

Should I send my young child to school with a mask if it's not mandatory?

Veronica Appia

As Ontarians brace for a different type of school year this September, parents may be wondering whether they should be sending their young children to school with a mask — even if it's not mandatory.

On July 30, the province revealed its [plans for reopening schools](#), which included a mandatory mask policy for students in Grades 4 to 12. Students in Grade 3 and below will be encouraged to wear non-medical and cloth masks, but it will not be mandatory for them.

These rules do not apply to any students with medical, developmental or mental health issues that make them unable to wear masks.

The province's plan was heavily informed by a [report released the day prior, by medical experts at SickKids](#).

The report recommended the “use of masks for high school students (with consideration for middle school students) whenever physical distancing cannot be maintained,” but also mentioned that there is a lack of evidence and clarity regarding best practices around mask-wearing in schools and that “it will be critical to assess the use of masks on an ongoing basis.”

Colin Furness, an infection control epidemiologist and assistant professor at University of Toronto, said it's important to remember that research shows children below the age of 10 are not particularly contagious.

According to the SickKids report, children account for less than five to 10 per cent of COVID-19 infections worldwide.

“That's not to say that they don't get COVID, that's not to say that you can't catch it from a child, but it's actually pretty rare,” he said. “And we still don't really quite understand the biology there, but we have the evidence that that's the case.”

He said based on this evidence, the province's recommendations make sense.

“On the other hand,” he added. “If we can get kids below the age of 10 wearing masks, that's going to be better.”

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“It may be only marginally safer, but we have to think about kids going out into the world as well, going shopping, going to stores, so on and so forth ... more people wearing masks is better.”

Furness said the ability for parents to successfully do this will depend on a few

factors, including the student themselves and their individual classroom environment. Individual school boards and classrooms will have the ability to implement stricter rules.

If a primary teacher is encouraging all students to wear masks and if the majority of the child's peers are wearing masks, Furness said, it is more likely that the child will be willing to follow suit.

He added that for parents who want to send their young child to school with a mask, but are experiencing some resistance from the child, it may be helpful to gradually transition the child by asking them to wear the mask for part of the day or only in certain areas of the school.

"My guess is that by and large you will see success when it can be done on a normative basis," he added.

Dr. Samantha Hill, president of the Ontario Medical Association, said when it comes to the question of younger students wearing masks, there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

"When deciding how and when to reopen schools and child-care facilities, consideration must be given to the unique needs of children, particularly with respect to their social and emotional development. This need must be weighed against the very real risk that children may spread COVID-19 to their peers, teachers, and families," Hill said in an email.

"We acknowledge that experts are divided around the ability to force younger children to wear masks and maintain physical distancing, and we know that each child may face unique challenges with this."

– *With files from Graeme McNaughton.*



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