



## 8 tips to prevent communication challenges while wearing a mask in school

Many state educational agencies and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that students and staff wear masks or cloth face coverings to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus when schools open for in-person instruction. Masks, however, will make verbal communication more difficult, especially for those with hearing loss who often rely on reading lips to understand speech.

In fact, mask wearing can muffle sounds, making hearing higher-pitched voices difficult, and prevents the ability to read facial expressions. Masks can also be physically uncomfortable for people who wear hearing aids or cochlear implants, said the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

Widespread mask use is essential for protecting the health of the public, ASHA said. There are, however, steps people with and without hearing loss can take to reduce communication challenges.

"It's important for teachers and other school staff to be aware that children with hearing, speech, language, and social communication disorders may miss out on certain messages when masks are used," said Brooke Hatfield, ASHA's associate director of Clinical Issues in Speech-Language Pathology. "ASHA wants to raise awareness about this with teachers and other school professionals to help children achieve success in the classroom in this challenging communication environment

Consider these best practices from ASHA to improve communication while wearing a mask in the classroom:

**Tips to improve communication while wearing a mask**

<p><b>1. Consider clear panel masks or face shields.</b></p>	<p>Most disposable masks cover the face from above the nose to the bottom of the chin. There are, however, masks on the market that have a clear, light plastic covering the mouth. Face shields, worn like a headband across the forehead, hold a clear plastic sheet that covers the entire face and bends toward the ears but doesn't touch the skin.</p>
<p><b>2. Get students' attention before speaking.</b></p>	<p>Making eye contact with students will be essential as a teacher begins an important lesson or wants to give instructions. Class sizes will likely be reduced to ensure social distancing so it may not take too long for a teacher to make sure all student attention is on him. Still, advise teachers that it may be most helpful to provide both written and verbal instructions.</p>
<p><b>3. Face students directly but maintain social distancing.</b></p>	<p>Remind teachers to avoid speaking, or at least providing critical instructions and lessons, with their backs toward students or while walking around the room. Teachers are also being asked to socially distance from students, so they need to stand in a spot where every student can see their face.</p>
<p><b>4. Talk a bit louder but don't shout.</b></p>	<p>Masks muffle sounds so teachers will need to speak a bit louder, especially if they are in a larger classroom for social distancing purposes. Speaking slower also will help improve communication. Remind teachers to avoid shouting as it can be jarring for students.</p>
<p><b>5. Use body language.</b></p>	<p>Masks block the ability to read facial expressions. For example, students will not be able to see a teacher smile if she is wearing a mask. Teachers can consider ways to communicate approval through body language, such as a thumbs up, an OK gesture with their fingers, or by holding a sign with a smiley face.</p>
<p><b>6. Check for understanding.</b></p>	<p>Teachers can ask students to indicate that they understood directions. Teachers should also encourage students to raise their hands if they need clarification.</p>
<p><b>7. Personalize communication.</b></p>	<p>At the beginning of the school year, teachers should try to understand each student's communication preference and how she can make communication easier for each student. For example, some students may always need both verbal and written instructions. Likewise, each teacher may have communication preferences. Remember that this is a unique situation, and everyone is learning how to navigate wearing masks in classrooms.</p>
<p><b>8. Suggest comfortable masks for students with hearing aids or cochlear implants.</b></p>	<p>Common face masks that hug the face with loops behind the ears can be uncomfortable for people who wear hearing aids or who have cochlear implants. Teachers may suggest face shields, masks that tie behind the head, masks with four string ties, or other face coverings that don't interfere with hearing devices.</p>

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