



Students Bullied Over Mask-Wearing: What Schools Need to Know to Prevent and Address the Problem

Introduction

Many educators, parents, and students are feeling a sense of relief as schools across the United States return to full-time, in-person learning. After months or years of remote and hybrid learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students are benefiting from increased socialization, improved access to services, and a return to their regular routines.

While all students should be returning to safe, stable learning environments after their lives were upended by the pandemic, for some students, being back in school may mean returning to an environment in which they were bullied. Even kids who previously were not bullied may find themselves targeted if they have to (or want to) continue to wear a mask when mask-wearing is optional in schools.

[Educators are concerned](#) about students being bullied for wearing a mask in school. This brief provides an overview of the problem of bullying over mask-wearing, as well as strategies for schools to prevent and intervene in bullying.

“In addition to the academic and social engagement schools provide, they also offer critical services and benefits that include school supported resources like meal programs, special education, mental health services, and childcare. ... There are also children who enjoyed or even thrived during virtual learning because they were separated from children who have bullied them. Returning to in-person school may be stressful for them, fearing that they might experience bullying yet again.”

[StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov)

Mask Bullying: What Educators Need to Know

Wearing a mask to protect oneself and others from COVID-19 has become a politicized, polarizing issue across the United States. It is not uncommon to hear about public arguments regarding mask-wearing and retail establishments or restaurants refusing service to customers who wear or do not wear a mask.

With many adults expressing strong opinions on whether masks are effective, kids can pick up on these negative attitudes and behaviors. These views are spilling over into schools, with [parents concerned that their children are being bullied about mask-wearing](#).

The American Academy of Pediatrics [recommends](#) that unvaccinated children and those with special healthcare needs still wear masks in schools and that staff and students who choose to wear masks be supported in their decision.

Students may continue to wear a mask for any of a number of reasons, even if their school does not mandate mask-wearing. For example, students may choose to continue masking as a protective measure. They may be at higher risk of COVID-19 complications if they have a disability or other health concern or are in close contact with someone else who is high risk. For

students who have anxiety or special needs, wearing a mask may give some measure of comfort or feeling of control after months of uncertainty during the height of the pandemic. Also, wearing a mask is not always a student's decision: A parent, guardian, or physician may have instructed them to wear a mask.

While there is no specific warning sign that puts a student at a higher risk for bullying, students who are perceived as "different" are often targeted. Kids who wear masks when most of their school has gone mask-free are squarely in that category.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "Stigma, discrimination, or bullying may arise due to wearing or not wearing a [mask]. Schools should have a plan to prevent and address harmful or inappropriate behavior."

Considerations for Students With Disabilities

Students with disabilities (SWD) can be especially vulnerable to bullying. SWD may have health issues that place them at high risk for complications due to COVID-19 and, therefore, more likely to wear a mask in school, increasing their risk of being bullied.

David Bateman, PhD, professor of special education at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, has consulted with school districts about students being bullied over mask-wearing. He says there are special considerations for SWD, especially those who have individualized education programs (IEPs) or 504 plans. These students often have physical, emotional, or behavioral health needs that may make them more likely to wear a mask in school, thus increasing their risk of being bullied. It is imperative that administrators and educators ensure that steps taken to address bullying do not affect a student's IEP or 504 plan.

"Anything that's causing a child anxiety may result in school refusal," Bateman explains. "In these cases, the IEP team needs to decide on the appropriate course of action. A decision, for instance, to move a child to another class or school [due to mask bullying] can't be made for administrative convenience. Schools can't alter the student's 'least restrictive environment' based on bullying or convenience to others."

Bateman also says that if an SWD is being bullied for wearing a mask, the student may need additional services, such as mental health counseling or social work. "Schools have an obligation to identify kids who are eligible for additional services and provide them." He says that schools need to ask, "Does the bullying

warrant the need for an evaluation or additional services? Did the school district evaluate if the programming the student is receiving can or should be changed? Is there a duty to reevaluate the child? What is the appropriate placement for that child?”

When considering how to address SWD being bullied due to mask-wearing, it is essential that schools do not interfere with the student’s access to education. In a “Dear Colleague” letter published August 20, 2013, the U.S. Department of Education stated, “Bullying of a student with a disability that results in the student not receiving meaningful educational benefit constitutes a denial of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) under the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] that must be remedied.”

Bateman emphasizes that any decisions about how to address bullying of SWD over mask-wearing must be made in consultation with the student’s IEP team, in the same way any other decisions that affect the child’s school placement would: “COVID-19 is so new that there’s little case law about it. But the law requires free, appropriate, public education for all students. If a kid getting bullied is preventing that, the school district is responsible for providing an appropriate education. That is their legal and moral obligation. Schools must also ensure that [SWD] are still making progress. If bullying is preventing that, something needs to change.”

Strategies for Schools to Prevent and Address Anti-mask Bullying

Because the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented impacts on schools and students, there are no evidence-based, best practices regarding bullying prevention and intervention strategies specific to mask-wearing. However, we can draw on general anti-bullying strategies to mitigate the problem.

Prevention Strategies

All students should feel safe and supported at school, whether or not they are wearing a mask. Schools need to create a climate in which students’ choices about mask-wearing are accepted and supported. Fostering an overall *healthy school climate* in which students feel safe and connected with their school can begin with [schools taking a vocal stance](#) that mask bullying will not be tolerated and *clearly and frequently communicating anti-bullying policies*. While schools may not have specific anti-bullying policies related to mask-wearing, language specific to mask-wearing can be interwoven into existing anti-bullying programming. Administrators should also know the [anti-bullying laws in their states](#) and use them to inform the bullying prevention and intervention policies in their schools.

Administrators, teachers, and *staff can model good behavior* for students. Regardless of their personal stance on masks, adults in schools must show [early and enthusiastic support](#) for students who continue to wear masks and avoid expressing their own opinions or making negative observations about those who make different choices about mask-wearing.

“Teachers and administrators need to continually model appropriate behavior,” says David Bateman, PhD, professor of special education at Shippensburg University. “I observed a classroom in March where the teacher said to a student, ‘Take your mask off; I can’t hear you.’ That’s not helping the rest of the class. We are the adults in the room. We need to model good behaviors and take students’ choices seriously.”

In addition to modeling supportive behavior, educators can *ask parents to lead by example* and not force their opinions about mask-wearing onto their children. This can be done while emphasizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many unknowns, and everyone is trying to do what they think is best for their families.

Likewise, administrators can *check in frequently with their staff and students* to ensure they are not experiencing or observing any negative behaviors directed at those whose mask-wearing goes against the norm. According to stopbullying.gov, “These discussions help teachers keep their fingers on the pulse of students’ concerns and allow students time to express their views about bullying and other social and emotional issues. They also provide students with skills to address bullying and related issues.”

Finally, it may be necessary for schools to *monitor for bullying in areas other than classrooms*. Bateman says, “Kids who choose to continue to wear masks may be made fun of in places like school buses, in the hallways, on playgrounds—not in classrooms where the students know they’d get in trouble.”

Intervention Strategies

Bateman states, “All reported incidents of mask bullying need to be addressed and taken seriously.” Schools are required by law to *investigate and address all instances of bullying*, including incidents related to mask-wearing. Responses to bullying related to mask-wearing needs to be documented, consistent, appropriate, and aligned with an individual school’s anti-bullying policies and protocols.

Educators can remind *students to speak to a trusted adult* if they or someone else is being teased or bullied over mask-wearing choices. Teachers can let their students know it is okay to talk with them or a counselor if they are experiencing issues such as anxiety, sadness, bullying, or trouble with peers.

Administrators, teachers, and staff (including school bus drivers, hallway and playground monitors, and lunchroom staff) should be trained to *recognize the warning signs of bullying*, especially among those whose mask-wearing behavior differs from school norms:

- **Warning signs among those being bullied:** unexplainable injuries, low self-esteem, declining grades, self-destructive behaviors, changes in eating and sleeping habits, withdrawing from previously enjoyed activities, feeling sick often, frequently missing school
- **Warning signs among those doing the bullying:** aggression, having friends who bully others, frequently in trouble at school, anger management issues, trouble accepting responsibility for their actions

Anyone who suspects a student is being bullied should respond and report the case as laid out in the school’s anti-bullying protocols. (See Sidebar for considerations for students with disabilities.)

Lastly, schools can teach kids to be [“upstanders,” not bystanders](#). According to [stopbullying.gov](#), “A bystander to bullying is anyone who witnesses bullying either in person or in digital forms like social media, websites, text messages, gaming, and apps,” and bystanders are present in a majority of bullying incidents. [Bystanders can experience negative effects](#) of bullying similar to those experienced by the person being bullied.

When a student shifts their role from bystander to upstander, they can act to address bullying. [They can do so by](#) modeling positive behaviors, becoming involved with anti-bullying efforts at school, intervening in bullying incidents, supporting a peer who is being bullied, and telling a trusted adult at the school that bullying is happening.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that while most of us are relieved that life is getting back to normal, not everyone will make an easy transition to mask-free schools. While the challenge of COVID-19 to schools is unprecedented, creating safe, supportive environments in which all students can thrive is not. Using the strategies outlined in this factsheet, schools can help ensure that students who wear masks feel confident and protected.

Resources

- [American Academy of Pediatrics Offers New Masking Recommendations for Families Following Updated CDC Guidance](#) (American Academy of Pediatrics)
- [Concerns About Bullying, Anxiety Follow Loosening of Mask Mandates](#) (K–12 Dive)
- [COVID-19 Parental Resources Kit: Ensuring Children and Young People’s Social, Emotional, and Mental Well-being](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment in Our Nation’s Classrooms](#) (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments)
- [Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment on Our Nation’s School Buses](#) (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments)
- [Fact Sheet: Bystanders are Essential to Bullying Prevention and Intervention](#) (stopbullying.gov)
- [The Great Debate: How to Deal With Bullying Over Face Masks in School](#) (Boston Children’s Hospital)
- [How to Stop Bullying at School](#) (girlshealth.gov)
- [Improving School Climate to Help Prevent Bullying](#) (stopbullying.gov)
- [Understanding the Roles of School Administrators in Community-Wide Bullying Prevention Efforts](#) (stopbullying.gov)