

COVID-19 Mask Use and Children

Current Recommendations

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends indoor masking in K-12 school, early childhood education, and childcare settings for all individuals ages 2 and older regardless of vaccination status^{1, 2}. Central District Health (CDH) recommends the same in both childcare and K-12 school settings when community levels are classified as High^{3, 4}.

Infectiousness and Transmission among Children

While early in the pandemic, children under the age of eight were felt to have lower levels of infectiousness as compared to older children and adults it is now understood that children of all ages can carry high loads of replicating virus and serve to transmit infection⁵. This role in community transmission among younger children has been demonstrated recently during the omicron surge⁶.

Effect of Masking on Disease Transmission in School and Childcare Settings

Numerous observational studies have been published which indicate that mask policies have a positive impact on COVID-19 transmission in childcare and K-12 school settings⁷⁻¹⁴. Compared to schools with mask optional or no masking policies, schools with universal masking policies had decreased incidence of illness^{8, 14}, reduction of within-school transmission^{9, 11, 13}, and were less likely to have reported a COVID-19 outbreak¹⁰. Additionally, childcare centers with mask policies in place were less likely to report COVID-19 related closures⁷.

Health and Cognitive Considerations

Data about the health and cognitive impacts of childhood masking in the COVID-19 era are not well documented in scholarly journals. Studies in children have shown that wearing a surgical mask does not adversely impact biological functions such as pulmonary function¹⁵, blood gas concentration, or heart rate¹⁶. Masking was not found to impact concentration or memory in children¹⁶ and one study demonstrated that children are not significantly impacted in their ability to infer emotion when another person is masked and likened the differential to the impact of a person wearing sunglasses¹⁷. Additional research is warranted to more clearly understand if and how masking impacts the learning process.

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