduced a requirement for those in third class and above in primary schools to wear a mask, excluding those with a medical exemption or complex needs, with effect from 30 November 2021. At that time these measures were instituted the 14-day incidence was 1287.6 per 100,000; 17.2% of cases were in those aged 5 to 12 years; and the incidence was highest in those aged 5 to 12 years, and particularly the 9 to 11 year old age-group.

Current epidemiology

Since then, the emergence of the Omicron variant has driven a significant surge in cases, which while noting the change in testing approach in early January, is now declining. With increasing evidence of the decoupling between cases and severe outcomes, including ICU admissions and mortality, the majority of restrictions were lifted on 22 January 2022.

The estimated 14-day incidence to 11 February, based on RT-PCR testing was 1524 per 100,000, and 67.7% of sequenced cases had S-gene target dropout on 9 February suggesting an increasing proportion of cases of the BA.2 variant.

From 30 December 2021, changes to the public health management of those aged between four and 39 years, recommended the use of antigen testing for symptomatic individuals in this age group,

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2 This does not include children aged 4 years and over
with the initial advice to seek confirmatory PCR testing removed on 11 January 2022. As a result the cases recorded in children are based on positive antigen test results that are uploaded to the HSE antigen portal.

Following a surge in late December/early January case numbers have declined. Despite the de-escalation of public health restrictions from 22 January 2022 the incidence in those aged 0-11 years is continuing to fall and is stable in those aged 12-15 years.

Consideration of the case numbers by age in years demonstrates an initial fall in incidence following the introduction of mask wearing on 30 November 2021, followed by a surge in cases linked to the Omicron BA.1 variant. Cases peaked in those aged 9 to 11 years with the reopening of schools, with this peak occurring later in those aged 3 to 8 years. While the introduction of face coverings for those aged 9-11 years may have reduced incidence in this age group, the main determinant of incidence is the incidence in the wider population.

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Vaccination

Following a NIAC recommendation on 7 December 2021 COVID-19 vaccination was strongly recommended for those aged 5 to 11 years: with underlying conditions or living with a younger child with complex medical needs or living with a person who is immunocompromised. Additionally the NIAC recommended that vaccination be offered to all other children aged 5 to 11 years because of the favourable benefit risk profile of the vaccine, protection against severe disease and the consequences that can follow infection e.g. multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, long COVID, psychosocial and developmental impact. With effect from 8 January 2022, vaccination was rolled out to all children in this age group. As of 14 February, vaccine uptake ranged from 15.6% in those aged five years to 31.4% in those aged 11 years.

![Covid-19 Vaccine uptake for ages 5-11 year olds]

International guidance

The international guidance remains unchanged since November and is as follows:

- ECDC: Masks are not recommended for pupils in primary schools (<12yrs)
- CDC: Masks are recommended for children aged 2 years and older
- WHO: For children between six and 11 years of age, a risk-based approach should be applied to the decision to use of a mask considering:
  - Community transmission levels, ability to maintain physical distancing and ventilation;
  - Intensity of transmission and data/evidence on the risk of infection and transmission in this age group;
  - Social and cultural environment including behaviour or social norms that influence the community and population’s social interactions, especially with and among children;

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The child’s capacity to comply with the appropriate use of masks and availability of appropriate adult supervision;
- Potential impact of mask wearing on learning and psychosocial development; and
- Adapting advice for specific settings such as households with elderly relatives, schools, during sport activities or for children with disabilities or with underlying diseases.

Qualitative evaluation

As part of this review three separate consultations were undertaken as follows:

1. Workshops with pupils
2. Focus groups with teachers
3. Serial surveying of parents

1. Workshops with pupils

An independent report Insights Health and Social Research was commissioned by the Department of Health and facilitated by Hub na nÓg. A total of 204 children from three primary schools (1 urban, 1 rural and 1 suburban) participated in the consultation, including children from 4th Class (n=68), 5th class (n=63) and 6th class (n=73).

The consultation had four questions exploring children’s views on and experiences of mask wearing.

- Question 1: What is good about mask wearing?

Children’s responses to the question on what is good about mask wearing reflected the public health messaging on the reasons for and benefits of wearing masks in relation to Covid 19. The majority identified the benefits in terms of, keeping others and themselves safe, protecting others and themselves, and stopping the spread of Covid-19 and germs. A number of children indicated their strong dislike of masks and stated that there was ‘nothing’ good about wearing a mask.

- Question 2: What is not good about mask wearing?

In response to the question on what was not good about wearing masks, a small number simply stated ‘everything’. Most describe difficulties in breathing, and many described the discomfort of masks e.g. ‘sweaty’, ‘warm’, ‘hot’, ‘stuffy’, ‘itchy’ or that they ‘fogged up’ glasses. Children complained that wearing masks ‘hurt their ears’, and a number said they suffered ‘headaches’, ‘dizziness’ or ‘light-headedness’ when wearing a mask. Difficulty in hearing the teachers and others was also a frequent complaint. Some found the masks to be distracting and found it difficult to concentrate.

- Question 3: What could make wearing a mask easier?

In response to the question on ways of improving mask wearing, many said ‘nothing’ would make it easier. Some felt it would be easier ‘if they didn’t have to wear them’, if they ‘banned them’ or ‘not wearing them at all’. Among those who made suggestions of improvements, the most common recommendation was to increase ‘mask-break’ and the opportunity to go outside in the fresh air more often. Echoing some of children’s dislikes of wearing masks, making them more breathable was another commonly given suggestion. Adapting the design, having better fits and style of the masks were also suggested.
Designing and personalising masks was also suggested as one way to improve the mask wearing experience. A few children said it would be easier to wear masks if they were ‘free’, and if they were more ‘environmentally friendly’. Some suggested alternatives to masks, such as wearing visors, neck masks, having antigen tests, getting vaccinated, or sanitising their hands. Children in the school with desk dividers/screens suggested having one or the other but not both measures.

- Question 4: Are you happy to continue wearing a mask in school?

The children’s answers to this question on future mask wearing was divided, nuanced, and qualified. Some children provide a straight ‘Yes’ answer to the question. Others said ‘Yes’ but for certain reasons, namely protecting themselves and others from Covid. Some added practical suggestions or adjustments they would like to happen, or continue to happen, while wearing them. For example, several children qualified their willingness to continue wearing masks in school with a range of requests e.g. more mask breaks, more mixing of pods and wearing a mask they like.

The detailed responses from children are captured below.

**Question 1: What is good about wearing masks?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Typical Quote</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety and Protection</td>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping others safe/protected</td>
<td><em>It keeps us safe so you don’t get covid and other viruses</em> (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>I think that wearing masks is good because they keep you safe</em> (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Wearing masks is good as they keep our friends and teachers safe.</em> (6th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>It keeps you and friends safe and shows if you are a selfish person or not</em> (5th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>I think it is good to wear a mask because I am protecting my grandparents and I don’t transmit covid 19.</em> (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>It is keeping other students safe and reducing covid.</em> (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Keeping your family safe when you go home.</em> (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Good for people who are sick around you</em> (4th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>I feel safe when I am wearing mask in public</em> (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The good thing about wearing a mask is it makes me feel safer in a busy environment.</em> (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>They keep you safe from covid. You can meet people indoors and be safe.</em> (6th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>When you are in a big place with lots of people it would be good to wear a mask but for kids it should not.</em> (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Masks are good to use because they protect you and others from getting and passing on Covid 19. Masks stop them from spreading this horrible disease.</em> (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Wearing masks is good as they keep our friends and teachers safe</em> (6th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling safe in public spaces</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td><em>Covid-19 won’t spread so easily if a person wears a mask because you can catch it if you don’t wear one.</em> (4th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stops Covid and Germs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing the spread of Covid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It’s not as easy to catch covid19. Still get it but not as big of a chance (4th class)

Masks stops them from spreading this horrible virus (4th class)

They stop germs from your mouth spreading to other people and no germs from other people can get into your mouth so this keeps you safe. (4th class)

When you cough or sneeze it will stay in the mask and will not touch anyone. (4th Class)

Wearing a mask is good because you have a better chance at not getting covid and a better chance of not spreading germs. (4th class)

It stops people from spitting when talking (5th class)

Incidental Benefits

Conceals expressions

Fun

Your teacher can’t see if you’re talking, laughing. (5th class)

They come in fun and bright colours (4th class)

You can also have lots of fun with different colours and patterns (4th Class)

You could wear a Man Utd mask (5th Class)

Nothing

Nothing is good about wearing a mask (5th class)

Nothing I don’t really like them (4th Class)

Question 2: What is not good about wearing masks?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Typical Quote</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discomfort/Uncomfortable</td>
<td></td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable</td>
<td>I just feel uncomfortable wearing a mask (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They are very uncomfortable (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot/sweaty/sticky</td>
<td>They are not that comfy and they make your face feel really warm. (4th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes it is really stuffy and warm (6th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think masks are VERY uncomfortable and annoying so they should not be worn and they can cause rashes and makes make your face very hot and itchy. (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itchy</td>
<td>It makes my glasses fog up (6th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you have glasses they can fog up (4th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My ear is very painful (5th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>if you have masks too long your ears start to hurt (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can get awful headaches (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some people start to feel light headed and dizzy. (6th class) it gets hard to breathe in them and they’re too tight. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you have a mask that’s too big it’ll keep falling down (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It feels uncomfortable and you sometimes have a big or small one which is not good (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathing Difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathing problems (e.g., asthma)</td>
<td>You can’t breathe with them on and with people’s asthma it will be harder for them to breathe (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s hard to breathe in masks. And for me I have breathing problems and it is so hard if I need to wear a mask. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Theme: Hard to breathe
- People with asthma or other breathing problems will have a tough time breathing using masks. (5th class)
- Short of air barely being able to breathe (5th class)
- I do not like wearing mask because when you exercise in class it makes it harder to breathe. (6th Class)
- The bad thing about wearing masks is I can’t breathe as good when I am not wearing a mask. (6th class)
- I don’t like wearing masks because I can’t breathe properly, and I can’t breathe fresh air (5th Class)
- You’re breathing in bad oxygen (6th Class)
- You can smell your own breath (5th Class)
- You are breathing in your own air which is bad for your lungs (4th class)

### Theme: Poor air quality
- I do not like wearing mask because when you exercise in class it makes it harder to breathe. (6th Class)
- I don’t like wearing masks because I can’t breathe properly, and I can’t breathe fresh air (5th Class)
- You’re breathing in bad oxygen (6th Class)
- You can smell your own breath (5th Class)
- You are breathing in your own air which is bad for your lungs (4th class)

### Negative impact on communication and social interaction
- They make you quieter when answering questions (4th class)
- It is harder because it makes it difficult to listen and communicate (6th class)
- You cannot hear other people while they are talking (4th class)
- Teachers find it hard to hear their students and it annoys you and makes it harder to concentrate at work (6th class)
- It is really annoying and to talk while having them on isn’t fun (5th Class)
- Deaf people will have trouble reading people’s lips (5th Class)
- They hide our true emotions and feelings. (6th Class)
- I don’t like masks and people don’t know if you’re smiling or sulking. (4th Class)
- You can’t see someone smile. (6th Class)
- The bad thing about wearing masks is that it hides your face and it makes you look closed to other people. (6th class)
- I like to see my friends faces which wearing masks prevent (5th Class)

### Cost – monetary and to environment
- They cost a lot of money (5th class)
- I think it is bad for the environment (5th class)
- The disposable ones are bad for the environment. (6th Class)

### Question 3: What could make wearing a mask easier?

### Theme: Have more mask breaks
- I think we should take more breaks because they are too warm and I mean by more breaks is to take it off. (6th class)
- Giving us a two-minute break to take off the masks (5th class)
- If we do have to wear a mask it would be easier to take breaks and wear them under our nose (4th class)
- If you take breaks from masks (4th class)

### Theme: More mask breaks
- Mask breaks so we can go outside for 5 mins to 10 mins to take off our masks (6th Class)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Typical Quote</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe having 5 min outside break every two hours to get fresh air (5th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier to breathe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More breathable</td>
<td>If could breathe better in the mask (4th Class)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having something on your mask that makes it easier to breathe and smells nice (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make easier to wear by adding air pockets (4th class)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If the mask had breathing holes (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Put in filers so you can get fresh air (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Add ventilation (5th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If there was a hole in the mask you could get more air (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Air pockets/Filters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More breathable</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lighter material/softer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being able to speak and hear others</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make them lighter but keeping them safe (4th Class)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make them more comfortable (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If they were padded on the inside with cotton wool. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be able to hear someone talking (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If they were a bit less stuffy and hot. Being see through might help because you can see what the person is saying (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size and fit</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better fit</td>
<td>Have a strap around your head instead of your ears (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not to hurt behind the ear (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>I think it’s better if the masks were looser and make little spaces to breathe (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When you are buying them, you could ask for 11-12 instead of child or adult size as sometimes children sizes don’t fit me (5th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you can adjust the material and definitely the size. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives to masks</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desk dividers OR Masks (not both)</td>
<td>Dividers or masks (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wearing visors instead of masks would help as it would allow more breathing room. (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If there were no screens as it hard enough trying to hear teacher with the mask. (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We could get our vaccine instead of wearing mask (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe go to the visor things (4th Class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instead of wearing masks, kids can do antigen tests (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalise mask</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design own mask</td>
<td>Masks would be easier if you designed them. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe if you got to design them it could make mask wearing a lot of fun!!! (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make your own mask. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmentally friendly masks</td>
<td>Softer mask or have everyone use fabric masks because single use ones are bad for the environment (5th class)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making masks washable can be better for people and the environment (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other messages</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it optional</td>
<td>It should be optional for children to wear a mask. (5th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ok with how they are</td>
<td>It is already easy (4th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe making them mandatory and free (6th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 4: Are you happy to continue wearing a mask in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
<th>School 3</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes but...</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed opinions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme | Typical Quote | Mentions |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free</td>
<td>When you are speaking to the teacher you should be allowed to take it off. If you have nobody too close to you, I think you should be allowed to take it off (6th Class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing/ban them</td>
<td>I can’t think of anything to make masks better. (6th Class)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection/keep safe/don’t want Covid 19</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Yes | Yes I am because they protect you (4th class)  
Yes I am as I am now used to it. I don’t see why not as it helps keep us safe. (4th class)  
Yes I am if it keeps everybody safe and healthy (6th class)  
Yes because if someone has it its harder to catch (4th Class)  
I don’t mind and if cases are lowering I will not mind keep wearing masks (5th class)  
Yes I am indeed because I do not want covid. (6th class)  
I personally don’t mind wearing masks OK because our teacher lets us have mask breaks every so often. (4th Class)  
I’d be happy cause me da hates them so he gives me days off (4th Class) | |
| Yes but or if ... | | 15 |
| If mask or desk divider (not both) | Yes as long as they are comfortable and easy to wear and I am safe (4th class)  
I’d be fine wearing a mask in school, but as I said the dividers seem pointless if we are all wearing masks (6th class)  
I’m happy to continue wearing a mask in school as I feel it is mandatory and is keeping me and others safe from Covid 19. On the contrary I would like to introduce mask breaks during the school day to make it easier when wearing a mask. (6th Class)  
I think we should be able to mix during lunch it is outside no masks needed. Some yard zone are too small for 2 classes. But you will be able to chat, in another yard zone then go back to yours. (6th Class) | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Typical Quote</th>
<th>mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice of mask</td>
<td>Yes but I think people with breathing issues shouldn’t wear masks, we have herd immunity as the majority don’t have breathing issues. (5th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes if it is the mask I like. (4th class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed opinions</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Prefer not to but if keeps class safe yes | Absolutely not. I don’t like mask but if it keeps me safe yes (4th class)  
Not really, I don’t like wearing a mask but if it means to keep the world safe I will. (4th class)  
I would prefer not to wear them but if I had to it would just so I could be safe and other people could be safe (4th Class)  
It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. I would rather not get covid again. They can be quite annoying (6th Class)  
I’m not happy because they are annoying and uncomfortable but I’m happy that it keeps everyone safe (6th class)  
I would not be happy to continue wearing a mask but if it does keep everyone safe then I wouldn’t mind to wear a mask in school (5th Class)  
It would be alright but I would prefer to stop wearing them. (6th class)  
I don’t really mind wearing them but I would like to get rid of them (6th class)  
I’d be happy if we did not have to wear one but I would be fine to continue (5th class)  
Yes and no because they are sometimes sore but they keep you safe (5th Class)  
I would be ok to continue. I would prefer not to though. (5th class)  
Yes I am happy to keep wearing a mask but I would prefer not to wear a mask (5th Class)  
It is fine wearing a mask and I usually have no problems but I would prefer not to wear masks (6th class)  
Not really I don’t like them but I’m told they are supposed to keep you safe (5th Class)  
I am happy we are covid safe but the masks are difficult to wear and I would rather not have them (6th class)  
Not really but I would still be able to (5th Class)                                                                                                 |          |
| No                         | 81                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |          |
| Can’t breathe              | No I am not because I cannot breathe (5th Class)  
No because they’re annoying and hard to breathe (6th class)  
I am not happy to continue wearing a mask because it makes me itchy and I can’t breathe and I get spots also. (6th class)                                                                                           |          |
<p>| Uncomfortable             | No because it hurts my face and when my reusable mask are in the wash I have to use a single use one and I don’t like to do that because it hurts the planet. (5th Class)                                                                                                                                                             |          |
| Distracting                | No because it is so distracting (5th Class)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |          |</p>
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<th>Theme</th>
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| Believe it doesn’t make a difference | I feel that masks are a bit distracting in school and I would really hope that we wouldn’t have to wear mask any more (6th Class)  
Not really because I find it difficult to concentrate (4th class)  
No, I don’t think it makes any difference because we take them off during lunch when we eat inside. (5th class)  
No because I can’t see all of my friends’ face (4th class)  
No because I can barely hear my friend talking and it’s not nice (5th class)  
Not really because I can’t hear people talking (5th Class)  
No because they are hard to talk with and the negatives outweigh the positives. (6th Class)  
No because the kids are too young to wear one at about 13 years old you should wear one (4th Class)  
No I think we shouldn’t wear masks. It should be like back in 2019 when we never wore masks (4th Class)  
No because they are extremely bad so I would much rather not wear a mask. Thank you for asking my opinion. (5th Class) |          |
| Can’t see faces/expressions |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |          |
| Hard to talk/hear            |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |          |
| Too young                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |          |
| Other                        | I think Nphet made a good decision with masks. I think we should stop and see do cases get higher if they do we put masks back in place. (4th Class)                                                                 |          |

Part 2: Consultation with Teachers

Two focus groups and eight in-depth interviews were conducted with a cross-section of primary school teachers regarding the wearing of face masks by children from 3rd - 6th class. Teachers were asked about mask compliance; mask efficacy; and the physical, emotional, educational and developmental impacts that they perceive following the implementation of this requirement.

Generally, teachers reported that mask wearing has gone smoother than expected, with some upsides to kids feeling included and playing their part. They noted that potentially children will be happy to continue in the short term, but new term and class teacher bonding should be considered for next September. They also noted that general Covid measures such as social distancing and the use of pods in the classroom have had a far greater impact on children's physical, emotional, social and educational development than masks but that the longer-term impact on social cohesions and learning progress for ESL5 or quieter students is not enough to support continuing with the mask wearing.

Detailed findings are captured below

**Mask compliance**

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<th>Date: 17 February 2022</th>
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- Really good buy in from the children - most were totally on board
- While overall strong compliance, the challenge came from children of parents who resisted mask wearing more of an issue in DEIS schools, but one or two parents in non DEIS e.g. DEIS
- Teachers mostly felt supported by schools and principals around encouraging mask wearing, but not their role to enforce it.
- Government guidance was clear but not detailed enough for certain situations e.g. nonmedical exemptions
- Decline in compliance since restrictions eased in recent weeks

**Mask efficacy**

- Sense of security for teachers and staff on introduction especially for staff dealing with multiple children on a one-to-one basis
- Teachers were divided as to the actual efficacy of mask wearing – anecdotal split on whether cases increased or decreased
- Concern that time spent eating with no mask could contribute to spread – up to 1 hour per day
- Hygiene around mask wearing could be poor at times – coughing, touching, misplacing, exchanging – could this undermine efficacy?

**Physical impact**

- Little change in physical activity other than need for more time outside
- No obvious change in energy levels reported, changes in concentration levels attributed more to Covid fatigue than masks
- Majority of teachers reported that noise levels in classrooms increased
- Difficulty hearing quieter children especially with cloth masks
- Teachers found it more tiring to teach largely due to the need to repeat instructions
- More difficult for children with physical issues such as glasses

**Educational impact**

- In most cases the teachers felt that mask wearing was having very little impact on their educational attainment. They pointed out that so much time had been lost due to home schooling, that mask wearing was not an issue. The Pods were much more of an issue
- The fun and engagement has gone out of learning for the children slightly, as they have to sit in the same groups and harder to respond in the moment to learning needs
- Some of the issues that were directly impacted by mask wearing are:
  - Teachers are not giving as much homework
  - Irish and phonics for children with additional needs was also seen as more challenging while wearing mask
  - Singing / Drama /PE - very restricted in what could be done

**Emotional impact**

- Overall teachers did not see negative impacts on the students’ emotional well-being or development, due to mask wearing
- The necessity of sitting in pods was more of an issue, particularly when students might clash.
- One group that was singled out as being negatively impacted were shy or quiet children. The mask wearing and difficulty in understanding what they were saying led to embarrassment and then a reluctance to participate
- Overwhelming consensus was that while masks were inconvenient, Covid in general had a far greater impact on emotional wellbeing
- It was noted however, that it can be difficult to convey positive emotions to children while wearing masks – non-verbal cues are a vital teaching tool and this has been impacted

**Developmental impact**

- Teachers felt that in the short term, masks did not have too much impact on their classes developmental or academic progress, especially compared to home schooling
- Children were still engaging and taking part in the work, although - independent learning becomes more important in older classes
• Quieter children highlighted as being less likely to participate in class-based activities
• Group work takes more effort but was still working well
• Biggest impact on social skills and social and peer learning

Part 3: Serial surveys on Parents of children aged 9 to 12 years

Amárach Research conducted on behalf of the Department of Health, weighted to the demographics of the 18+ adult population with a sample size n=1,600. Since December 2021, there has been a fall in the perceived appropriateness of children wearing face masks by parents (from 65% to 56%). Compliance in the school setting remains broadly unchanged at 90% to 91%, and parents report a slight increase in the proportion of children managing well (from 65% to 70%).

Do you think it appropriate that 9-12 year old children should wear face masks in schools and other indoor public places?
Is your child/children wearing face masks in the following situation?

- At school: 91% (87%), In shops etc.: 81% (79%), On public transport: 42% (37%), None of the above: 6% (5%)

If school: how has your child/children adapted to wearing face masks in school?

- Well: 65% (69%), Badly: 17% (14%), No difference: 16% (10%), Not sure: 20% (10%)