

Policy Position Statement: Transparent Face Masks

June 2022

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, the RCSLT has been campaigning for measures to reduce the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2. In this context, we have also been lobbying for the introduction of transparent face masks, as we have been very concerned about the communication challenges that opaque masks pose.

What's the issue?

Face masks present challenges with reduced clarity and audibility and an impact on non-verbal communication. But there is also an issue of equality for everyone.

The appearance of opaque face masks may be distressing or confusing for people with communication challenge, including potentially people with aphasia, autism, with dementia or with learning disability. In the UK there are up to 14 million people living with communication difficulties.

Facial expressions are particularly important when we are stressed, or unwell, or in a noisy, or unfamiliar environment. The deaf community and those with hearing impairment also rely on lip reading and use facial expressions to communicate on an equal basis.

By nature of what speech and language therapists (SLTs) do, which is supporting and developing someone's speech, language and communication, it is really important that their client can see their mouth and face, in a safe manner. Opaque masks prevent visual access to the therapist's mouth movements and facial expressions, and this creates a barrier to therapy. The use of transparent face masks could benefit speech and language therapists' interactions, with clients of all ages, who have speech, language and communication difficulties.

We are aware that the wearing of face masks is being relaxed across some settings in which SLTs work. However, where masks are still required, the introduction of transparent face masks remains a priority.

What's available?

Manufacturers are making progress in developing transparent masks which are compliant with the UK technical specification. At present the compliant transparent face masks are equivalent to a fluid-resistant Type IIR surgical mask.

Transparent masks, when worn correctly should provide adequate protection against large droplets, splashes, and contact transmission. They cannot be used to replace FFP2, FFP3 or PAPR respirators, or where care is being provided in poorly ventilated spaces, or with service users who may be COVID-19 positive or where status is unknown.

A list of compliant masks is available on the RCSLT website.

What is the RCSLT doing?

The RCSLT has already written information on priority groups to use the mask which can help to inform local decisions.

The RCSLT will continue to work with the UK governments to ensure that transparent face masks are available for speech and language therapists and their clients.

There is more to do, to ensure that therapists can continue to access transparent masks, that the design allows for an adequate view of the face and facial movements and that higher protection masks are developed to keep speech and language therapists, and those with whom we work, safe at all times.

Resources

- UK Transparent face mask technical specification: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technical-specifications-for-personal-protective-equipment-ppe/transparent-face-mask-technical-specification>
- RCSLT: Decision making guidance on priority groups: <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/RCSLT-Priority-Groups-Transparent-Masks-final.pdf>
- Government guidance on Infection prevention and control (IPC): <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/wuhan-novel-coronavirus>