



Tolerating a Mask

Introduction

It's important to recognize that children with autism are adapting to new daily routines just like the rest of us, but for some, new routines can be hard to establish.

For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recently recommended the use of cloth face coverings in public settings, like grocery stores and pharmacies.

Although tolerable for some individuals, this can be a new and difficult task for others. Research on applied behavior analysis points to two solutions to adapting to new routines: pairing and shaping. The purpose of this resource is to provide information to families and caregivers on how to help support a loved one to wear a mask.

Pairing

Pairing is a method introducing unfamiliar objects, like a face mask, to children with autism. To appropriately pair the new item, we deliver it to the child along with positive reinforcers like tickles and hugs.

Prior to asking the child to wear the mask, we simply want them to become more familiar with it. We can do this by giving them a mask followed by praise or high fives. Don't be afraid to be silly with it either! Try making goofy faces with your child and using the mask to play peek-a-boo. Once the child is comfortable in the presence of the mask, we use shaping to get them to wear it.

Talk about it

Have a conversation with your child about the importance and reason behind wearing a mask in the community and the safety that it provides to themselves and others. This would be a good time to review the "Wearing a Mask" social story.

HELPFUL PHRASES:

- To leave home safely, there is a new rule that says everyone must wear a mask so that we don't spread or contract germs and become sick.
- I care about you and your safety, so wearing a mask is important.

Ask Questions

How comfortable do they feel about wearing a mask? If they seem uneasy, acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Questions include:

- Will you hold the mask in your hands? Will you hold the mask up to your nose/mouth?
- Would you mind putting the mask on for a few seconds to practice?
- How would you feel about leaving the house with a mask on? Are you okay with others around you wearing a mask while we are out?

Shaping

The goal of shaping is to reinforce each small step towards wearing the mask. With pairing, we simply want the child to see the mask in a good light. With shaping, reinforcement is provided for small steps like (a) holding the mask, (b) touching the mask to the face, (c) allowing others to move the mask towards his/her face, and (d) putting the mask on.

It sounds easy, but each step may require several trials, and it's important not to move ahead too fast. Here is the shaping program being used in ABA session.

1. The mask sits on the table without the client pushing it away or engaging in escape maintained behavior.
2. Touch mask.
3. Hold mask 5 seconds.
4. Hold mask 10 seconds.
5. Hold mask to face 5 seconds.
6. Hold mask to face 10 seconds.
7. Someone else moves the mask toward their face without turning away or engaging in other escape behavior.
8. Put mask on (or allow it to be put on) with 1 strap.
9. Put mask on (or allow it to be put on) with 2 straps.
10. Leave mask on face for 5 seconds.
11. Leave mask on face for 10 seconds.
12. Leave mask on face for 15 seconds.
13. Leave mask on face for 30 seconds.
14. Leave mask on face while completing one activity/task.
15. Leave mask on face while completing 2 activities/tasks.
16. Leave mask on face while completing 3 activities/tasks.

Reinforcement

Provide lots of praise for what they were able to do, even just trying. Using a preferred item or activity as a reinforcer. You could also say something like: "You've been working very hard. I'm proud of how far you've come with wearing your mask!"

Give Choices

Does your loved one have sensory preferences? Think about their comfort and which kind of mask better suite their needs. Present several choices of masks, or better yet, involve them in making their own mask! Consider the following:

- Some individuals prefer cotton over nylon.
- Elastic around the ears vs. a tie behind the head.
- They might prefer to wear a mask that is their favorite color or design.

Practice Makes Perfect

After each ABA session, parents will be told what step of the shaping program was reached. Please practice these steps at home and reinforce successful steps. Also try practicing if they go anywhere (out in public, to Grandma's house...). If anyone is getting frustrated, please stop and try again later. A power struggle with this skill will not be helpful or beneficial.