Data clearly shows that masking can slow the spread of Coronavirus, which is why the Minnesota Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MNAAP) strongly supports everyone over the age of 2 wear face coverings.

In Minnesota, face coverings are required in all public indoor spaces and indoor businesses. Additionally, all students, staff, and other people present in school buildings and district offices or riding in school transportation vehicles are required to wear a face covering. Under the mandate, children between the ages of 2 and 5 years old are not required to face coverings, but they are strongly encouraged to wear them.

As pediatricians, we strongly believe that face coverings play a critical role in keeping everyone safe – especially children and families. Therefore, we will not be writing exemption letters for children in most cases. In general, if a child is capable of physically removing a face covering in the event of an emergency, they should be wearing one.

If a child has severe cognitive issues, sensory challenges, significant respiratory impairments (e.g. tracheostomy or on oxygen), orthopedic or neurologic issues (e.g. cerebral palsy), or other medical condition that would prevent them from being able to remove a face mask in an emergent situation, parents should speak directly with the child’s primary pediatrician to discuss further.

It is important to point out that for children with underlying asthma or other lung issues, there is no medical reason that they cannot wear a mask. In fact, pediatric pulmonologists believe that masking in these children is of the utmost importance. For any child that cannot wear a mask because of “difficulty breathing” or because of an asthma “flare,” the child should likely not be at school.

If a child has difficulty wearing a mask, here are a few suggestions to help them become accustomed to wearing a mask:

- Try different masks, including different styles (pleated, duck bill, ear loop, bandana) and fabrics.

- Practice wearing a mask at home; start with short periods of time, even a few minutes at first, and gradually increase.

- Offer a younger child stickers or small rewards for keeping their mask on.

- If a child has known significant sensory issues, work with his/her OT now to prepare for possibly wearing a mask at school.

- If a child has anxiety, work with his/her therapist now to prepare for wearing a mask at school.

- Consider a mask with a pattern that the child likes, such as sharks, superheroes, puppies, etc. Parents and caregivers should be good role models. If a child sees them wearing a mask comfortably without complaining, they are more likely to accept it.

- Parents and caregivers should 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.