

Masking in Autism

This is a strategy that is developed by some children with Autism to help them blend in with their peers. Persistent Autistic masking can result in anxiety, depression, isolation and burnout. Below gives an insight on how difficult their school day is, and how you can easily help them.

Morning

As the child attends school inside he is feeling stressed, unsettled and his one main thought is how to get through this school day.

In comparison this is the same level of anxiety as you would have attending a job interview, imagine being on high anxiety like that, day in day out before you even start work.

Classroom

Keep it simple. Simple language, simple instructions and simple expectations. Here's what we are doing today, this is how we are doing it, I would like you to do this and when you have finished do *this*. Tell him when you expect him to use or not use his iPad. Not knowing causes him great anxiety.

Think of your classroom as another country with a different culture, he doesn't understand it. So he needs your help on how to navigate your classroom and your teaching methods and standards. Spell it out. Clarification of what is needed - equipment, quantity of work etc. Give him the tools to be able to speak out when he is stressed or worried.

Planning

Tell him what's happening. This reduces his anxiety. The more you pre-plan with him, the more he will flourish. Priming before a lesson will get the best out of him.

Him not knowing what's happening before the lesson is a bit like going on a ghost train ride and not knowing what is going to scare you next. If you knew you wouldn't jump as much. Simply communicate to him what's happening next.

Lessons/work

It's best if you can point out to him the learning objective of the lesson. This will help him understand what the lesson is trying to teach. He has problems picking out the relevant information, giving him materials to take away is ideal as he takes longer to process the information given in class.

To him the lesson itself is a bit like having to put together flat pack furniture with no instructions. Providing the 'instructions' either before, in or after lesson will all help. The 'instructions' would be best as bullet points and outcome expectations explained. Processing information is easier if it's clear and concise.

Seating arrangements

Including him in making the decisions about where to sit will help. All classrooms are different so it will change according to the environment.

This is like you walking into a restaurant and there are no spare tables, the only seats left are by strangers. How would you feel having to choose the seat which is going to give the least anxiety.

Emotions

He finds when stressed crying relieves his anxiety. This obviously is not ideal when in senior school, due to his age. We are encouraging him to try and speak about his feeling before getting too upset. This a learning curve as he has to build up trust with the said member of staff. This can be encouraged by using open language/questions.

Imagine balancing a bucket on your head. Then adding the stress (water) from all the above situations and doing your best not to spill any. At the same time you are adding more water constantly. When it gets that the bucket gets full, it spills over. This is when the tears flow. Telling him to pick up the water and carry on isn't going to help, giving him the tools to mop it up will. Open questions will encourage him to show you how you can help. Scenario: you see him upset. Rather than saying "you will be okay", try "I can see you're upset would you like to talk about it?" This will show him you're trying to help.

His aim is to please you always. He hates the thought of being disappointing, a burden or time consuming. He will often portray that he is fine, simply to make you happy. We understand this is difficult but using the strategies above will help him open up and talk.

He is simply trying to be you.

REMEMBER THEY ARE DOING THEIR VERY BEST