

Hygienic and Social Distancing Considerations Regarding COVID-19 for Students with Disabilities Returning to In-Person Education

Purpose

This document provides supports and considerations for students with disabilities in meeting health-related safety standards when students return to school. This document contains both strategies for teachers to use in the classroom as well as strategies that teachers can support parents and caregivers in implementing. The considerations in this document are supplemental to the Agency of Education and Vermont Department of Health's current [Health and Safety guidance](#) and are not meant to be read as prescriptive.

Sensory-Based Strategies

Students who struggle with sensory integration may find it difficult to follow hygiene standards such as wearing a facial covering or washing their hands.

Wearing a Facial Covering

- **Choosing the Most Appropriate Facial Covering:** There are "sensory friendly" masks made from softer materials which may be comfortable enough on their own, or which may require "ear savers" to be worn comfortably.
- **Sensory Integration:** All facial coverings will take time to get used to for any student, particularly one with sensory integration challenges. Improving a student's tolerance to sensory stimuli requires that the student practice with the stimuli for short periods of time at first, and then increase the duration of time slowly. This is something that teachers can support parents and care givers practicing in the home before returning to school.
 - **For students with the lowest tolerance:** Students may need to start with just having their ears touched followed by a reinforcer or may be asked to hold a cloth up to their face for three seconds followed by a reinforcer and slowly lengthening the time that the cloth gets held up to their face by one or two second intervals. Parents and caregivers may start with a piece of cloth that is familiar to the child (a beloved blanket or favorite shirt) and move on to unfamiliar fabrics that may have a new or different smell. Parents and caregivers should be cognizant about the smell of the detergent they use to wash these pieces of fabric and choose something mild and unscented.
 - **For students with a medium tolerance:** Students may first be asked to wear their facial covering during their favorite (short) activity such as playing a game on the computer. Activities where the student will be fully engaged or distracted will be best to start.

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- **For students with the highest tolerance:** Parents and caregivers may start using facial coverings as a requirement to access their favorite activities. For example, a student may only get to watch television or play computer games while wearing their facial covering.

Leveraging Students’ Special Interests to Support Improved Outcomes

If students have a special interest or something they really like it can be used to support them in wearing a facial covering.

- **Patterned Masks:** Students who have a favorite interest such as a TV character or outer space may be more inclined to wear a facial covering decorated with that special interest. Parents and caregivers can be encouraged to let the student pick between a couple different patterned masks made with prints featuring things that they like. Collaboration between parents and the school may be possible when procuring patterned masks. Plain masks can also be decorated by the student.
- **Power Cards:** A power card features a student’s favorite character or characters and gives a brief reasoning why the student should follow certain guidelines and is supported by the character. For example, a power card might have a picture of Dora the Explorer on it and say “Dora the Explorer loves to go on adventures but knows it is important to stay safe. That is why Dora will be wearing her mask to school this year! Dora always puts her mask on when her teachers ask her to, and she wants you to wear your mask too so you can be safe like Dora!”

Using Social Stories to Explain Facial Coverings

Social stories can be used to explain the expectations of wearing a facial covering at school as well as all other COVID-19-related guidelines. Social stories are short stories created for a student to tell them what is going to be occurring in a given situation, and what the expectations will be for that student. Creating a social story about COVID-19 may help them to understand the new rules and guidelines they are expected to follow.

A social story can also be used to help ease the students worries about being safe. Social stories are written in the first person. They include statements of affirmation, directives about how the student will be expected to behave, strategies the student can use when they are struggling, and descriptive information about the situation itself. When writing a social story for a student with sensory integration challenges it is important to include any sensory information that might be needed.

An example of a few short lines might be “Today I am going back to school. School might be different than how I remember it (descriptive). Some of my classmates may choose to stay home because they are not as healthy as I am and that’s okay, I will see them again soon (affirmation)! I may be asked to wear a mask at school (expectation). This will help keep me and the people around me safe (affirmation)! Wearing a mask might be hard to get used to, but if it feels too uncomfortable, I can ask my teacher to go outside and take it off for a short break, or I can ask my teacher to help me with it (strategies).

As always, social stories should use culturally appropriate language. For example, if you are describing what will happen when a student's grandmother drops them off at school, but the student calls their grandmother "Yiyia", then that is the word that should be used in the social story. Social stories should also be racially representative of the student it is created for, and should represent the diversity of the world they live in.

Strategies to Use When Introducing Hand Washing

- **Task Analysis:** A task analysis is a breakdown of a more complex job into smaller jobs. A Task Analysis can be helpful in reminding students to follow every step of handwashing. A task analysis will show a picture of each step of the process (turn on the water, get some soap etc.) Each step should include a clear picture accompanied by a written instruction.
- **Singing a Song:** Educators may suggest an age-appropriate song to sing while hand washing (such as *Happy Birthday* for young students or *Bohemian Rhapsody* for older students) to help students remember how long to wash for. Suggesting a variety of songs to match different tastes and languages can help all students find one that works for them and can help them feel included.
 - **Visual Timers:** Visual timers can include anything from egg timers and sand timers to time timers and can be found online as well as in stores. The time timer is one of the most effective timers for executive function because it allows the student to see the amount of time left in an easy to understand, pictorial context. Time timers can be downloaded onto most smart devices for free from that device's application store.
 - **Sensory Overload Mitigation:** Handwashing can be a very sensory-heavy experience and may deter some students from washing their hands. Some students with Anxiety or OCD may become compulsive about hand washing. Signs of this may be raw or bleeding skin, over-zealous scrubbing or unexpectedly frequent trips to the sink. Look out for these behaviors and consult with the student's mental health team for guidance if it becomes problematic.
 - **Smell of Soap/Lotion:** The smell of hand soap or of hand lotion may be overwhelming to those with sensory integration challenges. Teachers may consider asking parents to send in something that is either unscented or that they know their child will like.
 - **Water Temperature:** Some students have interoception challenges and may not be able to discern what they are feeling, or what specifically is making them feel uncomfortable. Teachers may want to make sure that water is at a safe and appropriate temperature, as some students may not be able to tell that the water is too hot, or if they can tell, may not know what needs to be done to improve the feeling on their hands.

Strategies to Use When Introducing Social Distancing Measures

Students who struggle with proprioception, or where the body is in space, may have struggled with personal space before COVID-19. These students may need extra support in understanding social distancing practices. Students with executive function challenges, such as students with ADHD, may also struggle with social distancing because it requires inhibiting typical impulses to interact with others in a traditional way.

- **Creating Islands:** Students can create their own islands in the classroom to help encourage social distancing. Students may enjoy creating their own space with their own materials as well as developing their islands flag and special laws if appropriate. Distancing will be extremely difficult for both students and staff, but making it seem at least a bit more fun may encourage students to participate.
- **Social Stories:** As mentioned above, social stories can be used to convey the expectations for students regarding the rules as well as letting them know what they can expect. Social stories can be used to discuss social distancing and general personal space principals to support students in maintaining a safe distance from their peers. Keep in mind that different cultures have different social norms regarding greetings and personal space. We are asking all students to engage in a behavior that is not natural to them, and it may be more difficult for some students than others.
- **Visual Markers:** Some students will benefit from seeing social distancing displayed visually. Often it is difficult even for adults to picture how far a particular distance is. It is also challenging for all students and educators to break the habits of being in close contact, so the visuals can act as prompts in the environment to keep a safe distance.
 - **Tape on the floors:** Tape can be used to mark the space around desks that students are expected to stay in, lanes (similar to those in grocery stores) throughout the classroom to keep students apart while traveling through the room and to mark the directions that students are allowed to travel through any given area.
 - **Use of distancing objects:** Objects such as hula hoops, pool noodles, etc. can be used to help demonstrate to developmentally younger students what social distancing and personal space are. Schools are encouraged to use items readily available to them and to be creative about repurposing common objects. Many students are still learning these skills and will need extra help maintaining a safe distance.

Transportation and Travel

- **Paths of Travel:** Classes should limit the frequency of traveling when other classes are also traveling throughout the building. When possible, different classes traveling at the same time should have different paths of travel. Classes containing medically fragile students may need to travel through the building at different times than other classes and take routes other students going to the bathroom will not use.
- **Riding the Bus:** Students will likely have assigned seats and be seated far from peers. This will be confusing for many students who are unfamiliar with the concept and may require visuals such as social stories or power cards. These visuals can help remind students of the expectations.
- **Open Windows:** According to guidance put forth by the CDC, whenever possible windows should be opened to increase ventilation. This can be done on the school bus or in any other vehicle as well as in the classroom. Some students may find this uncomfortable, particularly as colder weather approaches. Students should come prepared with warm layers so they windows can be kept open as long as it is appropriate to do so.

Temperature and Symptom Checks

Information about how temperature and symptom checks will be performed should be communicated to parents as soon as the information is available. Some students will not have the ability to communicate how they're feeling and would benefit from bringing in a note from their parent or caregiver.

- **Interoception:** Some students struggle with their interoception and therefore struggle to feel their bodies signals, and to connect those signals with a condition or need. For example, a feverish student may not feel their fever symptoms or may not know that the symptoms they are feeling are a fever. These students will benefit from others checking in on their health and well-being.
- **Anxiety and Trauma:** Temperature checks are going to be very anxiety-provoking for some students, particularly the first few times they are done. Some students may have trauma tied to guns or gun violence and the forehead reader may be triggering for them. The temperature and symptom checks may also make a student feel anxious about potentially being sick.
- **Familiar People or Faces:** Having a trusted adult administer the temperature check may help reduce a student's anxiety about having their temperature taken. If it is not possible to have a trusted adult take the temperature, having a trusted adult present may help the student feel safe.
- **Secluded Spaces:** Having a student do temperature and symptom checks in a quieter, and more secluded space may also help decrease any social or sensory related anxiety.
- **Clear Expectations:** Letting the students know exactly what to expect and what it all means can help mitigate some of the potential anxiety a student might face. These are best practices whenever you are going to touch a student or when you have to get within a very close proximity to them. Let them know when you are about to touch them or get close to them by saying something like "I am going to put the thermometer very close to your forehead right up here, but I am not going to touch you, okay? You are not going to feel anything, but you will hear a little beep when it is finished."

Considerations Regarding Cleaning Supplies

- **Sensory Issues:** The smell of bleach or other chemical cleaners can be very strong for students, with and without sensory integration challenges, even with the windows open. This may result in some unexpected behaviors from students such as leaving the classroom without permission or engaging in challenging behavior to communicate discomfort. Whenever possible, staff should disinfect areas with strong cleaners after students have left the room.
- **Chemical Ingestion:** Some cleaners are indistinguishable from juice for developmentally younger students. Cleaners should be kept safely away from students and educators should have the number for poison control available should they need it.

Establishing Additional General Rules

- Educators may have to put new rules in place to keep students safe. Younger students in particular may benefit from having these rules reviewed and posted as an educator would with most classroom rules. Educators should not assume that students will understand all the nuances and rules without being explicitly taught as some students with social communication disorders may not be as adept at learning through social osmosis.
 - Coughing into your elbow
 - Washing your hands after blowing your nose
 - Avoiding touching your face
 - Speaking in a quiet voice to avoid increased respiratory droplets