

Unmasking strategies to help kids navigate mixed views on face coverings

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"Masks are for sissies!" "Where's your mask, know-it-all?" This fall, add comments like these to the list of childhood taunts heard on the playground and in the classroom.

Long a polarizing issue among adults, [masks](#) have become a source of

contention among children and, unfortunately, a perfect set-up for bullying, with children taking many of their cues from things they hear their parents say at home.

"What creates a bullying situation? Anything that sets a child apart from their peers or makes them appear weak, anxious or not able to defend themselves," said Dr. Ramnarine Boodoo, child psychiatrist at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. "When you layer in political and social views, it becomes even more challenging for kids to navigate all this."

Evolving information about the effectiveness of masks—now essentially proven as more [scientific evidence](#) is available—unfortunately helped fuel the idea some still hold that masks don't work, Boodoo said. "We now have a large body of evidence that shows wearing a mask isn't harmful to health and is very effective at preventing transmission," he said. "However, not everyone believes this."

Pennsylvania's mask mandate actually may help mitigate bullying since most students are required to wear a mask at school, Boodoo said, but it still leaves open to ridicule those students who can't wear a mask for medical reasons and those who opt to wear a mask when not required, such as at playdates and group activities outside of school.

"Maybe that child has someone in their household who is more vulnerable, so that's why they always wear a mask, but other kids might see that child as being afraid of catching an illness or trying to isolate from the group," Boodoo said. "This can leave children feeling anxious, guilty and vulnerable."

Here are a few things that parents can do to mitigate the risk for bullying, he said.

- Equip your child with tools that will help him stand up to a bully. "If you're the parent of a child whom you want masked continuously, make sure your child knows the reasons why and can articulate it to anyone who ridicules him," Boodoo said.
- Have a conversation with the parents of your child's friends. Explain why you choose to have your child mask even outside school ("My wife is on chemotherapy," "My elderly mother lives with us") and ask, "Can you please work with us on this?"
- Cultivate an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding. "The spirit of rugged individualism has become such a large part of the American ethos that we may have reached a point where we can't even tolerate each other anymore," Boodoo said. "Instead of writing people off as uneducated or ignorant, reach out and ask them to explain their stance so you can build understanding."
- Talk with [school officials](#) if you see irregularities in how the mask policy is administered. "If the teacher isn't on board with masking and turns a blind eye to kids who don't wear their masks properly, that can set up a situation where those kids can swagger and feel empowered to bully other kids," Boodoo said.

When bullying occurs, the child must be held accountable, and that discussion should include the importance of respecting others, he said. School officials should evaluate what might be behind the bullying. "Is the child being bullied at home or are there are other troubling factors about their home life?" Boodoo said.

Above all, parents need to remember that they are their [child](#)'s greatest role model.

"What you do, your children will do. Your views will become their views," Boodoo said. "This can be a real teaching moment where you can explain your views and why others may think differently."

In the end, we live in a free country and, when not mandated, it's a personal choice whether or not to mask—and that choice must be respected, he said.

"This is another teaching moment about democracy, which is not about everybody getting their way," Boodoo said. "We must teach our [children](#) that everyone is free to advocate for their own choice, but it must be done in a way that is non-violent and doesn't adversely affect our neighbors."

In other words, no bullying.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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