



Communicating with a Face Mask: What Schools Need to Know for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students (and Everyone)¹

Whether made of brightly colored cotton or medical-grade materials, face masks are now a fact of life during the pandemic to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. But face masks can make communication difficult, especially for deaf and hard of hearing students, faculty, and staff at your school— and it's an issue that transcends the classroom.

The [National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes \(NDC\)](#) has identified key communications concerns regarding face masks, as well as strategies to overcome those barriers and ensure effective communications for all, including those in K-12 settings.

How Are Face Masks a Communications Barrier?

Face masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) can cause unintentional communication issues for everyone, across both spoken and signed languages.

- They can muffle and distort audible speech. It is especially hard to hear someone speak through a face mask across a socially distanced classroom or if there is any background noise.
- They hide facial features and expressions essential for understanding context by anybody who is speaking or signing. In American Sign Language (ASL), facial expressions are so critical, they can affect the meaning of a sign. When face masks block necessary lipreading or visual cues, deaf and hard of hearing students are not getting the full picture — even with a sign language interpreter in the classroom or office. That may cause increased stress, fatigue, and anxiety.
- They inhibit those instant impressions that are so integral to our interpersonal communications. Want to be supportive with a simple, reassuring smile? Convey your displeasure with a frown? That's blocked by your face mask, too.

What do the CDC and Physicians Recommend and the ADA Require?

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has released guidance for [schools](#), as well as [considerations for wearing face masks](#):

¹ August 3, 2020. Adapted with permission from the National Deaf Center, *Communicating with a Face Mask: What Colleges Need to Know for Deaf Students (and Everyone)*, July 31, 2020 <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/>

“Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing — or those who care for or interact with a person who is hearing impaired — may be unable to wear cloth face coverings if they rely on lipreading to communicate. In this situation, consider using a clear face covering. If a clear face covering isn’t available, consider whether you can use written communication, use closed captioning, or decrease background noise to make communication possible while wearing a cloth face covering that blocks your lips.”

Face shields (clear plastic shields that cover the forehead, extends below the chin, and wraps around the sides of the face) or face shields that stem from the chest up instead of a facemask were recommended by [physicians](#) as an alternative for people who cannot wear masks due to medical or other conditions. Face shields protect the wearer and allows full visibility of facial expressions and lip movements for speech perception.

Regardless of face coverings used in class (in person) or online, the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) requires equitable access to education². The ADA’s [Effective Communication](#) document lays a foundation for school districts to consult with a deaf or hard of hearing student, or his/her parent, on a case-by-case basis, to identify communication needs.

Concerns About Face Masks

Hundreds of disability services professionals in higher education were polled by NDC about their top concerns with face masks on college campuses. More than one-third (37%) were concerned about determining appropriate accommodations when face masks or shields are a barrier. Nineteen percent were worried about campus requirements or policies, and 16% were concerned about addressing classroom acoustics and hearing assistance technology needed for mask wearers.

However, the experts emphasized that accommodating face masks is not their ultimate goal -- ensuring effective communication is, in all aspects of school and campus life for deaf and hard of hearing students.

Are Clear Face Masks or Shields the Answer?

They are options to consider. Clear face shields or face masks with clear panels to see the mouth and lower half of the face are highly sought-after as a remedy to the most common communications barriers. Many disability service professionals think they can be part of an overall access strategy, especially if they can be the standard mask option for everyone in the school. Others worry about availability and cost for buying clear face masks or shields in bulk. Schools should check with their local school and health department for guidance and vendor information.

NDC has addressed several [frequently asked clear mask questions](#), including:

- **Can I make my own clear face mask or shield?** Finding and buying clear face masks and shields can be a challenge, and some people are making their own. First, check with your

² Although accommodations are also identified in the student’s IEP, IDEA’s requirement of “reasonable” accommodations may be a lower standard than ADA’s “equitable” accommodations.

school on whether homemade masks or shields meet their health and safety rules, plus review the CDC standards on [cloth face coverings](#). Connect-Hear.com has a [comprehensive list](#) of tutorials and DIY instructions for creating clear face masks. Some institutions are also using [3D printers](#) to make face shields. Consider providing face masks or shields for service providers for use when working face to face with students.

- **Where can I find vendors for clear face masks and face shields?** [Knowledge Base](#), part of the Connect-Hear.com website, maintains a list of clear mask and face shield vendors. Due to high demand, contact vendors directly for more information.
- **How can I keep a clear face mask or shield from fogging up?** One of the concerns about clear face masks is that some tend to fog up. [The Hearing Spot](#) and [Knowledge Base](#) provide several tips for care and use of clear masks.

Tips to Ensure Effective Communication

Face masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19, but they don't have to prevent effective communication with your deaf and hard of hearing students. Use these tips and strategies to overcome the most common barriers.

- Ask what a student prefers. Remember that each deaf or hard of hearing student varies in their [communication](#) and [accommodation needs](#). They may also ask others to remove their mask if both parties are able to maintain a safe physical distance of 6 feet. To help determine appropriate face masks or [alternative accommodations](#), engage in an interactive process with your student using this [checklist](#)³ to identify their preferences. Work on how face-to-face communication can be supplemented with [assistive listening systems](#), [remote services](#), real-time [speech-to-text services](#), or other accommodations. Most importantly: let the deaf or hard of hearing person lead the discussion and ensure they are comfortable with any decisions.
- Consider remote services, even when the instruction is face-to-face. For instance, if an ASL interpreter will be required to wear a face mask or PPE for your face-to-face class, work with the student and your school to determine if [remote interpreting services](#) would be more effective.
- Go beyond the classroom. Many deaf and hard of hearing students use residual hearing and lip-reading to understand others, especially in group activities, tutoring sessions, extra-curricular activities, and while socializing. In situations involving impromptu conversations while wearing face masks, consider using speech-to-text apps or automatic speech recognition (ASR) software. Though not 100% accurate, it can be helpful in brief conversations for real-time translation. Examples include [AVA](#), [Live Captioning](#), [Live Transcribe](#), [Microsoft Azure](#), and [Otter.ai](#) (see [Knowledge Base](#) at Connect-Hear.com for additional resources).

³ Note: This checklist is geared to high school transition and college students and will need adaption for younger students.