

HOW TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC STUDENTS WHO MASK AT SCHOOL



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When it comes to masking, some autistic students may act one way at school and act very differently at home with caregivers. Masking behaviors might not be easy to identify, because these behaviors are “expected behaviors” by society, like sitting up straight in a chair with eye contact on the teacher. For some, these are behaviors that are forced, painful, and counterproductive to learning. An autistic who is masking might get overlooked in the classroom resulting in expectations that are either too high or too low in areas. If the student’s learning needs aren’t well understood, they will not be well supported. While school personnel may desire to help, it can be difficult to know how to support a student who masks, and resources may be limited if the student’s academics seem unimpacted. When school staff and teachers are familiar with autistic masking, they can approach interactions with curiosity and alternatives that don’t contradict the student’s needs. Collaborative work with the student, school, caregivers, and outside support team of licensed professional can create a clearer picture of the student’s support needs, helping to address challenges and implement accommodations so that the student can thrive. Additionally, universal design for learning can benefit all students, including those who mask and go undiagnosed.

UNDERSTANDING MASKING

- Masking is a learned social survival strategy that can happen consciously or unconsciously.
- Masking takes a lot of energy, and while a student may be able to go through the motions, it can leave them exhausted at the end of the day.
- Signs of masking at school include meltdowns when the student gets home, excessive worrying, hiding or suppressing stims, and using rehearsed scripts that have been researched or prepared ahead of time.
- Bullying encourages masking and must not be tolerated in any environment.
- Unmasking can happen depending on how safe the student is feeling moment to moment, which is why some times they “behave” and then other days they are “acting out”. Remember that “acting out” might actually reflect that the student is feeling safe and understood, which is why they can be more themselves.

UNDERSTANDING THE COSTS

- Masking in the classroom can take an emotional toll, resulting in anxiety, depression, and elevated levels of chronic stress..
- Many experience low self-esteem because they feel they can't live up to expectations.
- Due to burnout, masking may affect student retention and the student’s relationship with learning and job training experiences in the future.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN THE CLASSROOM

- Many strategies that help students who mask also help everyone else!
- It is important to create learning opportunities that consider and don’t contradict a student’s sensory needs.
- Create a space where students feel comfortable checking in with their bodies and doing what works for their brains.
- Make sensory tools freely accessible and allow movement and standing.
- Use a predictable routine and provide notice of any changes to the schedule whenever possible.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

- Don’t rely on the student to always self-advocate for what they need. Check in and offer support!
- Some IEP goals can encourage autistic students to learn masking behaviors. This is why it is great for the IEP team to create neurodiversity affirming goals that are strengths-based.
- Collaborate with caregivers and both school and outside specialists and therapists. Listen to their concerns and suggestions.
- When big behaviors happen, privately reassure the student that they can be their authentic selves with you, and that you’re there to help support them.