

Overcoming Sensory Challenges: Wearing of face masks

Sensory issues might be a real and difficult challenge for many learners who have to wear masks when out in the public or once they are back at school.

Sensory sensitivities and emotional issues usually go hand in hand. It is therefore important to prepare and do what is needed to ensure our learners with sensory and other challenges do not need to be under additional stress due to the new Coronavirus safety regulations.



Basic principles when choosing a mask for least invasive tactile input:

- Choose a mask that is made with soft, light material.
- Choose a mask with the least seams.
- Choose material that has his/her favourite characters on the material.
- Elastic around the ears could be uncomfortable. Choose a soft elastic. This could be attached to a cap as in picture below. If using strings, it could also help to tie it over a hat or cap.



When your child is not comfortable having to wear the mask, it will help to find out what the main reason is. Possible questions to ask in determining the underlying cause:

- Does your child tend to be inflexible to change?
- Does your child show avoidance of tactile input around their face and/or mouth area?

If inflexibility to change is the main reason, the social story about wearing the mask would be important to go through with your child.

If sensory challenges are an issue it is advisable to go through the social story in collaboration with the desensitization techniques.

Basic principles when desensitizing with regards to flexibility sensory sensitivity:

- Gradual introduction to the new and unusual input.
- Use firm pressure when touching the child, never light touch.
- Always be sure your child is expecting the touch, never surprise the child.



- Avoid giving instructions or touching without child seeing you and expecting you.
- When using physical prompts, instructions or guidance, use as firm a touch as possible without hurting.

Desensitizing the face:

Do this desensitizing technique 3 times a day ideally each time before starting with the gradual wearing of the mask.

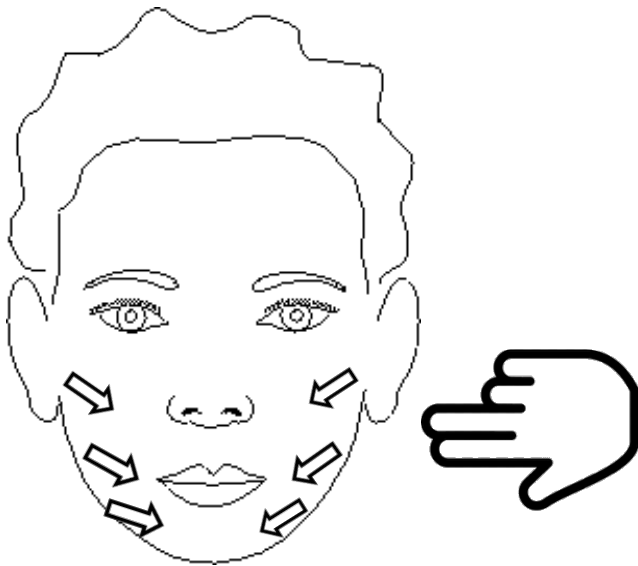


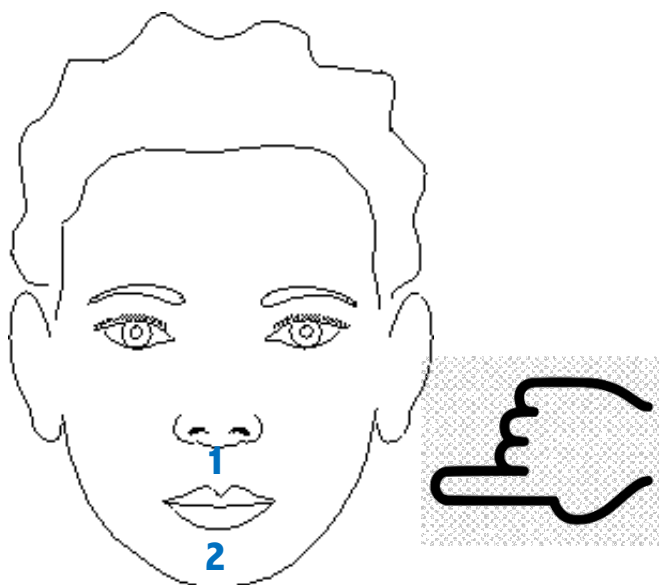
Fig. A

Exercise A:

Use base of middle and index fingers on each side. With firm pressure rub from outside to centre on face taking approx. 5 seconds for a stroke. Both sides can be done simultaneously. Start on the cheekbone, then upper jaw, then lower jaw.

If your child does not tolerate your hand/finger on his/her face, then you can use a rolled-up sock (soft material) and put gentle, deep pressure on each of the above areas as illustrated in Fig. A.

Complete exercise demonstrated in Fig. B once exercise A is completed.



Exercise B:

1. Use index finger and place firm pressure between nose and upper lip for 5 seconds.
2. Followed by firm pressure just under the lower lip for 5 seconds.

Playing games to help desensitize while wearing the mask:

- Family game: everyone wears his/her mask and take turns to sing/hum a line from a familiar song without using words. Guess which song it is.
- Family plays hide and seek while wearing their masks.
- Older children: everyone wears his/her mask and one person at a time gets to have a sticker with an object drawn on it. The person with the sticker has to guess what the object is by asking simple questions to which a 'no' or 'yes' answer can be given by the others.
- Other option: get the child to wear the mask while he is busy with one of his favourite activities. Use a timer to determine how long he/she is tolerating wearing it. Do this on a daily basis and increase the time daily. If he/she tolerates the mask for 5 minutes, add 30 seconds to a minute the next day. If he/she tolerates wearing the mask for 20 minutes at a time, increase the time with 4 – 5 minutes. When using this method, a reward can be used i.e. a star after each effort. 5 stars = special activity.

