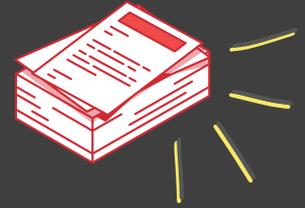


# AUTISM MASKING

## SCHOOLS GUIDE



### What is masking?

People who are autistic consciously or unconsciously mask by hiding their autistic traits to fit in, blend socially, avoid bullying or cope with sensory and classroom expectations. It might look like copying peers, forcing eye contact, staging social behaviours or suppressing stims.

### Why children in school mask:

- Fear of being judged, teased or singled out
- Pressure to appear “okay” or “independent”
- Desire to make friends, fit in or avoid conflict
- Trying to meet adult expectations and avoid sanctions
- Managing overwhelming sensory environments.

### Why understanding masking matters

Masking may help a child survive the school day, but it comes at a high emotional, physical and neurological cost. It can lead to:

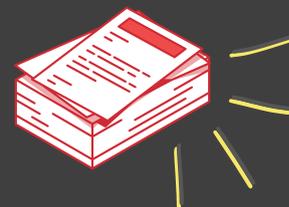
- Exhaustion, shutdowns or meltdowns *before and/or after* school
- Increased anxiety, depression or burnout
- Difficulties with friendships or social confusion
- Missed indicators of support need (looks fine in class)
- Delayed diagnosis or misunderstanding of behaviour
- Staff wrongly blaming meltdowns with parents on poor parenting.

### Signs a child may be masking

- Very quiet, timid or overly “fine” in school
- Polished social behaviour that looks rehearsed
- Copies peers rather than initiating
- Avoids unstructured times (break, lunch, group work)
- Suppresses stimming but later has big emotional releases
- “Two different versions” – school vs home
- Perfectionism, high compliance or rigid routine-following
- Sudden dysregulation on occasions, often misinterpreted as occurring without any triggers.

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### What you can do

1. Create authentic acceptance
  - Normalise stimming, movement and sensory needs
  - Provide predictable routines and visual supports
  - Use clear, calm communication and reduced social pressure.
2. Reduce the load
  - Allow sensory adaptations
  - Remove unnecessary demands
  - Offer alternatives to eye contact, verbal answers or group work
  - Adapt expectations to the daily energy levels the autistic child has available.
3. Work closely with parents and SENCOs
  - Compare home/school presentation to identify masking
  - Track energy levels, overwhelm and social effort
  - Adjust support plans based on what's hidden, not just what's seen.
4. Support regulation and identity
  - Build short, restorative breaks into the day
  - Encourage self-advocacy: "What helps you feel comfortable?"
  - Teach emotional literacy, sensory awareness and self-regulation skills.

### Key Message

A child shouldn't have to hide who they are to feel safe. When school environments celebrate individuality and reduce social and sensory pressure, autistic children can learn, connect and thrive as their true selves.