

Understanding Masking in Autism

Why It Happens and How to Help



What is masking?

Masking refers to the strategies autistic individuals may use to present themselves in ways that align with expected social norms. This can occur across a range of contexts, including school, the workplace, and both familiar and unfamiliar social situations. Children and young people often develop masking strategies by carefully observing those around them.

Common ways people mask

- Forcing or rehearsing eye contact.
- Copying speech patterns, facial expressions, or mannerisms.
- Suppressing stimming or special interests.
- Preparing scripts for conversations.



Over time, masking can shift from being a conscious strategy to an automatic response. For some children and young people, it becomes so deeply embedded that it feels like a routine part of daily life.

Why Do Autistic People mask?

There are many reasons why autistic people may choose to mask, and these often depend on the context they are in.

Some of the most common reasons include (National Autistic Society):

- To fit in socially and meet expected social norms.
- To be accepted by others.
- To avoid discrimination, prejudice, or bullying.
- To reduce the likelihood of drawing unwanted attention in educational settings.
- To cope in environments that are not neuro-affirming or inclusive.
- To maintain friendships and relationships.

The impacts of masking

Masking can have a significant impact on a child or young person, particularly when it is used over long periods of time. For example, a pupil may spend the school day working hard to mask, which can be exhausting. Once home or where they feel safe, this effort can no longer be sustained and may result in distress or what parents often describe as a "meltdown". This helps to explain why behaviour can look very different in school compared to at home.

Constantly monitoring behaviour and suppressing natural responses is draining and can leave a child feeling very tired.

Long-term masking is linked with higher levels of anxiety, stress, and low mood.

Sustained masking can lead to autistic burnout, a state of extreme fatigue and reduced ability to cope.

Whilst masking can bring challenges, it is important to recognise that for some individuals it also provides a sense of control. In certain situations, masking may help a child or young person feel safer, more confident, and better able to manage the social or educational demands placed upon them.

How you can help?

Create safe, accepting environments

Ensure staff training on neurodiversity

Allow recovery time following social events or school

Use special interests positively

Value authentic communication

Provide calm, safe spaces for children to retreat to

