**EA Sensory Service** Education Authority Logo

# Face Coverings in Schools

This document is intended to provide information and advice on the effects of wearing face coverings in schools for deaf children and young people.

Whilst we are concerned about the communication challenges that face coverings present for our children and young people who are deaf, we also respect that people may choose or be advised to wear them for their own protection, or for the protection of others.

This advice is intended to go some way towards mitigating against the challenges experienced by deaf children and young people in schools when face coverings are worn by staff and peers.

## **Face coverings are a challenge for children and young people with hearing loss.**

**They:**

* Obstruct access to lip-reading and gesture
* Distort speech
* Speech can be unintelligible
* Creates feeling of isolation

Deaf children and young people (CYP) are telling us that they are experiencing high levels of stress as a result of teachers wearing face coverings in school. Some deaf CYP are also telling us that they would prefer not to attend school if face coverings are worn due to the challenges in communication and feelings of isolation.

## Clear face coverings

Clear face coverings should be explored as an alternative to fabric face coverings. However, whilst these may work well for some children, it should be emphasised that this will **not** be effective for all.

* All face coverings and visors degrade the speech quality of the speaker by muffling high frequency speech sounds.
* Cloth face coverings muffle speech and provide no visual support to communication.
* It can be difficult to lipread if the clear face covering has fogged up or if there is light reflection.
* There is no particular strategy that addresses the challenges around face coverings in a way that works for all deaf children.

Where face coverings are being worn or are required, clear face coverings are clearly preferable to fabric or opaque masks. However, clear face coverings do not mitigate the need to take other reasonable adjustments to ensure deaf children are not disadvantaged.

When wearing face coverings please be aware that your voice will be distorted and muffled. When wearing a face covering, a talker needs to take extra care in their speech production (regardless of the level of deafness of the listener). ‘Extra care’ includes a range of factors detailed below:

* An increased focus on the listening environment, minimising all unnecessary background noise. Steps should be taken so that deaf children are taught in classrooms with the best possible listening conditions.
* Seat pupils who are deaf at the front of the room, ideally as close to you as socially distancing permits.
* Face pupils who are deaf when speaking to them.
* Reduce the background noise as much as possible.
* Make sure you have the attention of the pupils who are deaf before beginning to speak.
* Talk slowly, but do not shout, over-emphasise or exaggerate your words.
* Ensure only one person speaks at a time.
* Provide vocabulary lists/key points of lesson content **in advance.** This will allow the deaf pupil to be familiar with the language used in the lesson and aids listening and understanding.
* Allow time for processing information.
* Check comprehension with open questions.
* Repeat/rephrase remarks if not understood.
* Ensure any hearing devices are being worn and are working.
* Ensure the effective use of radio aids if a child uses this technology. Radio aids transmit the teacher’s voice directly to the child’s hearing aid or cochlear implant. Research suggests that the use of a lapel microphone can be effective in improving verbal communication when the speaker is wearing a face covering.

Steps should be taken to ensure radio aids are cleaned when passed between the child and teacher. Cleaning should be done with care to avoid potential damage to the device. Please click for advice on cleaning devices.

* If feasible, consider live captioning, so that what you say is displayed on the board/screen. Teachers of the Deaf can provide advice on this.

Given the fact there is no perfect solution, education settings should carry out individual assessments to consider the impact on a deaf child of any decision to wear face coverings in the classroom. This should include an assessment of the difficulties that a face covering introduces for a child’s understanding of speech and/or ability to communicate.

Qualified Teachers of the Deaf have a key role to play in advising on reasonable adjustments and mitigating steps. They should be involved in any plans when assessing the need for mitigating steps for individual deaf CYP.

Please be also be mindful of the social implications. Talk to any children and young people who are deaf about what they feel would support them whilst mask wearing is required / prevalent.

Sources used in this document:

British Association of Teachers of the Deaf

National Deaf Children’s Society

For further advice please contact the Sensory Service via phone: 028 25 661 258 or email: sensoryservice@eani.org.uk