

# Mask Wearing and ASD



Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and public health recommendations, it is becoming increasingly common to see people wearing non-medical masks when physical distancing is not possible. Some learners with autism spectrum disorder may feel anxious or afraid when they see people wearing masks or when they have to wear a mask themselves. Therefore, preparing learners is very important.

## **Preparing learners to be around people wearing masks**

Learners may have to get used to masks before they're put in a situation where they'll have to work or interact with people who are wearing them. Here are a few strategies you can use to prepare learners:

- let learners handle masks and play with them;
- show them photos of people wearing different styles of non-medical masks;
- print photos of favourite characters' or famous peoples' faces, and images of masks for the learner to put on the faces;
- put a mask on a favourite toy or teddy bear; and
- create opportunities for learners to see their parents/guardians wearing masks.

## **Preparing learners to wear a mask**

It may be necessary to prepare learners to wear a mask. Here are a few strategies you can use to prepare learners:

- let learners handle and play with masks;
- put a mask on a favourite toy or teddy bear; and
- let learners choose the mask they want to wear if masks of different colours or patterns are available.

## **Teaching strategies**

Some learners may need more specific, methodical support to get used to being around people wearing masks or to wear a mask. The following are six evidence-based teaching strategies you can use.

### **1. Modelling and Video Modelling**

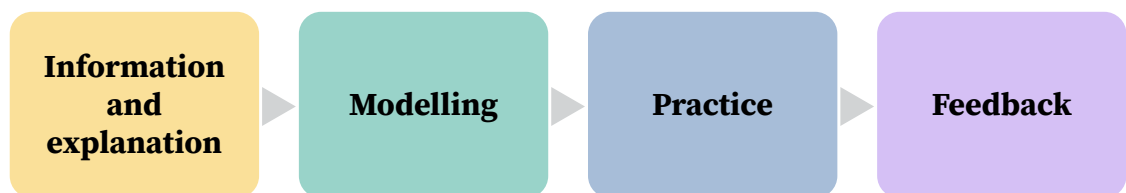
During modelling, learners observe another person appropriately performing the targeted skill or behavior before performing the skill themselves. During video modelling, learners watch a video of someone performing a skill. You can find a wide range of videos on the Internet (or you can create your own custom videos). Choose fairly short videos that are no longer than four minutes. Video modelling is practical as it allows for viewing the video as many times as necessary, and you can start or stop the video at strategic times, depending on the learner's needs.

Modelling and video modelling can be used together with prompting and reinforcement. They can also be used during behavioural skills training (see strategy 2).

Examples: Modelling and Video Modelling	
Teach learners appropriate behaviours for when they are around people wearing masks	Teach learners to wear a mask
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learners observe a young person their age engaging in an activity with an adult who is wearing a mask.</li> <li>Learners watch a video of a young person their age engaging in an activity with an adult who is wearing a mask.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learners observe someone putting on a mask.</li> <li>Learners observe someone taking off a mask.</li> <li>Learners watch a video of a person putting on and taking off a face mask.</li> </ul> <p>Example of video modelling: how to put on a mask</p>

## 2. Behavioural Skills Training

Behavioural skills training (BST) is a teaching approach that helps to maximize learning, comprehension, and skill levels. The following steps must be taken when using BST:



**Information and explanation:** The first step in BST is to provide the learner with information and an explanation of the skill being taught. It involves describing the skill and discussing its importance and validity. It's important to use a language level accessible to the learner and to be clear and concise.

**Modelling:** The second step is to model the skill to be developed by learners. This involves showing learners an example of the skill so they understand exactly what's expected of them. You can do the modelling yourself or use video modelling. Do as much modelling as you think necessary to prepare learners to perform the skill on their own.

**Practice:** The third step in BST is to allow learners to practice the skill during exercises or while role playing with you in a calm, safe environment.

**Feedback:** The last step is to provide learners with feedback after each exercise or role-playing session. Communicate to learners the areas where they were successful during the rehearsal and areas needing improvement. It's important to identify tangible actions when giving feedback so learners know exactly what their strengths and challenges are. You can then do some additional practice exercises so learners can master the skill while you continue to provide feedback.

When you think the learner has mastered the skill in the more structured context of practical exercises and role playing, you can then provide the learner with opportunities to use the skill in their natural environment with others. Continue to support the learner and to offer feedback to make sure they experience success in this environment and can generalize learning.

Examples: Behavioural Skills Training	
Teach learners appropriate behaviours for when they are around people wearing masks	Teach learners to wear a mask
Information and explanation	
<p>Here's an example of an explanation you can give a learner with a high level of language skills:</p> <p><i>"People wear masks to protect themselves and others from COVID-19. COVID-19 is a virus spread by tiny germs from the mouth or nose. We can't see the germs because they're very small, but they can stick to people and make them sick. When we wear a mask, we avoid spreading germs. The people around you wear masks to avoid spreading germs to others. I'm therefore going to wear a mask when I work with you to avoid spreading my germs."</i></p>	<p>Here's an example of an explanation you could give a learner with a lower level of language skills:</p> <p><i>"Sometimes we have to wear a mask to stay healthy and safe. We put it over our mouth and nose. As you'll see, it doesn't hurt. You can still breathe and talk. But you mustn't touch it once it's on your face. I'm going to show you how to put one on."</i></p>
Modelling	
<p>Here's an example of a situation you could model or show the learner a modelling video of:</p> <p>When you're around someone who's wearing a mask, you must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• act with respect, as you would if the person weren't wearing a mask;</li> <li>• refrain from touching another person's mask;</li> <li>• refrain from removing another person's mask; and</li> <li>• stay an appropriate distance away from the person, even if they are wearing a mask.</li> </ul>	<p>Here are a few examples of actions you could model or show the learner a modelling video of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to put on a mask.</li> <li>• How to perform tasks or activities while wearing a mask.</li> <li>• How to remove a mask.</li> <li>• What to do once the mask has been removed.</li> </ul>
Practice	
<p>Here's an example of a practice exercise session with a learner:</p> <p>Wear a mask while doing an activity with the learner so they can practice the different actions that were modelled.</p>	<p>Here's an example of a practice exercise session with a learner:</p> <p>The learner practices putting on and taking off a mask, using the tips provided during modelling.</p>
Feedback	
<p>Here's an example of feedback you could offer a learner with a high level of language skills, after the practical exercise:</p> <p><i>"You did a great job while I was wearing my mask. Well done! Also, you didn't touch my mask—that's excellent! One thing I'd like to see you do next time is to stay a bit further away from me. You got very close to me to admire my mask. Even though I'm wearing a mask, small invisible germs may escape, so don't put your face near mine to prevent germs from being transmitted to you. Stand up and I'll show what a reasonable distance looks like, even when people are wearing masks."</i></p>	<p>Here's an example of feedback you could offer a learner with a lower level of language skills, after the practical exercise:</p> <p><i>"Well done! You held your mask by the elastics to put it on and you kept it on your face for almost three minutes! We're going to try again, and this time, try not to touch it when it's on your face."</i></p>

Additional information on BST will be available fall 2020 in the *CALI—Functional Skills for Independence online resource*.

### 3. Visual Strategies and Cues

Visual strategies and cues are a type of support that includes visual information meant to help learners understand how to carry out an activity or task. It gives them a better understanding of expectations and directs their attention to the important aspects of the task or activity.

Examples: Visual Strategies and Cues	
<p>Teach learners how to behave appropriately when around people wearing masks</p>	<p>Teach learners to wear a mask</p>
<div data-bbox="370 472 868 703" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="370 735 779 798">You can find other examples on gnb's <a href="#">COVID-19 web page</a>.</p>	<p data-bbox="893 472 1485 535"><b>Visual sequence of the steps involved in putting on a mask</b></p> <div data-bbox="893 556 1485 682" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="893 703 1485 1081" data-label="Complex-Block"> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Ensure the face covering is clean and dry.</li> <li> Before putting on your mask, wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.</li> <li> Ensure your hair is away from your face. Secure the elastic loops of the mask around your ears. If your mask has strings, tie them securely, ensuring your mask fits snug on your face.</li> <li> Cover your mouth and nose with the mask and make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask.</li> <li> Do not touch the front of the mask while you wear it. Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer if you accidentally touch your mask.</li> </ol> </div> <p data-bbox="893 1113 1485 1176"><b>Visual sequence of the steps involved in taking off a mask</b></p> <div data-bbox="893 1197 1485 1554" data-label="Complex-Block"> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Before taking off your mask, wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.</li> <li> Do not touch the front of your mask to remove it and be careful not to touch your eyes, nose, and mouth when removing your face mask.</li> <li> Remove the elastic loops of the mask from around your ears or untie the strings from behind your head.</li> <li> Hold only the loops or strings and place your cloth mask directly in the wash. If you are in your car, place into a bag until you get home to wash or discard it. If throwing it out, place it into a garbage bin or plastic bag.</li> <li> Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer after you have discarded your mask.</li> </ol> </div>

## 4. Intervention Involving a Visual Support

Social narratives are a type of intervention involving a visual support that describes a social situation from the learner’s perspective. They include relevant social cues, other people’s perspectives of the situation, and expectations regarding the learner’s behaviour. Scenarios are individualized according to the learner’s needs, and short sentences and images are used. Social narratives can be used before learners have to work with someone wearing a mask or before they have to wear one themselves.



Examples: Intervention Involving a Visual Support	
Teach learners how to behave appropriately when around people wearing masks	Teach learners to wear a mask
<a href="#">Seeing other people wearing masks</a> from Autism Little Learners is an example of a social scenario for seeing other people wearing a mask.	<a href="#">Wearing a mask</a> from PAutism.org is an example of a social scenario for a learner who has to wear a mask.

## 5. First–Then

It can be difficult to motivate learners to carry out a task or activity they don’t particularly enjoy. The first–then strategy can be used to show learners that they must first complete a task or activity they don’t particularly enjoy and then they can carry out a favourite activity or task. You can use a visual support to show them the sequence of activities, as shown in the example below.



This strategy can be used to encourage learners to adopt a specific behaviour that is difficult for them. It’s important that the task learners are then asked to perform is reinforcing for them in order to motivate them to show the behaviour they have difficulty with.

Examples: First–Then	
Teach learners how to behave appropriately when around people wearing masks	Teach learners to wear a mask
<p>The adult says:</p> <p><i>“First I’m going to put on my mask, then we’ll play a game.”</i></p>	<p>The adult uses the following visual support:</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><b>First</b></p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><b>Then</b></p>  </div> </div>

## 6. Task Analysis and Chaining

Task analysis and chaining are two interventions that can be used to break down a complex task into small steps that are more manageable for the learner. Task analysis is used to describe each of the steps in the skill, and chaining is the suggested strategy for teaching these steps.

Additional information on task analysis and chaining will be available fall 2020 in the *CALI—Functional Skills for Independence online resource*.

### Summary

It may be necessary for school staff and parents/guardians to teach learners specific mask-wearing skills. It may be harder for some learners to adjust to this new reality for a variety of reasons (e.g., sensitivity or sensory challenges, fears or phobias, rigidity, or difficulty coping with change). The strategies outlined in this document might help you to teach the necessary skills and overcome these challenges. Be sure to provide learners with reinforcement for the targeted behaviours to increase the likelihood that they will continue to exhibit them and thus ensure everyone's safety and wellbeing.