Masking in autistic students

What is masking?

Masking (also referred to as 'camouflaging') is when a person uses strategies and behaviours to hide autism (or ADHD) characteristics or related challenges. Masking is often used to cope with everyday life, and to 'fit' in with others. Some students may not be aware that they are masking, while others may be aware of the ways they mask. Masking is very common for autistic people, but may be seen more often in girls due to social expectations about how girls typically behave. This often leads to girls receiving a diagnosis at a later age than boys.

What does masking look like?

Masking tends to involve suppressing, hiding, or compensating for autism characteristics or related challenges. For example, students may:

- suppress stimming (e.g., repetitive hand movements).
- force eye contact.
- repeat phrases exactly how someone else has said them.
- mimick or mirror other students' facial expressions or behaviours in social situations.
- try to stop talking about their interests.
- keep quiet in conversations.

Why is it important to understand masking?

Research has shown that masking may lead to:

- exhaustion
- anxiety
- identity uncertainty
- missed opportunities for receiving support.

Best practice tips

Increase school staff's awareness of masking

- Increasing school staff awareness of masking can increase their understanding of autism and how it presents. This leads to a more accepting culture for autistic students, making them feel less like they need to mask their characteristics.

Provide sensory breaks throughout the school day

- Sensory breaks can help students who are masking throughout the school day to feel less overwhelmed.
- This can include time with sensory toys or a movement break to release energy.

Check in with students

- When a student is masking it can be difficult to observe how they are feeling. Regular check-ins provide an

opportunity to become aware of how they are feeling or what they may need.

- Visual resources, such as Emotions cards, can be helpful for check-ins.