

Parents Are Losing Their Minds Over Masks in Schools

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On the first day of school last week, Kelly Carothers picked up her 5-year-old twins from the bus stop and noticed that the kids weren't wearing their masks.

"It's hot on the bus," they explained, "and no one else was wearing one."

She asked if they had worn them throughout the school day. "Well," they said, "sometimes."

The incident confirmed Carothers's worst fears about this school year. Public-school students in her Florida county, Hillsborough, are technically required to wear masks to school. But in an [attempt to please everyone](#), parents may opt their kids out of mask wearing by signing a form. Masks also [remain optional](#) for teachers. According to Carothers, some of the parents in her kids' classes have signed the mask waiver, and their kids roam around blissfully mask-free.

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Most of the parents I talked with realize that their kids will probably be fine: Fewer [than 400 kids](#) have died of COVID-19 so far. They hope and pray that their fears are not warranted. But after more than a year of screaming headlines about the threat of COVID-19, it's hard to shelve those worries and send your little one into the hot zone with a lunch box and a wet wipe. "Human perception dictates fears, not rationality," says Alan Kazdin, a child psychologist at Yale. "Our fears do not rely on the data. They rely on our perception of danger, our perception of the consequences." This is why people fear shark attacks more than car accidents.

Still, the risk of COVID-19 transmission is undeniably reduced when everyone is masked. The anti-mandate crowd frames masks as an issue of "parents' choice," but child psychology being what it is, kids are unlikely to wear masks unless everyone else is doing so. A man named Kyle in Iowa told me that his 15-year-old was bullied last year for wearing a mask to school. (I am only using his first name to avoid jeopardizing his wife's job.) Kids said the only reason his daughter was wearing one was because she was a "Democrat who created the fake disease."

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