

## Talking About Masks and Kindness

Schools are faced with helping students and staff use masks in face-to-face education during the pandemic. While this may seem straightforward, it can be a challenge, as there are a variety of opinions that students and adults hear about the importance of mask-wearing. Some of those opinions come from people that a child or adult may love or respect.

Creating a uniform expectation for wearing a mask to ensure other people are safe requires discussion of those opinions in a caring way. The pandemic has been very disruptive to everyone; students may feel particularly concerned about both themselves and the people they love. They may also feel very confused. The topic can be frightening for adults and students. Here are some pointers on how to talk about masks and the pandemic.

### Adults' Role

*Be calm and focused for the children.* Adults need to get the support they need from other adults to effectively guide the students. Self-care and mindfulness is important in this time.

*Talk and listen.* Find out what children's fears and concerns are and address them as directly and calmly as possible. Reassure them that adults are there to help and protect. Circles and dialogues are ways to help children talk about their feelings and what they can do to cope. Making a routine of checking in with the questions and concerns of students can be helpful.

*Create a plan for extra support.* Circle gives adults the opportunity to slow down and see each student, to check with affect, to hear their voice, to see if they want to share. Some students may show signs of distress. The student support staff team can provide extra support for children. Take time to prepare for this circle with students by holding the circle with adults. Ask each other for ideas on how to help a student who says they don't have someone to talk with about their worries. Set up a time to have someone to check in with them. Create a building plan to deal with students in distress who need a safe space to process.

*Use your resources.* School staff should remember that there are community groups and organizations that are willing and able to help you talk to children, including local and public health departments as well as the Minnesota Department of Health.

## Talking About Masks and Kindness

Here is a suggested format for a classroom or group discussion or online circle. Depending upon the age of the students and the amount of time you have, these questions may be used in multiple sessions or circles. Mask-

wearing is connected to the pandemic. The pandemic resulted in a sudden change in schooling last spring. It would be useful to reflect briefly upon that change through the summer so that students can process the new normal that kept changing in small and large ways. After such discussion, talking about how mask wearing will make more sense to the students and provide useful information to the educators about their students.

In a classroom or group setting, a circle process with a talking piece is a useful method to have a discussion. However, with any process used:

Allow everyone to speak.

- To ensure that everyone has the chance to speak, go in order around the circle or rows.
  - Online, set up an order of speaking in the chat, or go in alphabetical order by first name.
  - Reinforce positive social norms and values of the group, even if anti-social statements are made.
- Recognize that difficult feelings are normal, natural and need to be expressed, but need to be handled respectfully and in a manner that de-escalates conflict rather than fuels it.
- Build communication and connection and defuse tension by inviting people to share their thoughts and feelings.

Agree upon guidelines for the discussion. The [Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility](#) has [guidelines for discussing difficult issues](#). They suggest before you open up the topic, review your community agreements or "community practices" (that is, ways that we want to treat each other in this and other gatherings). These might include:

- It's okay to pass if you need more time to think or would rather not respond.
- Speak from your own point of view.
- Be your own barometer – share as much as you feel comfortable sharing.
- Confidentiality is important. We need to agree that what we share among ourselves will stay private.

*Opening Statement:*

It has been a very long time since we were together! I feel so happy to see you! But we may have many feelings about being together since last March. When we feel a lot of different feelings, it is helpful to take a big breath, hold it and blow it out. Let's do Six-Second Breathing – take a deep, six-second inhale while reaching arms overhead. Exhale while counting backwards from six and slowly bring arms back down. Let's do that two more times.

Thanks for that breathing and stretching. I would like to have us talk with each other about what has happened since last spring – having to go home and learn online, then the Black Lives Matter protests, and now about our new way of doing school. Any change can be exciting and confusing and frustrating, all at once. It is important for you and me to be able to share our feelings and share our thoughts and concerns. Let us go around the classroom (or circle) and talk about what has happened.

*Possible Discussion Questions:*

- Using a circle process, each participant can have the opportunity to address each question.
- Let's go around and say our name and one thing we saw this morning before school started.

- What is something that you liked about the end of the school year?
- What is something that you missed being able to do last spring before school was out?
- What questions or thoughts do you have about the Black Lives Matter protests? (See [Writing and Art on COVID and Black Lives Matter](#) for more ideas on how to discuss the pandemic and social movements.)
- What is one thing that you did this summer for fun? (This question could be paired with a drawing.)
- What are you looking forward to doing this school year?
- What are you worried about for this school year?
- Who can you talk to about things that worry you?
- In order to have a safe school for everyone, we need to try to keep everyone safe. It is an ordinary thing for us to wash our hands, before we eat and after we go to the bathroom. We want to be sure that everyone has clean hands so that we don't spread germs. What else do we do to keep ourselves and others healthy?
- What do you think about wearing a mask?
- Why should we wear a mask?
- Who in our lives do we wear a mask for, so that they don't get sick?
- How can we help each other keep our masks on, how can we help in a kind way?
- Some children are not able to wear a mask. Why do you think that is?
- Who are your friends, supporters and resources you can turn to if you need to talk more about COVID-19 or wearing a mask, or feel you need help?
- If you had a friend who was worried, can you think of someone in school that you might suggest they talk to about what was worrying them?
- Who would you talk with in school? Like someone in the office, or the social worker, or me, or a teacher you had in a different grade, or someone in the lunch room?
- Do you have any questions?
- How was circle for you?

As a closing statement at the end of the discussion, encourage care in this time of stress and confusion. Remember small acts of kindness can help us all feel stronger and healthier. This is the time to practice acts of respect and kindness, like wearing your mask. Help each other out. We came up with great ideas on how to support each other. We will talk again next week to see how things are going. In the meantime, talk to me or other adults when you have questions or concerns.

## Ongoing Support

*The rituals and routines supporting mask wearing.* Consider including connections to wearing masks to encourage kindness. The Social Emotional Learning (SEL) [three signature practices](#) provide a natural way to support mask wearing. Students can provide comment on masks in their warm welcome such as “who are you wearing your mask for today?” Engaging practices might include the science behind masks and the spread of COVID-19, or designing a mask, or making an ad campaign for the school encouraging people to wear masks. The optimistic close might include a feeling word about mask-wearing during the lesson. All feelings are accepted and affirmed.

*Ongoing support for mental health.* Plan for regularly scheduled check-ins between teachers and student support staff on the use of masks and the emotional needs of students or staff. Consider monthly circles for adults to provide a place for connection and support. Invite student support staff to circle on a rotating basis to

help students get to know them. In addition to individual interventions, use the circle process with the classroom to provide peer support to students in need.

## Resources

Discussions about masks, the coronavirus, social movements and the presidential race can all bring up opinions and ideas that may be a challenge or even hurtful to other students and staff. Here are a few resources that may be helpful in preparing for remarks targeting Asian Americans, Black Americans, Muslim Americans, Indigenous peoples, Latinx Americans and LGBTQ people as well as immigrants and refugees.

[Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\) CASEL COVID-19 Resources](#)

[Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility](#)

[National Association of School Psychologists: COVID-19 Resource Center](#)

[National Center for School Mental Health COVID-19 Resources.](#)

[Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Minnesota \(PBIS\)](#)

[Teaching Tolerance: Supporting Students Through Coronavirus](#)