

What Does Masking Look Like in School?



Many autistic students mask every day at school—often without realising it. Masking is when a person hides, suppresses, or changes parts of themselves to fit in, avoid judgement, or meet expectations.



Masking can help autistic students get through the school day, but it comes at a cost. Over time, it can lead to exhaustion, anxiety, burnout, and a feeling of being “not enough”.



Why Students May Mask

- ♥ To fit in with peers
- ♥ To avoid bullying or judgement
- ♥ To meet expectations from teachers
- ♥ To be seen as “well-behaved” or “easy”
- ♥ To avoid standing out
- ♥ To prevent criticism or punishment
- ♥ Because they don't feel safe being themselves



What Masking Can Look Like

- ♥ Forcing eye contact
- ♥ Smiling when overwhelmed or anxious
- ♥ Laughing along even when it's not funny
- ♥ Copying what others do or say
- ♥ Practising conversations or answers
- ♥ Staying quiet to avoid saying the “wrong” thing
- ♥ Pretending to understand when they don't
- ♥ Suppressing stimming or fidgeting
- ♥ Hiding sensory discomfort
- ♥ Pushing through exhaustion
- ♥ Trying to look calm, confident, or “normal”
- ♥ Perfectionism and fearing mistakes
- ♥ People-pleasing or seeking constant approval
- ♥ Hiding meltdowns, shutdowns, or emotions



The Hidden Impact of Masking at School

Students may appear fine during the day, but masking takes a huge amount of energy. Over time, it can lead to:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| ♥ Extreme tiredness | ♥ Emotional exhaustion |
| ♥ Anxiety and worry | ♥ Irritability |
| ♥ Headaches or stomachaches | ♥ Loss of identity |
| ♥ Shutdowns after school | ♥ Burnout |
| ♥ Difficulty sleeping | ♥ School refusal |



Many students don't have meltdowns at school because they are holding it all in—saving it for a “safe” place later.



What Masking Can Look Like in Different Situations

In the Classroom

- Raising hand even when they don't want to
- Forcing participation in group work
- Hiding confusion or needing extra time
- Pretending to enjoy noisy or chaotic activities
- Trying to sit still and stay focused

In Social Situations

- Rehearsing what to say
- Asking questions to keep conversation going
- Laughing or agreeing to fit in
- Hiding true feelings or interests

At Break Times

- Copying what friends are doing
- Playing games they don't enjoy
- Staying quiet to avoid awkward moments
- Hiding overwhelm in busy spaces

When Things Get Hard

- Pushing through sensory overload
- Hiding shutdowns or distress
- Pretending everything is “fine”
- Trying not to cry or “make a scene”



What May Help

Small changes can make a big difference. Every student is different—what helps one may not help another.

- ♥ Predictable routines and clear expectations
- ♥ Flexible communication and participation options
- ♥ Access to sensory supports
- ♥ Breaks and safe spaces when overwhelmed
- ♥ Understanding of shutdowns and recovery time
- ♥ Acceptance of stimming and self-regulation
- ♥ Patient, supportive, and non-judgemental adults
- ♥ Celebrating strengths and individual needs



When students feel safe, accepted, and understood, they don't have to mask as much—and they can learn, grow and thrive as themselves.



A Note for Parents & Carers

You might see your child collapse at home after school, seem “fine” at school, feel anxious, or take a long time to recover. This is often masking. Your understanding, patience, and compassion make a powerful difference. You are not alone.



Gentle Reminder

Masking is not a choice—it is a survival strategy. Every autistic student deserves the chance to feel safe, accepted, and able to be themselves.

You are enough. Just as you are.



Ways to Support Yourself

It's okay to take breaks. It's okay to be yourself. You deserve support, kindness, and environments that help you feel safe and seen.

- 
 Use breaks when you need them.
- 
 Use fidgets, stims or sensory supports.
- 
 Talk to someone you trust.
- 
 Do things that help you relax.
- 
 Be kind to yourself.