

# Masking



## What is masking?

Masking (or camouflaging) is consciously or unconsciously changing your behaviour to 'fit in'. This can involve deliberately behaving in certain ways to fit in with your peers – laughing at jokes you do not find funny for example, copying mannerisms or pretending to like the same things. An autistic pupil who is masking may offer to present to the class even though it terrifies them and damages their mental health. It can also involve deliberately *not* behaving in certain ways to fit it (fearing you will be considered 'socially unacceptable' if you do). For example, avoiding talking about subjects you find interesting, using sensory aids or stimming for example. It is common for autistic pupils to refuse outside help that they really need, simply because of their desire to look the same as everyone else.

Everyone masks occasionally, but research suggests that 70% of autistic people mask regularly. People of both genders and those who are non-binary can all mask: it is not exclusively girls (although they tend to be very good at masking'). When an autistic pupil is masking it may be absolutely invisible from the outside.

Masking for long periods of time can be exhausting and detrimental to mental health.

"The mask I use to hide my autism is for your comfort, not mine. It causes me over-stimulation, exhaustion and a deep sense that who I am underneath is not good enough" Purple Ella

## Why is understanding and recognising masking important?

It might seem that masking could have benefits in helping pupils to fit in, and to feel included: many autistic people do report that they choose to mask for this reason. In reality however, many autistic people will report that even when they do mask they still *do not feel* they are accepted. Having to hide your true self just to feel accepted and likeable is terribly damaging to an individual's sense of identity and self-worth, and autistic pupils *should not have to* pretend to be someone else to be accepted. Their autistic selves are enough.



As well as damaging identity and self-esteem, masking takes a great deal of energy: It is physically and emotionally *exhausting*.

In the short-term, this drain of energy can seriously affect the ability to learn and cope in school life. Pupils may be too drained to learn, and their masking may include hiding any difficulties they are facing (claiming to be 'fine' when actually they are not in order to 'blend in'). This can lead to autistic pupils struggling in class when they do not need to. In the longer term it has the potential to



lead to poor quality mental health.

## When do autistic pupils mask?

It is important to realise that many autistic pupils mask, and that we may not always be aware of it: it can be invisible from the outside. Often the only clue comes when parents report a child to be melting down at home (often due to the strain of masking).

Autistic children often mask to fit in and look indistinguishable from their peers. This often means *avoiding attention* because attention and 'singling out' can look like 'difference'. Attention can also provide the wrong sort of help, so masking can also play a role in avoiding well-intentioned but unhelpful support. So for example, an autistic child might mask because:

- In the past when they have been visibly upset the attention they received made them feel singled out and 'different', (so now they are careful not to show when they are visibly upset).
- The support they received may also have *not helped*: for example what they may have needed was to be left alone to recover, and what they received was a lot of well-meaning fuss and attention from staff. So next time they hide their distress and mask instead.
- They fear being asked questions that will make the situation harder (e.g. being asked 'tell me what you are feeling?' when they simply don't know the answer to how they are feeling).
- They worry they will not be believed if they say it's too loud, too bright, too smelly (they may not have been believed in the past). Staff and peers may also look at them strangely.
- If they give their real point of view and it differs from everyone else's they may be considered 'weird' and their peers and staff may laugh (not necessarily realising the distress this causes). So they pretend to have a different point of view.
- They fear being told off for behaving differently (e.g. for using sensory aids or stimming to stay regulated, especially when a teacher does not recognise the behaviour as 'stimming').
- They know they are praised or more accepted if they sit through a lesson without moving or using sensory aids (even though they desperately need both these things and would focus far better with them).
- They are aware that if they don't 'copy' exactly how the other pupil's behave the whole class treats them as 'weird' or 'inappropriate'.
- They know that if they *do* behave the same way as everyone else and 'blend in' (make eye contact, pretend to share interests) they are more socially accepted to pupils and staff.

## How do autistic pupils mask?

*Autistics are really good at recognizing patterns, and deep down, even as undiagnosed autistic children, we know we're different. Desperate to fit in however we can, we learn to watch others and copy what they do*

**Katie** (<https://weirdsensitivecreatures.com/?p=1022>)

Some autistic pupils will spend a great deal of time secretly studying others, copying what they do and what they say just to fit in. Others will just try and stay below radar, show no response, make no comment – just to avoid standing out. The fear of being 'different', feeling alien to the class, is often far greater than then the desire to have a question answered. Even very young children can mask.

The energy it takes to keep up this mask however – to monitor every item you wear, every word you say, every expression you show, every question you ask, every opinion you express, every choice you make, every movement you make, every eye contact you give, every comment you make... is often beyond what a young person can bear. For this reason, a child who is masking will often collapse at home. Stress will overwhelm them, doubts of 'did I really manage to fit in?' flood them. Exhaustion and frustration take over and throw them into meltdown.

## Accidental encouragements staff can give to masking

Autistic children should be free to be themselves, with all their unique and special interests, stims and way of being. They should be able to ask for help when they need it, and get that help without judgement. They should never be laughed at for being who they are.

While we might all agree with this, it is easy to encourage masking accidentally and it is important to be mindful of this. For example, we may be encouraging child to mask if we:

- Praise them for sitting with quiet hands (when they need to stim to stay regulated),
- Congratulate them for sitting quietly or 'not minding' (when they are struggling, distressed or confused inside),
- Reward them for speaking in front of the class or taking on a role that was more than they were actually capable of that time (and leads to meltdown at home), or
- Encourage them to work towards sitting silent and still through assembly (when they continue to find assemblies painfully 'loud')

It is not easy to know what is going on in the minds of pupils of course (for example to know if they are desperate to stim). However, if we take the time to get to know them well, listen and take *seriously* everything they tell us then we will be much less likely to inadvertently encourage them to

mask. Celebrating difference, highlighting autistic success in the world, and actively prevent bullying and teasing are all important actions that can help reduce the need to mask.

### Strategies

- ✓ If you are able to create an environment where pupils feel accepted, the social pressure that they may feel to mask may be greatly reduced. Consider raising awareness of autism and showing all the positives and successes of autistic people.
- ✓ Support all pupils to be more accepting of difference. This may mean not drawing attention to differences in front of the whole class, and/or challenging when pupils laugh at anything 'different'.
- ✓ Support autistic pupils to understand and feel pride in themselves as autistic young people.
- ✓ Consider lunch or after school clubs to help pupils discover and explore interests that reflect their true inclinations. Peers may value their expertise!
- ✓ Allow stimming in class and do not draw attention to it.
- ✓ Normalise use of sensory aids
- ✓ Be careful what you are praising autistic pupils for – stay mindful that you may be inadvertently praising them for masking. It may be more helpful to praise a pupil for asking for time out when they are overwhelmed, than for sitting quietly in class and experiencing that overwhelm (only to be unable to focus and meltdown later).
- ✓ Stay mindful that many autistic pupils want to please and may do so at the expense of their own mental well-being. Be careful what you ask for.
- ✓ Ask autistic pupils how they like to be supported when they are experiencing difficulties – they may say they prefer to be left alone and given time. It may be easier for them to discuss the problem later, when class mates are not around to see or hear.
- ✓ If parents express concern that their child is masking take this seriously. Do not feel you should be able to see this in school, masking can be invisible.
- ✓ Some autistic children will choose to mask. Consider developing [energy accounting](#) for them to help them cope and to protect their mental health (ask your autism advisor for help)

# HOW ALLISTIC\* PEOPLE CAN HELP

\*non-autistic

Persistent autistic masking can result in anxiety, depression, isolation, & burnout. Here are some ways to help:

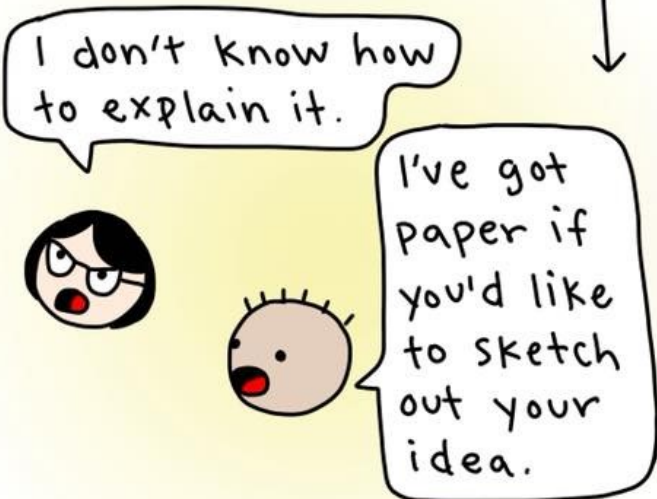
Don't make judgments about behavior or feelings



Be aware of Sensory needs



Allow for multiple methods of communication



Respect the need for personal space.



by Kate of Girls Autistic Journey

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Words by Girls Autistic Journey

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