

Get kids to wear their masks with pride

It may be hard to get kids to keep their masks on all the time, but some patience, gentle persuasion and the lure of cute masks may help

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When the pandemic hit, hair and make-up artist Valerie Tang Yong lost her gigs. But it also threw her an unexpected lifeline – making reusable face masks.

After she hand-sewed some for her children, aged four and two, family and friends began requesting them too.

"I started using Carousell last month to list them and I got so many orders, my mum gave me a new sewing machine," says Ms Tang, 35, who runs her online shop under the username @ifitzy.

"She has made more than 200 masks of all sizes so far and also offers custom-fit and twinning options.

Demand for kid-size masks has surged as children return to school in stages from Tuesday – those aged two and older are required to wear one.

At the same time, parents are struggling to persuade pre-schoolers to keep their masks on and debating online about the pros and cons of masks versus face shields.

According to Google Trends, searches for "kids face mask" and "kids face shield" saw a huge spike in the middle of this month and online shopping platform Shopee reports that "kids mask" was among the top searches from February to late April.

"Demand for health and personal hygiene products including child surgical masks and hand sanitisers has increased as shoppers adhere to governmental advisories and social distancing measures by staying home and purchasing essential items online," says Mr Zhou Junjie, Shopee's chief commercial officer.

"Brands and sellers recognise the need for child masks during this period and many have expanded their offerings to cater to this demand."

In response to the demand, Shopee has launched a Back to School Essentials campaign, which includes kid-size masks.

Online marketplace Carousell reports a similar trend.

"We first saw a spike in the number of mask listings for kids in February and this has steadily increased over the past few months. In the week of May 18 alone, we saw more than 150 new listings created, just for child-size masks," says its spokesman.

"We have a variety of handmade masks for children being sold on Carousell and a lot of them are made by parents themselves who have been exploring mask options for their children. The latest trends have been to customise a matching set for the entire family."

To prevent scalping, Carousell carries advisories asking users to compare prices and offers



Mr Joshua Nathaniel Norsen and his wife Richelle Mendova Norsen helped their daughter Sarah get used to wearing a mask through patience, consistency and gentle persuasion. PHOTO: JOSHUA NATHANIEL NORSEN

Carousell Protection, an escrow solution where payment is withheld until buyer and seller are satisfied.

Even as parents scramble to buy masks for their little ones, many have been sharing online their frustrations about persuading their kids to wear one, and wondering if face shields are good enough.

The shields are an acceptable alternative for young children and the Temasek Foundation will be giving one to each pre-schooler and primary schooler when schools reopen.

While face shields may be easier for younger kids to tolerate, they are not as effective as masks, medical experts caution.

"Face shields may reduce the likelihood of large splashes or droplets from coming into contact with the child's eyes, nose and mouth, but do not offer the same degree of protection as compared with a well-fitted surgical mask," says Associate Professor Thoon Koh Cheng, head and senior consultant for infectious disease services in the department of paediatrics at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

Dr Chan Poh Chong, head and senior consultant of the division of general ambulatory paediatrics and adolescent medicine at the National University Hospital, says that face shields have been recommended as an alternative because masks may be restrictive for younger children.

"Face masks cover the mouth and nose better, but may cause breathing difficulty and irritation on a child's face and ears. This may cause them to scratch and pull on the masks repeatedly, increasing the risk of infection," he says.

"If there is a need to go to crowded places like taking public transport, where social distancing may not be easy, a face mask would offer better protection."

He suggests that parents use age-appropriate language to explain why kids should protect themselves and others from infection, empathise with their difficulties, and practise wearing masks and shields at home before classes resume.

Dr Chan advises buying well-fitting ones that are less likely to cause discomfort, as well as personalising masks and shields to help children "identify the protective coverings as part and parcel of their daily dressing."

"Despite all these efforts, we cannot expect that very young children will immediately be able to keep their masks and/or shields on all day. It is important to be sensitive

to the children's needs and exercise flexibility while helping them to get used to the coverings," he says, adding that cultivating the habit will take time.

Veteran early childhood educator Patricia Koh acknowledges parents' frustrations, but says childcare teachers will be helping their young charges adopt the mask-wearing habit in "creative ways to make it like an adventure".

Ms Veronica Loh, 33, a stay-at-home mum, credits childcare teachers for educating her two boys, aged six and four, about hygiene and the need for masks. "Getting them to choose their own designs of the fabric masks helps as well," she says. "Benjamin, my four-year-old, complained that he couldn't breathe when we put a kid's surgical mask on him, but he was okay with the fabric ones from ChubbyChubby."

Mrs Koh, who is education ambassador of the MapleBear Singapore chain of pre-schools, encourages parents to think positively as "how we look at a situation will affect our children's feelings and behaviour".

That upbeat attitude certainly helped Mr Joshua Nathaniel Norsen, 38, a technical specialist. His daughter, Sarah, attended child care during the circuit breaker as both he and his wife are essential workers.

It took the two-year-old about five school days and a weekend to adapt to a mask-wearing habit, which he shared in a series of videos on social media.

In class, her teachers explained the importance of masks with engaging activities. At home, Mr Norsen and his wife followed these key pointers: "Be consistent, have lots of patience and use gentle persuasion."

He says: "During the first couple of days when Sarah was frustrated with her mask and wanted to remove it, I maintained my cool and let her have her mini meltdown. By giving her time and space, she usually recovered within five to 10 minutes. I would then distract her with passing vehicles or tell her make-believe stories.

"I also empathised with her and used visual persuasion by pointing to others and even myself wearing masks to help her calm down."

He adds: "It wasn't easy and almost made us go crazy, but it worked. Now Sarah won't go anywhere without her mask. I encourage every parent who's still struggling to keep trying. Your little one will eventually wear it with pride."

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Where to buy kiddie masks

ANS.EIN

The Singapore-based fashion label founded by two mumpreneurs first made masks to donate to essential workers during the circuit breaker. It started offering adult and kid sizes for sale last month after requests from customers.

Made in Jakarta, its three-ply child mask has a waterproof middle layer and comes in a variety of sizes, colours and prints. Prices start at \$3.50.

Customers can also buy masks under its "2,500 Masks For Everyday Heroes" initiative, where proceeds fund its efforts. The company is also developing hats with face shields. Go to: ans-ein.com



CHUBBYCHUBBY

Its masks come in various sizes and are made from cotton fabric offered from past clothing collections, or cloth from suppliers in Japan and South Korea.

Each mask has two layers and comes with a filter slot. Prices range from \$8 to \$14 on a preorder basis. A portion of the proceeds is donated to charities and local seamstresses who sew the masks. Go to: www.chubbychubby.sg

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MAISON Q

Known for its reversible kidswear, Maison Q initially made 50 adult masks as a special order for retailer Motherswork to give to its customers and influencers. After the recipients posted photos on social media, it received requests to make more.

Its three-ply masks for adults and kids have a pocket for a filter and are made from leftover fabric from its collections.

Producing the masks helps its Indonesian artisans to continue working and 20 per cent of the proceeds will go to the Happy Stork programme for teenage mothers.

Kid sizes cost \$16, while adult ones are \$18. Go to: www.maison-q.com



SEA APPLE

A desire to help migrant workers and an under-utilised factory sparked the idea to produce masks for adults and kids late last month. Its first batch sold out within a weekend.

The masks are made from past season fabric, which is a comfortable interlock knit, and feature its exclusive designs.

Priced at \$10 each for adult and child sizes, they are two-ply with space for a filter.

Preorders opened yesterday for the second batch and 20 per cent of the proceeds will go to The Courage Fund for those affected by Covid-19. Go to: www.seaappleshop.com



OH HAPPY FRY

This online kids' lifestyle store started selling masks about two weeks ago after its founder, Ms Rae Yun, could not find suitable washable versions for her two children.

Made in South Korea, the masks come in two- and three-ply styles and various designs.

Prices for adult and child masks range from \$6.50 to \$15.99 each. It also has hats with detachable shields and mask pouches. Go to: www.ohhappyfry.com



PHOTOS: ANS.EIN; CHUBBYCHUBBY; MAISON Q; SEA APPLE; OH HAPPY FRY; ELIZABETH LITTLE

ELIZABETH LITTLE

Unable to find well-fitting child masks for her three kids, founder Eileen Tays sewed them herself. Requests poured in after she posted photos on social media, and she started preorders last month.

Her masks are crafted from her label's signature Liberty Art Fabrics, which are 100 per cent Egyptian cotton from Europe.

There are three sizes for kids, tweens and adults, and a choice of two-ply with a filter compartment, or three-ply with an embedded filter.

For every \$22 mask sold, the brand gives a reusable cotton child-size mask to vulnerable families. It has donated more than 2,000 masks so far. Go to: www.elizabethlittle.co