

Zero-Three: Mask Up! Talking to Young Children about Wearing Masks

Aug 14, 2020 By Rebecca Parlakian

While wearing masks is something new for all of us, toddlers and preschoolers respond well to the safety and security of daily routines.

Masks have become part of daily life for toddlers and preschoolers (aged two years and up). Looking for ideas to help your child understand the why's and when's of mask-wearing? We've put together our top tips for masking up with your little one:

Explain the why for wearing a mask, but keep it simple and not scary: "We are wearing masks to keep our coughs and sneezes in while we are at the store."



Introduce the mask during playtime. Use pretend play to help your child get used to the mask if wearing one is new. "Let's play grocery store. We have to get ready! We have to get our bag and we need to put on our masks!"

Frame the mask as a *big kid* thing. There's nothing that littles like better than being big. Remind your child that *only big kids* get to wear masks out at the store. Some friends of ours took this approach and their three-year-old proudly wore a mask for a trip to the hardware store.

Offer choices, if possible. Toddlers and preschoolers are known for seeking independence, and sometimes this means they push back against *any* clothing you offer (they want the dinosaur t-shirt when you picked the stripes). You can head this off at the pass by letting them choose between two child-sized masks.

Remind your child about what's going to happen before you leave: "We are going to the supermarket. When we get there, we will put our masks on in the car. We will wear our masks the whole time we're shopping. When we get in the car to go home, we'll take them off again." (Or whatever your family practice is, as some families keep masks on in the car.)

Review the rules when you arrive. Since toddlers and preschoolers have a limited memory and limited self-control, you'll want to review what's going to happen when you arrive at the market. As you are putting on masks, remind your child: "We'll wear the masks *the whole time* we are in the store. When we are done and back in the car, we can take them off again."

Prepare yourself for mask fails. Toddlers and preschoolers just don't have the same self-control as adults. They will get excited and pull their masks down to tell you about the flowers in the floral department. They will dance down the aisle and their masks will fall off. They will just get bored or frustrated with having a face covering on. All of this is normal. Rather than getting upset or scaring children about the possibility of getting sick, it's best to focus on the routine: "We have to wear our mask in the store to stay healthy." When mask fails happen (and they will happen), remind your child about your "family mask rule." Point out your own mask and gently replace the mask on your child's face. If your child shares that the mask is uncomfortable, it's okay to validate that sometimes masks do feel itchy or hot., Then re-direct your child's attention to something nearby: Can they find a box of cereal that's orange? Can they show you where the apples are? Would they like to push the cart down the aisle?

While wearing masks is something new for all of us, toddlers and preschoolers respond well to the safety and security of daily routines. If masks are consistently part of your family's "going out" routine, over time, children will adjust and go with the flow.