Autistic Masking for Schools

Autistic masking is a term used to describe conscious or unconscious suppression or hiding of elements of a person's autistic identity. Research is still relatively new, but it is thought that 94% of autistic adults have masked at some point in their lives (Sedgewick et al, 2022).

Masking is often referred to as a 'social survival strategy' and is used to conform to expected 'norms', cope with situations or environments, or avoid expressing anxiety. Many autistic children will mask at school in order to fit in with their peers and to avoid appearing different.

Autistic author, Helen Ellis, uses the example of Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, to illustrate masking. "Superman knows that he is different and that in order to 'fit in' with society, he has to suppress his differences and invent an unassuming role – someone that nobody will notice".

Autistic masking can be considered a response to stigma and trauma (Pearson and Rose, 2021). The fact that autistic people may need a social survival strategy suggests that society is currently not meeting their needs.

Masking takes an exhausting amount of effort. Sustained masking can have a detrimental effect on mental health and well-being and many children who mask in school exhibit extreme, distressed behaviours when they return home and/or will need to sleep.

Autistic Masking Examples

- Mimicking the social behaviour of others, including gestures or facial expressions.
- Deliberately forcing or faking eye contact during conversations.
- Hiding or underplaying their own intense interests.
- Scripting or rehearsing conversations or preparing a bank of 'stock phrases' for conversations.
- Suppressing stimming (self-stimulating) behaviours. These are repetitive behaviours, such as whistling, jumping, hand flapping, rocking etc, which are used by autistic people to help self-regulate and for fun.
- Internalising sensory discomfort.

Effects of Masking

- Autistic fatigue or autistic burnout (severe exhaustion accompanied by other difficulties, including increased meltdowns or shutdowns).
- Rejection of their own identity, impacting self-esteem.
- Mental ill-health, including anxiety and depression.
- Increased risk of suicidal thoughts (Kassidy et al, 2021).
- Needs not being recognised or met.
- Parents are not believed that their child behaves differently at home than in school.

Ref: Watts, C. Available at www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/what-is-autistic-masking
Produced by Communication and Autism Team and pupil at King Edward Camp Hill School for Girls, May 2023

Support Strategies

1. By 2026 the government wants:

- Education settings to provide better and more inclusive support, so that autistic people are better to achieve their full potential.
- More teachers and educational staff to understand the specific needs of their autistic pupils, ensuring that more school placements can be sustained.
- More autistic children to have their needs identified early on and to have positive experiences in educational settings.

2. Promote an Inclusive Whole-School Culture:

- Children need to feel their autistic identities are respected and supported.
- Rather than expecting autistic people to change to 'fit in' to the school environment, the environment needs to be changed to support neurodiversity.
- Schools should embrace the concept of neurodiversity through whole staff training, where they see autism as a difference, not a deficit.

3. Provide Individualised Support

- Make reasonable adjustments to effectively support individual's differences.
- Produce a one-page profile made available to all staff to support autistic pupils in their learning and inform teaching approaches and an understanding of difference.
- Build effective relationships with autistic learners to provide them with support to meet their individual needs.

4. Listen to parents and carers

- Parents are experts on their own children, however parents of autistic children who mask often report feeling unheard, shut down or even judged as a parent of their child that is different to the one seen in school.

Get in touch with the Communication and Autism Team (CAT)

CAT provides training through the Autism Education Trust (AET) and supports mainstream schools across Birmingham and the West Midlands. Contact your school CAT worker for further information and advice about masking and autism in general.

Ref: Watts, C. Available at www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/what-is-autistic-masking
Produced by Communication and Autism Team and pupil at King Edward Camp Hill School for Girls, May 2023