

Advisory Teaching Service:

Advice sheet to support pupils who may be masking in school

What is Masking?

Masking in social situations:

Autistic people can mask to help them feel safer when amongst other people. They suppress typically autistic behaviours to help avoid social discomfort and distress. In social situations an autistic person might be doing any of the following:

- Prioritising pleasing others over meeting own needs
- Over-analysing previous conversations and social situations
- Pre-planning or rehearsing phrases, comments, questions
- Only saying and doing what will please others
- Avoiding expressing emotions, opinions or interests
- Copying other people's communication style
- Sharing eye contact – even though this feels uncomfortable
- Adapting appearance to fit in with others (e.g. clothes, hairstyle)
- Tolerating uncomfortable or painful sensory preferences
- Suppressing stimming, meltdowns and shutdowns

- If successful, the pupil may appear an enthusiastic and conscientious pupil in school. However, this often involves a high level of energy and vigilance for the child and may result in them being very upset as they go home. They may experience meltdowns or extreme exhaustion, hiding away to recover from the immense effort of a school day spent masking in order to fit in.
- Masking can lead to 'restrain and collapse' = holding in at school and releasing at home (eg 'The 4 o'clock explosion')
- Collapse can describe shutdown (withdrawal) behaviours or meltdown behaviours when a person becomes overwhelmed, leading to an emotional or behavioural breakdown often due to sensory, emotional, social or environmental stress
- Autism often presents differently in girls. They can mask or camouflage to hide their autism/and/or to be seen as 'coping'. This leads to internalised anxiety and exhaustion from constant social monitoring
- Masking may look like:
 - **Social Mimicry:** Imitating peers' social behaviors, gestures, or speech patterns to blend in
 - **Suppressing Autistic Traits:** Hiding stimming, special interests which may not be shared with the main group, or hiding sensory differences to avoid standing out
 - **Resisting Seeking Help:** Masking students may find it difficult to ask for help or guidance and may actively resist any form of support which they feel draws any attention to them
 - **Inconsistent Energy or Attention:** The mental energy required for masking can impact focus, executive function, and academic performance
 - **Lowered Expression:** Pupils may mimic the expressions they believe are 'correct' and may not laugh or cry when this is what they actually are feeling
 - **Sensory Differences:** Despite trying to suppress any difference, they might cover their ears in noisy situations or wince in bright light
 - **Seriousness:** They may struggle to see the humour in some situations or just miss the social norm for their humour when they are attempting to share something funny

- **Anxiety:** Anxiety can be heightened, particularly when there are any changes to routine or people that are unexpected

Advice/Recommendations for supporting pupils who may be masking:

- Liaise with parent/carers and encourage the pupil to learn about Autism and their autistic self with a trusted, safe adult as well as learning about other autistic and neurodivergent individuals.
- Creating a safe, inclusive environment where individuals feel accepted for who they are can help reduce the perceived need for masking: **Remember to tailor reasonable adjustments and support to each individual as each pupil may have a different context and profile of needs:**
 1. **Encourage a culture of Celebrating Diversity:** Create a safe space where students feel comfortable expressing their needs and authentic selves, including time for any stimming
 2. **Provide Sensory Support:** Routinely offer sensory-friendly tools or accommodations like noise-cancelling headphones, fidget toys, or quiet spaces, with clear rules for how to use them and the times and places where this is most helpful..
 3. **Use Visual Supports:** Routinely use visual reinforcement for as much key advice as possible, including visual schedules and cues.
 4. **Explicitly Teach Social Conventions:** Social stories can be helpful for making conventions clear. Similarly, if things have not gone to plan, the use of comic strip conversations can explore the communication and motivations of people around them.
 5. **Recognise and Validate Emotions:** Acknowledge and validate pupils' feelings before exploring any issue, to establish a starting point of trust.
 6. **Provide Regular discrete Breaks:** Schedule time for sensory breaks between or within tasks. This might include tasks like finding or giving out resources or a more overt sensory task, such as sensory circuits.
 7. **Individualised Plans:** Collaborate with parents and staff to create personalised profiles and plans, responsive to the current presentation.
 8. **Consider some opportunities for personal reflection in a safe space:** It may be helpful to consider some targeted approaches such as Emotion Coaching, ELSA or TEAA.
 9. **Professional Development:** Train staff and make time in staff meetings to reflect on the school's approach to neurodiversity and autism including masking.

Some specific approaches:

- School staff may wish to explore the [Autism Education Trust's Self-Advocacy](#) Toolkit to support the pupil in building confidence to express their needs as an autistic young person, while also helping them identify and understand their strengths and preferences
- Make an annotated emotion thermometer with approaches and activities that can help at each level
- Consider each worry/problem and likelihood scaling
- Teach pupils to notice their thoughts emotions and physical feelings in different situations and any strategies they used to support themselves.
- Short term: Create a 'toolkit' of immediate coping techniques – deep breathing etc., mindfulness, tai chi, yoga pretzels
- Long term - identify activities that help reduce overall anxiety, such as exercise, drawing or journaling.
- Create a list of specific situation and areas in the environment along with the thoughts and feelings that trigger anxiety
- You may wish to use the CAT Q (Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire) by Hull et al (2019) or the Masking Grid from Pooky Knightsmith
- Ensure de-compression time in a safe space is available throughout the day, especially at the end of the day
- Create a safety plan about how to withdraw from a difficult situation and provide them with a sense of security and support: Where will they go? Who will they be able to speak to? What resources can they access?

References and useful websites:

Website links:

- [Autistic Young Experts Panel Launch Their NEW YouTube Channel | Autism Education Trust](#)
- [Masking Q&As and resources - North East Autism Society](#)
- [Self-Advocacy Toolkit | Autism Education Trust](#)



- **Behind the smile: Autistic masking at school - Autistic Girls Network**
- **Understanding Masking | Kids Charity**
- **Inside Our Autistic Minds: What parents can learn about masking and non-speaking autism - BBC Bitesize**
- **Masking - Autism Understood**
- **The Girl With The Curly Hair - Autism Training, Animations, Books – Alis Rowe**
- **Masking in Autistic Children: The Childs Voice – Jodie Clarke**
- **What is masking, what does it look like and how can it affect people? - Support for neurological conditions | The Brain Charity**
- **Opportunities for pupil to explore their own coping strategies Coping Kit | Childline**
- **Lumi Nova. This is an app that has been endorsed by NICE and the NHS and targeted to support children aged 7-12 with worries and anxiety Lumi Nova: Tales of Courage**
- **Self-Care Resources For Young People | Anna Freud**
- **Stress Bucket Activity | Mental Health Resources | YoungMinds**
- **[Autism Level UP!](#)**

Publications:

- **The Amazing Autistic Brain cards: 150 Cards with Strengths and Challenges for Positive Autism discussions: Gloria Durà-Vilà, Rebecca Tatternorth**
- **Wonderfully Wired Brains: An Introduction to the World of Neurodiversity: Gooding, Louise, Burrows, Ruth:**
- **The ASD Girls' wellbeing toolkit by Tina Rae**
- **Taking off the Mask by Hannah Louis Belcher**
- **Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing Our Hidden Neurodiversity (Unmasking Autism Series) by Devon Price**
- **Energy Accounting by Maya Toudal**
- **Autistic Girls that Work**
- **[Autism-Masking-10-6-24.pdf](#) by Here to Help**

Further resources: Appendices (see below)

- ***Where is the magic in each of us?***
- ***What makes a Person Unique?***
- ***What values do I value?***
- ***Experiment with expectations:***
- ***Diary of Challenge and Joy***



Where is the magic in each of us?

Think about people you admire in these areas:

Area/Group	Person: Name/relationship	Admirable feature
Family		
Friend		
School		
Community outside school		
Clubs or groups		
Other		

Examples of things that might be easy to admire:

Funny

Calm

Friendly

Caring

Forgiving

Welcoming

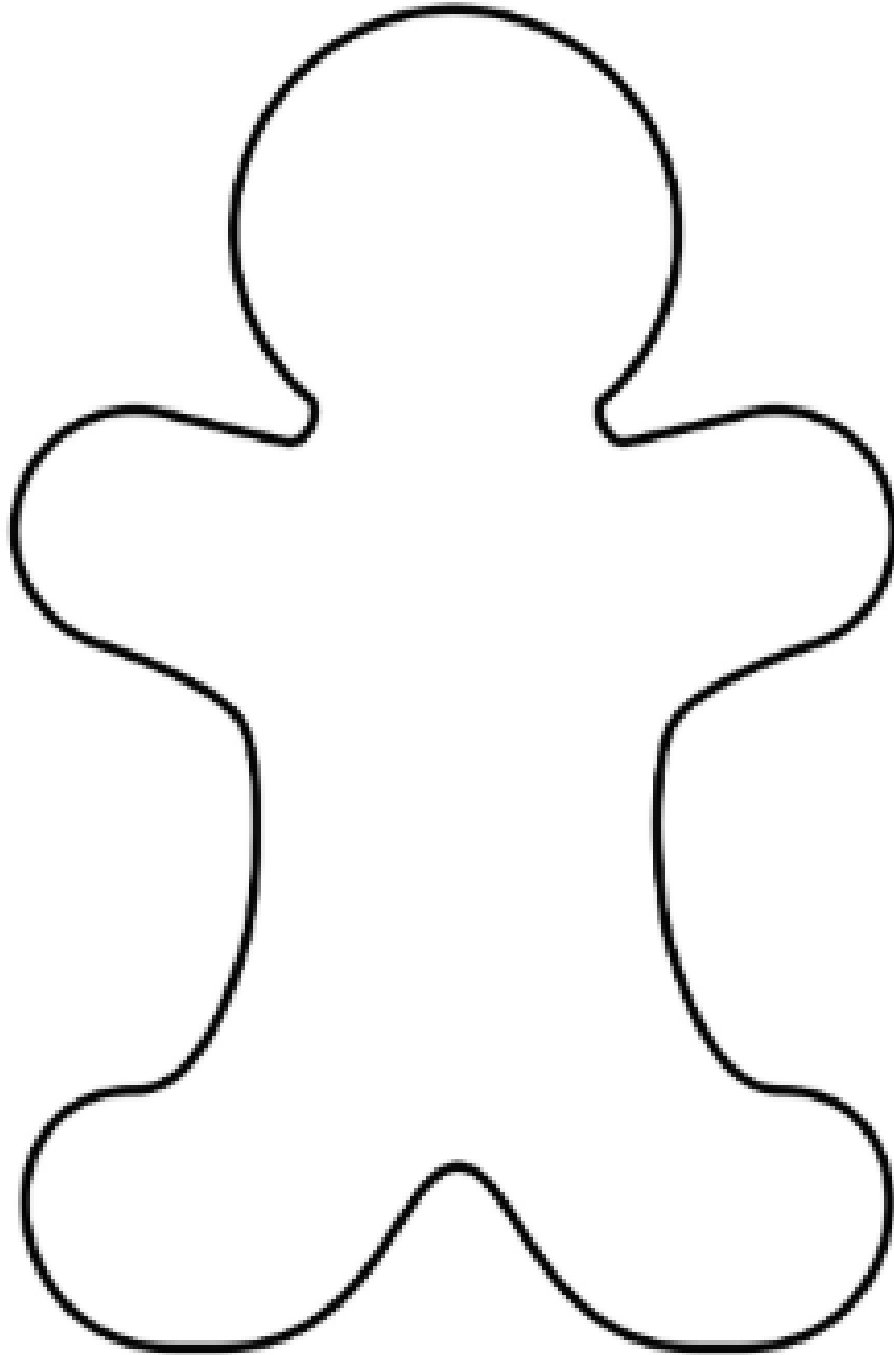
Skilled

Enthusiastic



What makes a Person Unique?

Physical, Emotional, Intellectual etc.







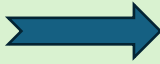


What values do I value?

Value	When I have shown this	When might this arise in future?
e.g.: Forgiveness	I understood when someone said something unkind but I was really upset and didn't tell them	I will first say the effect on me and then say that I understand they made a mistake.



Experiment with expectations:

<p>Situation</p> 	<p>e.g. I need to stim but I stop myself when in public</p>	
<p>What might happen?</p> 	<p>People will see and think I'm crazy or make an unkind comment</p>	
<p>How can it test this?</p> 	<p>Allow a short stim in the classroom</p>	
<p>What actually happened?</p> 	<p>No one notice at first and then no one commented when they did see.</p>	
<p>What have you learned?</p> 		



Diary of Challenge and Joy

Day	Joy	Challenges
Monday	I saw my friends I completed 2 tasks I had a great lunch I made someone smile	I felt tired in the afternoon I am worried about tomorrow