

Wearing of masks in schools and colleges from 8 March 2021: Advice for staff and pupils who are deaf or hard of hearing

This paper brings together shared practice and strategies, informed by the experience and expertise of ASCL specialists and members.

A checklist is provided at the end of the paper which summarises actions and ideas for school and college leaders to adopt and adapt for their setting. Many of the identified strategies will strengthen communication and inclusivity across the school or college community to benefit everyone not only for those with hearing issues.

What is the DfE guidance on the wearing of masks?

To summarise the [guidance](#):

“...recommend that in those settings where pupils and students in year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn in classrooms and during activities unless social distancing can be maintained. This does not apply in situations where wearing a face covering would impact on the ability to take part in exercise or strenuous activity, for example in PE lessons.

In primary schools, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and adult visitors in situations where social distancing between adults is not possible (for example, when moving around in corridors and communal areas). Children in primary school do not need to wear a face covering.

Transparent face coverings, which may assist communication with someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expression to communicate, can also be worn. There is currently very limited evidence regarding the effectiveness or safety of transparent face coverings, but they may be effective in reducing the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Face visors or shields should not be worn as an alternative to face coverings.

Those who rely on visual signals for communication, or communicate with or provide support to such individuals, are currently exempt from any requirement to wear face coverings in education settings or in public places.”

The issues with mask wearing for those identified as deaf or hard of hearing

- Staff and children/young people may not have let anyone know they are struggling to hear when a mask is worn
- Mask wearing can distort the sound and volume
- Mask wearing inhibits the ability to lip read – many people who are hard of hearing may rely on this
- Mask wearing covers facial expressions which can distort meaning

Support and suggestions

The following is a list of suggestions that can be used in schools and colleges to support children/young people and staff. The following practice and strategies are not presented in any order of priority and is also not exhaustive.

Children and young people who are deaf or hard of hearing

- Use captions/subtitles where possible.
- Pre-release reading material or teaching aids so this can be read ahead in advance/use flipped learning where you can.
- If reading together around the room (eg a novel in English), consider those pupils who are hard of hearing as they will not hear others reading and will affect their own experience of the lesson and prevent their ability to fully engage in the work.
- Where you can, let parents know in advance details of the work so they have an opportunity to consolidate at home.
- Gestures/facial expressions (in primary especially). Use claps or arms movements. Facial expressions can be lost under a mask (such as only eyebrow raises... are visible, although smiles can be seen in your eyes).
- Use of PowerPoint slides that confirm what you are also speaking.
- Provide any links ahead of a lesson (for example to videos) so these may be viewed in advance.
- Questions on PowerPoint slides at the same time as these shared verbally.
- Break up lessons where you can, try to avoid lots of talking.
- If you are going to talk a lot, stand still, do not move around too much as this makes it difficult for someone who is hard of hearing to follow the sound, especially if you turn away from them or turn towards the board.

For teachers who are deaf or hard of hearing

- Consider the use of flashcards for answers, Yes/No/hands up/question mark.
- Use of pupil whiteboards to hold up the answer to the teacher.
Provide pupils with a small notebook to write any questions down so the teacher can see.

For pupils and teachers who are hard of hearing

- Consider the acoustics of the room: larger/older classrooms with wooden floors can affect the sound quality more than smaller, carpeted rooms with lower ceilings (this can help those pupils and staff with sensory issues too).
- Also consider the acoustics for staff meetings.
- Ask staff (and pupils) to let you know who is hard of hearing and be open about the support needed.
- Consider asking everyone in the school/college to carry a notebook and pen.

Checklist

- Identify staff and children/young people who have deafness or communication difficulties.
- Ask staff and children/young people to let someone know if they are hard of hearing.
- Risk assess where required or consider shadowing a child/young person who is deaf or hard of hearing to check the consistency of their experience and support across all lessons.
- Look at rooming and acoustics for those identified as hard of hearing/deafness – re-room if needed.
- Ensure PowerPoint slides are used alongside verbal instructions.
- Add subtitles to any videos.
- Support teachers in ensuring that they speak clearly and try to maintain a good volume (for example, if a teacher whispers the final line of a story to make it more exciting, this may be completely lost on a child who cannot hear properly. Also, if a child answers a question, repeat this answer again in case anyone did not hear it).
- Ensure all classrooms have access to appropriate flashcards (according to age).
- Provide notepads and pencil.
- Invest in a hearing loop system if finances allow, for hearing aid users.
- Be consistent in your approach: try to make sure pupils who are hard of hearing do not have to re-adapt every lesson and for every teacher. This includes asking teachers to follow the same expectations when mask wearing/delivering lessons and to keep the same speaking volume if possible.
- Consider staff who are hard of hearing: consider your whole school practice, including all staff meetings/briefings where possible; do not assume all can hear. Also, send any briefing messages as written notes as soon as possible following a meeting. Maintain a consistent approach.

2 March 2021