

Masking

What Is Masking?

Masking is when a neurodivergent person hides or suppresses their natural behaviours, communication styles, or needs in order to “fit in” with expectations around them.

It can involve copying peers, imitating social cues, or pushing through distress in order to appear calm, focused, or “fine.”



Masking is not deception. It's usually a protective strategy, a way to avoid judgement, bullying, exclusion, or misunderstanding. Over time, however, it can be exhausting and can lead to burnout or emotional distress.

Learners might mask for many reasons, such as:

- **Wanting to belong or avoid standing out**
- **Feeling unsafe to express distress or ask for help**
- **Worrying about being punished or misunderstood**
- **Copying others as a way of learning social “rules”**

Why Masking Matters

- **Hidden needs:** A learner who appears to be coping may actually be struggling to manage sensory input, anxiety, or executive functioning demands.
- **Delayed support:** When masking hides signs of distress, a learner's needs may go unrecognised until a crisis occurs.
- **Burnout and exhaustion:** Sustained masking can lead to fatigue, meltdowns at home, or emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA).
- **Behavioural misunderstanding:** Educators might interpret shutdowns, absences, or emotional outbursts as “non-compliance” rather than signs of chronic masking and overload.
- **Relationship impact:** Learners may struggle to trust adults or feel truly accepted if they feel they must perform a version of themselves to be valued.

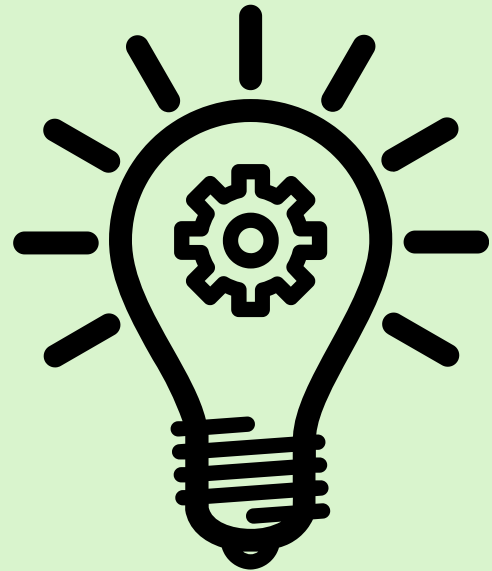
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Practical Strategies for Teaching Staff

Understanding and Planning

Use the **Assess–Plan–Do–Review** cycle to identify possible signs of masking and respond early.

- Observe differences between home and school presentations.
- Engage parents, carers, and the learner themselves in identifying where and when masking occurs.
- Build support plans that acknowledge the need for recovery time after social or academic effort.
- Include learner-preferred regulation tools and strategies in risk assessments and support plans.



Relationships and Environment

- **Create safety through relationships:** Relational practice. Consistent, trusting relationships. This can help learners feel safe to unmask.
- **Predictable environments:** Clear routines reduce the need to “perform” or guess expectations.
- **Safe spaces:** Provide low-demand, calm areas where learners can retreat without stigma.
- **Respect recovery:** After highly social or noisy situations, allow time for solitude or preferred activities.
- **Model acceptance:** Celebrate neurodiversity openly; use positive language about difference rather than deficit.

Communication and Support

- Use **indirect and low-pressure language** to reduce anxiety.
- Avoid constant praise for compliance; instead, acknowledge effort and honesty.
- Offer **choices** to give a sense of control.
- Be mindful of tone and non-verbal cues. Subtle disapproval can increase masking.
- Allow **extra processing time** and don’t assume silence means understanding.
- Validate the learner’s experience (“It looks like that was really tiring for you”) rather than challenging their emotions.

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Teaching and Engagement

- Connect learning to the learner's **interests and strengths**, helping them engage authentically rather than performing for approval.
- Keep demands clear but flexible – offer multiple routes to success.
- Encourage creativity, humour, and curiosity as legitimate forms of expression.
- Build in **movement or sensory breaks** to reduce overload .
- Check in discreetly (“Would you like a quick break?”) instead of drawing public attention.

Supporting Recovery and Reducing Burnout

- Recognise that after a school day, some learners may “collapse” at home due to unmasking fatigue.
- Work with families to plan **gradual transitions**, reducing pressure at the start or end of the school day.
- Incorporate **trauma-informed approaches**, understand that chronic masking can be a stress response.
- Encourage rest, hobbies, and authentic peer connections.

Key Takeaways

- Masking is an adaptive survival strategy, not misbehaviour.
- A learner who seems “fine” may be working very hard to stay that way.
- Building trust, predictability, and flexibility helps learners feel safe to be themselves.
- Reducing the need to mask supports genuine engagement, regulation, and wellbeing.