



# Face Masks and Sensory Processing

HOW TO HELP OUR STUDENTS  
WEAR MASKS

# What is Sensory Processing?

**Sensory Processing** is the brain's ability to interpret and organize information received from the environment or from the body's senses

- Allows us to make adaptive, appropriate, and functional responses
- Directly impacts development of motor control, behaviors, and emotional responses

Take in information through senses →  
process information → make purposeful  
response

## The Sensory Systems:

- **Visual, Auditory, Taste, Smell, Touch** – sensations that tell us what is coming from outside the body
- **Proprioceptive and Vestibular** – sensations that tell us where the body is in space and how it is moving

**What are the  
Sensory Systems?**

# What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

- A disruption in the process is called **Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)**.
- Occurs when there is a glitch in the system that disrupts daily routines and activities.
- Can interfere with the ability to learn, interact with others, perform tasks and participate in activities.

# Why are good Sensory Processing Skills important?

|                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Attention and Focus | Time Management  |
| Organization        | Peer Interaction |
| Task Completion     | Learning         |
| Self-Regulation     | Emotional Health |

# TWO Major Patterns of Sensory Processing

## OVER-responsive to sensory input (sensory avoider; hyper-reactive)

- Responds to sensory input more intensely, more quickly, and/or for a longer time
- Notices stimuli more easily than others
- May occur in one or more sensory systems
- RESPONSE: May see:
  - Sensory avoidance
  - Hyper-reaction to a non-noxious situation

## UNDER-responsive to sensory input (sensory seeking; passive/withdrawn)

- Responds less to sensory input; has a high-threshold
- Misses stimuli that others notice easily
- System needs stronger input to activate
- RESPONSE – May see:
  - Sensory seeking
  - Less reactive to input; passive, withdrawn

# Face Masks and Sensory Processing Difficulties



How do face masks impact a person with SPD?

Affects the senses:

- Sense of touch (Tactile System )
- Sense of smell (Olfactory System)
- Not seeing mouth (Visual and Auditory System)
- Where body is in space (Proprioceptive System)

Other areas affected:

- Breathing
- Self-Regulation
- Attention
- Task Completion
- Emotional Health



## How can we help our students wear masks?

- Give a choice
- Include child in the process – design, color, putting on mask, making the mask
- Explore different fabrics – choose breathable, non-itchy fabrics
- Attach mask to lanyard to prevent it from getting lost
- Model comfort and safety of wearing a mask
- Practice wearing mask at home
- Role play – make it fun
- Increase the amount of time worn each day
- Consider alternative ear attachments (minimize pressure around the ear)
- Have multiple masks available throughout the day if needed
- Consider Adult sizes vs Child sizes
- When possible, allow child to express what he/she likes or dislikes about wearing a facemask

## General Strategies





# Sensory Strategies



- **Desensitize** – provide slow and graded exposure to uncomfortable sensation
- **Tactile** – exposure to/play with a variety of tactile materials and textures
- **Proprioceptive** – provide heavy work and deep pressure input to help calm and organize the sensory system
- **Oral motor** – heavy work for the mouth to decrease chewing on or drooling on mask (or have multiple masks available)
- **Olfactory** – chose materials that have no or a neutral scent
- **Auditory/Visual** – use a slow, calm voice when providing instruction; consider mask with clear cut out around mouth
- Provide **multi-sensory input** when providing directions
- Provide **predictability** with wearing mask as much as possible

Use transitional language

- “In 5 minutes we will go outside. Remember, we will put on our jackets and masks.”

Offer choices when possible

- “Do you want to wear your orange or your blue mask today?”

Structure your language including the reward of a preferred activity

- “When you put on your mask, you will get to ride on your scooter.”

Use visuals to support the routine

- Social stories
- Simple visual schedule
- Written Word with or without Pictures

Incorporate masks into language goals

- WH Questions (e.g., “Who wears a mask?” “When do we wear a mask?”)
- Problem solving (Come up with ways to protect us from germs)
- Expression (Child teaches others why wearing a mask is important)

# Language & Visual Strategies



# Behavioral Strategies

## Wearing Masks Task Analysis + Posters



Printable PDF Color + B&W  
by AllDayABA

**Pairing:** You introduce the individual to the mask pairing it with frequent positive reinforcement – start by simply showing the mask or giving it to the individual, followed by a reinforcer, such as tickles or hugs. The goal is for the individual to be comfortable holding or seeing the mask. Once individual is comfortable with the mask you will take small steps toward them wearing the mask.

**Chaining:** You provide positive reinforcement for small successive steps towards wearing the mask. Steps could vary by individual but might include putting mask near face, touching face with mask, putting elastic overhead, etc.



- Repetition and repeated practice are critical in teaching new skills.
- Provide relatable examples through social stories and role play opportunities where students are able to practice in a safe, secure environment.
  - **Here are some social stories from PTS**
    - [Masks Keep Everyone Safe](#)
    - [Who Wears a Mask?](#)
- Provide high levels of reinforcement for desired target responses
- Practice with various people to ensure generalization!

# Social Stories and Role Play



# Alternative Ideas for Masks



- Attach mask to headband or hat with buttons
- Use a Face Shield instead of a mask
- Wear a bandanna or similar scarf
- Hold mask in front of face instead of wearing
- Pull up and zip hoodie all the way up (the ones that go up above the mouth)
- Wear a Ski Mask
- Attach mask to a Sporting helmet
- Place student in a building or classroom with proper ventilation, socially distanced from peers if student not able to wear mask
- Provide a safe place to take breaks from mask-wearing
- Attach mask to lanyard to prevent it from getting lost

# Resources

<https://www.autism-products.com/product/sensory-friendly-protective-fabric-mask/>

<https://www.sensacalm.com/collections/face-masks>

<https://funandfunction.com/the-social-mask.html>



# Empowering Teachers, Parents and Paraprofessionals with Practical Strategies



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