

SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic: Should Children Wear Masks?

Pandemia de SARS-CoV-2: Devem as Crianças Utilizar Máscaras?

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Palavras-chave: COVID-19; Criança; Máscaras; SARS-CoV-2

Dear editor,

During the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the World Health Organization has advised the use of masks, not only in healthcare facilities, but also in particular settings in the community where maintaining physical distance may not be possible.¹ However, the generalised use of face masks presents some challenges, especially in paediatrics.^{1,2}

Young children have small airways and may lack the motor skills necessary to remove a mask without assistance, increasing the risk of suffocation. Therefore, its use is not recommended in children under two years old.^{2,4} In this age group, other preventive measures such as social distancing, frequent hand washing and surface disinfection should be prioritized.^{1,3} For older children, the use of masks, when advised, should be preceded by a careful explanation on how to properly wear and take them off.^{2,4} Touching the mask should be discouraged as it increases the risk of infection.^{1,4}

Parents and teachers are key players in this educational process and should be provided with age-appropriate strategies to overcome common difficulties such as poor acceptance and fear.^{2,4} Moreover, children with cognitive

impairments and behavioural disorders may have more difficulty tolerating a face covering and those with hearing impairments may need modified masks, for instance with clear panels in the front.^{1,4}

Regarding the several types of masks available (see Appendix 1: https://www.actamedicaportuguesa.com/revista/index.php/amp/article/view/14787/Appendix_01.pdf) it should be noted that only immunocompromised children or those with severe chronic diseases, with high risk of complications, should be encouraged to wear FFP2/N95 masks.^{2,3} Surgical masks can prevent inhalation of droplets and are available in smaller sizes for children older than three years of age.^{1,2} Home-made or commercially available cloth masks are an alternative but their effectiveness may vary.^{1,2} Regardless of the type of mask it is important to ensure that it fits snugly around the face to enhance tolerability and minimise risks.^{1,4}

In Portugal, the Directorate-General of Health (DGS) has issued recommendations for Leisure Activities Centres, acknowledging the need for mask-wearing inside facilities, by both professionals and children older than ten-years-old.⁵ As we approach the start of a new school year this issue becomes particularly relevant and will need further clarification based on the evolution of the pandemic and additional knowledge of the role of children in the dissemination of SARS-CoV-2. For now, it seems clear that masks, used in combination with other containment measures, may limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2.^{1,4} Therefore, we should be ready to face the challenges it presents.

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