



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues in our community and across the nation, the family physicians, pediatricians, and pediatric specialists at Billings Clinic continue to be here to care for your family. We are following current recommendations from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as well as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), and we will continue to use guidance from these organizations to care for your children during the pandemic.

Both the CDC and the AAP recommend a return to in-person learning this fall for students as long as this can be done with strict safety measures in place. Many of our pediatric healthcare providers work with education leaders to ensure that schools are ready to safely welcome children. These measures include social distancing, increased hand hygiene, and masking of students and teachers.

When it comes to wearing masks, data clearly shows that masking can slow the spread of Coronavirus which is why it is such an important part of the safety measures schools should be putting in place this fall. The CDC, AAP and AAFP recommend that anyone 2 years of age and older wear a mask. As pediatric healthcare experts, we strongly believe in this current recommendation and, therefore, will not be writing exemption letters when it comes to children wearing a mask. If your child has a diagnosed developmental disability or other medical condition that would prevent them from being able to remove a face mask in an emergent situation, then please speak directly with your child's primary provider.

For children with underlying asthma or other lung issues, there is no medical reason they cannot wear a mask. In fact, our pediatric pulmonologist believes that masking in these children is of the utmost importance. If a child cannot wear a mask because of "difficulty breathing" or because of an asthma "flare," that child should not be at school, and should seek medical guidance from their physician to discuss appropriate asthma control.

We know this can be hard for younger children in particular. Below are some suggestions on encouraging mask use and helping children to become accustomed to wearing one:

- Let your child help select the mask and try different ones, including different styles (pleated, duck bill, earloop, bandanna).
- Consider putting a drop of peppermint oil in the mask to make it smell better.
- Practice wearing a mask at home; start with short periods of time, even a few minutes at first, and gradually increase.
- Offer your child stickers or small rewards for keeping their mask on.
- If your child has known significant sensory issues, work with their OT now to prepare for wearing a mask at school.
- Be a good role model. Tell your child why the mask is important, and wear one yourself. If your child sees you wearing a mask comfortably without complaining, they are more likely to accept it.
- Be patient and keep working on it. Masks will likely be recommended for a long time, so putting effort in now to get used to them will make things easier in the coming months.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact your child's primary care provider. Call us at **406-238-2500** or **1-800-332-7156** or visit **billingsclinic.com/kids**.