

When their five-year-old son Kristian, who has autism and is non-verbal, began exhibiting behaviours indicating a headache, the Schmidts took him to the doctor, who suggested an eye exam. The couple booked an appointment, but when they arrived at the optical business – Chris was masked but not Kristian as he is exempt due to his disability and sensory issues in particular – they were turned away.

The couple were instantly angered and frustrated, then disappointed by the realization their son had become a casualty of the pandemic.

“When we go out to stores, we do what we need to do. And we respect the rights of business people to do what they need to because it’s their livelihood. Caution is good. The risk is very real,” said Chris. “But Kristian thrives on routine. There was a lot of preparation for this (appointment) and not being able to go through with it was an extra challenge ... because he doesn’t understand why.”

The couple believe their recent experience is directly related to the confusion around mask laws, the role of essential businesses in balancing the health and safety of patrons and respecting the rights of those requiring accommodation.

The province has strengthened their position on the requirement to wear a mask when indoors, but the legislation does allow for some exemptions (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/face-coverings-and-face-masks>). It is not necessary for a person to present evidence of their exemption.

According to the College of Opticians of Ontario, in the event a patient or visitor indicates they are unable to wear a mask, entry should only be refused after considering whether any reasonable accommodations are warranted, such as offering service by appointment when no other patients and/or staff members are present.

Kristian’s situation was explained when booking the appointment, but the Schmidts question if other factors came into play.

“These are definitely unprecedented times. There’s a lot of fear out there, and understandably so. But people need to withhold judgment, especially with children,” said Kali.

Headlines newsletter
