



# Understanding Masking in Autism

A Parent Information Guide

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## What Is Masking?

Masking, sometimes called camouflaging, is when an autistic child suppresses or hides their natural behaviours in order to fit in socially. It can be intentional or automatic. Many children are not fully aware they are doing it. Masking often develops as a survival strategy when a child learns that being themselves leads to correction, exclusion, teasing, or subtle disapproval.

## What Masking Can Look Like

- Copying peers' speech, gestures, or facial expressions
- Forcing eye contact despite discomfort
- Suppressing stimming behaviours
- Rehearsing conversations in advance
- Staying very quiet to avoid mistakes
- Appearing calm at school but melting down at home

## Why Children Mask

Children mask because they are perceptive and quickly learn social expectations. Over time, they begin monitoring themselves constantly, checking tone, posture, facial expressions, and responses. This constant self-monitoring is cognitively exhausting.

## Effects of Masking

Long-term masking can contribute to emotional exhaustion, increased anxiety, low self-esteem, identity confusion, burnout, shutdowns or delayed meltdowns, school avoidance, and depression in adolescence. Some high-masking children are overlooked for support because they appear fine on the surface.

## How Parents Can Help

1. Normalise neurodiversity and celebrate differences.
2. Reduce unnecessary performance pressure around eye contact or tone.
3. Protect safe stimming behaviours.
4. Build decompression time after school.
5. Validate social exhaustion.
6. Encourage and celebrate special interests.
7. Watch for signs of burnout.

## A Final Note

Home should be the place where the mask can come off. Children who feel safe to stim, speak freely, admit confusion, and rest without performing are more likely to develop strong self-worth and long-term emotional resilience.