

# Effective Communication and Mask wearing at school

In response to COVID-19, many people are wearing masks and social distancing while in the community. This presents some challenges for everyone, but especially people with hearing loss or communication problems. However, there is [no evidence that use of face masks prevents or delays speech and language development](#). There is evidence that [mask use reduces infection](#).

## How Masks Can Make It Harder to Communicate

- Masks muffle sound, making it [more difficult](#) to understand speech and some higher-pitched voices and sounds (e.g. S, H, F).
- Masks take away our ability to read lips and see facial expressions, which help us better understand what we're hearing.
- Speaking with a mask can be hard for people with communication or sensory differences, e.g. ASD, Down's syndrome, voice issues.
- Masks can be uncomfortable for people who wear hearing aids or cochlear implants.

[From the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association \(ASHA\) website](#)

## Tips for teachers to communicate effectively with their students:

- Make sure you have your student's attention and that you are facing them directly
- Attend mindfully: attend to your characteristic gestures and body language so that you can align your non-verbal communication with your spoken message
- Talk a little slower – this helps your students have more time to process what has been said and gives you better breath support. It will also help you produce clearer speech sounds
- Use increased gesture and body language, also pay more attention to your student's body language if they are wearing masks
- Use increased visual and written supports for your spoken message e.g. visual classroom timetable [Visual Timetables and Routines Printables for Primary School - SparkleBox](#), use videos of sound production for phonics: [Pronounce the Sounds - Videos and Audio | Phonics Hero](#)
- Adjust your tone, rather than your volume – increasing volume just makes you seem annoyed – instead pay more attention to your tone and enunciation when speaking.
- Eliminate background noise
- To help your students better read emotions of mask wearers, play a “guess what kind of face I'm making” / “guess how I'm feeling” game – tell them to watch your eyes, listen closely to your voice, and read your body language.
- Stay positive: your students will learn to notice the more subtle social cues of body language and tone of voice as they learn to interpret and read the emotions of mask wearers

## How to look after your and your student's voices when wearing a mask all day

Even without masks, teachers often strain their voices so it's extra important to look after your voice while wearing a mask, and that of your students. The Voice and Swallow Mechanics Lab website has short videos on how to protect your voice here: [Outreach | Mysite \(vsmechlab.com\)](#)

### Key strategies:

- Hydration: Keep a water bottle with you to remind yourself to drink regularly throughout the day
- Microphone: this may be helpful in larger classroom spaces
- Posture: try to maintain a relaxed neck and shoulder posture to support your breathing and vocal quality
- Vocal warm-up: help get your voice muscles ready for the day ahead – gently hum and focus on feeling the vibrations in your lips, cheeks and nose. Shift your humming pitch from high to low, low to high. Then sustain a medium, comfortable pitch that helps you feel the maximum amount of vibration in the front of your face. You should feel that your voice comes out more easily and has a clearer tone.
- Vocal rest: take time to rest your voice.

Compiled by Fran Ogier, Speech Language Therapist, Ministry of Education, 27 January 2021, from the following websites:

[Communicating Effectively While Wearing Masks and Physical Distancing \(asha.org\)](#)

[The Impact of Masks on Social and Emotional Development | Psychology Today](#)

[Maintaining Our Humanity Through the Mask: Mindful Communication During COVID-19 \(nih.gov\)](#)

[Outreach | Mysite \(vsmechlab.com\)](#)