# Masking

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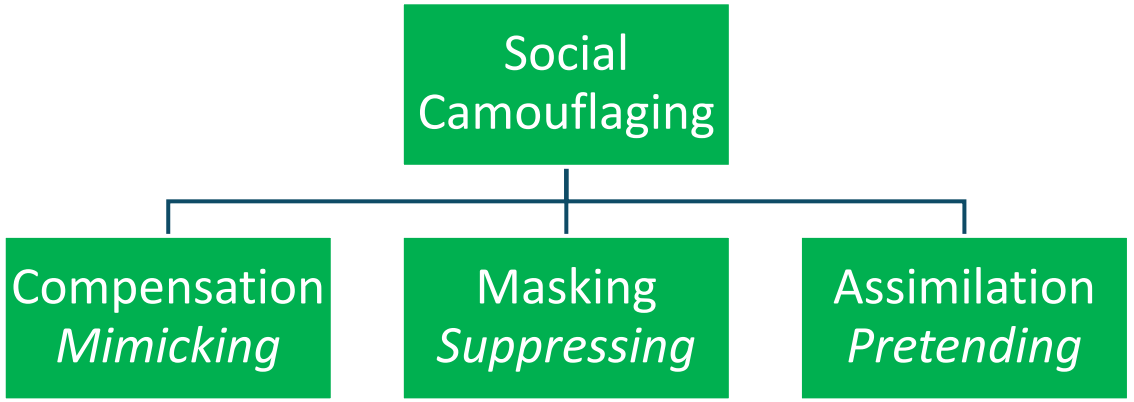
**“To ‘mask’ or to ‘camouflage’ means to hide or disguise parts of oneself in order to better fit in with those around us”** *(National Autistic Society, 2022).*

It can be a conscious or unconscious process.



- Mimicking
- Copying facial expressions, body language, gestures or tone of voice
- Rehearsing conversations / scripts in your head before a social event.
- Adopting a different speaking style to fit the crowd

Suppressing

- Forcing eye contact
- Hiding stimming or hyperactivity
- Pushing through with sensory overwhelm
- Not asking or accepting support
- Monitoring yourself in social interactions and how much time spent talking about topics of interest

Pretending

- Putting on an act or performance
- Forcing self to interact
- Needing others' around to support social interaction
- Avoiding interactions with certain individuals

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# How might we identify if someone is masking?

- Avoidance of certain topics, tasks or behaviours
- Appearing overly rehearsed or scripted
- Difficulty talking about themself (likes, wants and interests)
- Emotions may seem incongruent with their circumstances & experiences
- Decline in wellbeing and attendance
- Inconsistent behaviour across different situations/settings (e.g., home and school)

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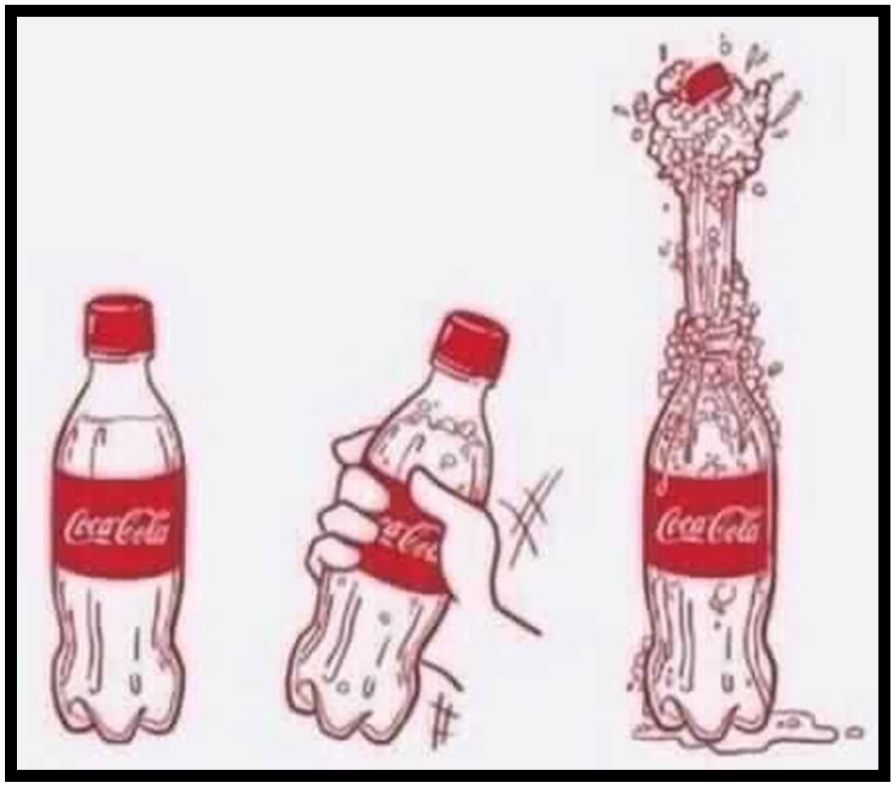

What parents report at home:

- Emotional dysregulation ('meltdowns')
- Exhaustion
- Need for control
- Irritability
- High self-criticism
- Avoidance and social withdrawal
- Heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli

Can be understood as the 'Shaken up Coke Bottle Analogy'

This can be confusing and frustrating for both parents and school staff when behaviours seen at home are not being seen in school.

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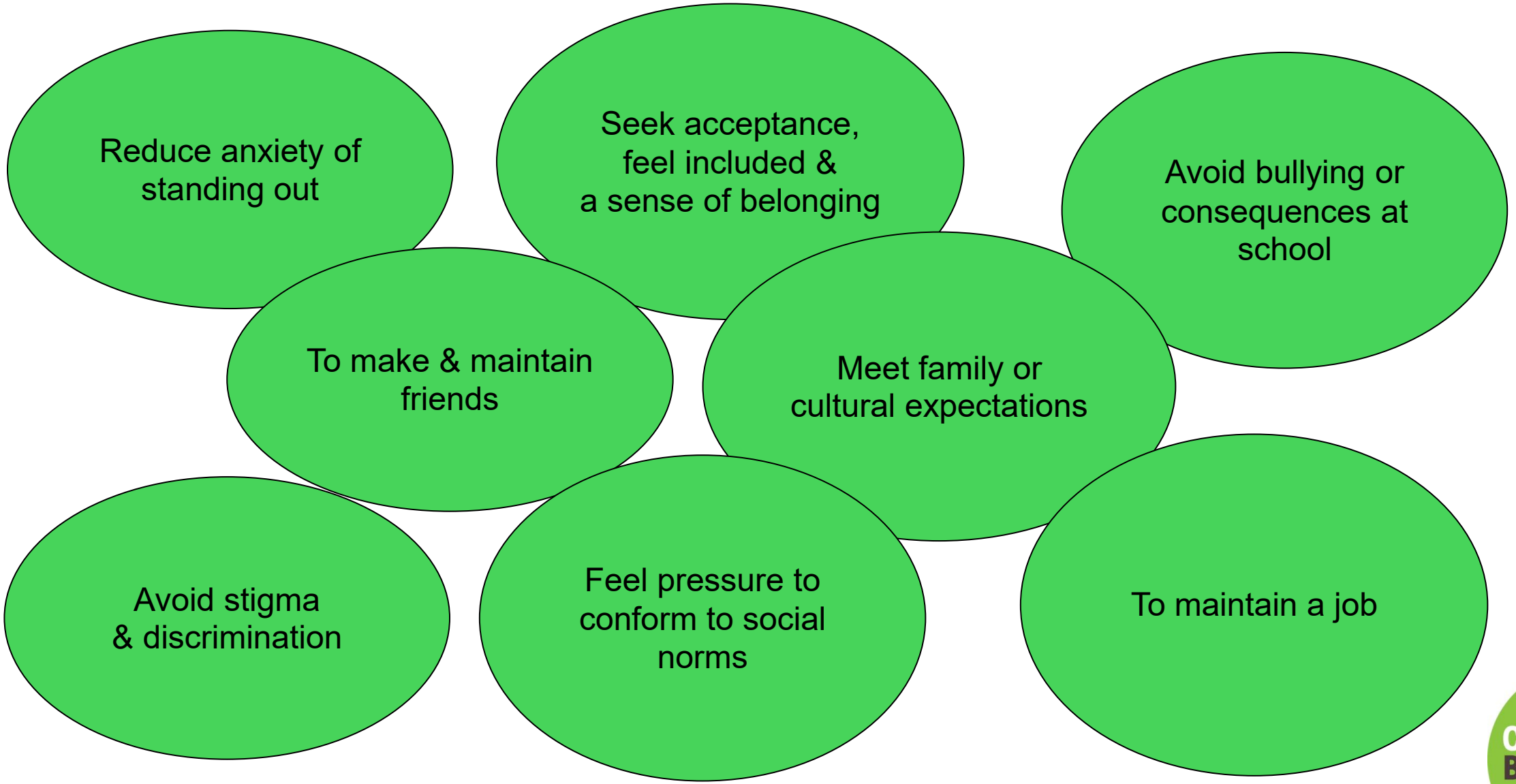
# The function of masking

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# What can you do?

- Allow extra time for any potential moments of distress.
- Reduce demands ( mornings and evenings) -the priority is regulation.
- Downtime after school, special interests for regulation motivating activity when the child/YP arrives home.
- Visual timetables and visual support (eg emotions fan) at home
- Questioning vs reassurance, Use "it's going to be ok" as well as "what do you think might happen?"
- Transitional object between home and school
- Homework - break it down or remove it.
- Home to school communication ( supporting demands and expectations)
- Safe space to share emotions
- Reflections on triggers –future planning, diaries, worry boxes /jars

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# HOW TO SUPPORT THE CHILD WHO MASKS IN SCHOOL

(PARENT EDITION)

### BELIEVE WHAT YOU SEE AT HOME

- Even if teachers report "they're fine here," trust your instincts.
- Emotional release after school shows how hard they've worked to cope.
- Meltdowns, tears, or withdrawal are signs of emotional exhaustion, not misbehaviour.

### REBUILD EMOTIONAL SAFETY AT HOME

- Masking often stems from fear of rejection or failure.
- Reassure your child that they don't need to perform to earn love or approval.
- Validate their experience: "It's really hard keeping it all together all day."
- Your calm, accepting response teaches them it's safe to unmask at home.

### COMMUNICATE GENTLY WITH SCHOOL

- Share what you observe at home without blame or criticism.
- Use language like: "They seem very drained after school and often melt down at home."
- Ask for small adjustments: sensory breaks, a calm space, or a trusted adult to check in with.
- Collaboration helps create safety during the school day, reducing after-school collapse.

### PRIORITISE DECOMPRESSION TIME

- The transition from school to home is huge for masking children.
- Offer downtime before questions or demands.
- Provide food, quiet, movement, or sensory comfort.
- Some children need closeness, others need space — follow their lead.

Supporting a masking child isn't about fixing them — it's about helping them feel safe enough to rest, recharge, and be authentically themselves.

**WHEN A CHILD MASKS, THEY NEED SAFETY – NOT SCRUTINY.**

MASKING, THE TOOLKIT FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS - LINK IN COMMENTS OR VIA OUR LINKTREE SHOP

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# 'AFTER SCHOOL RESTRAINT COLLAPSE'

After-school restraint collapse isn't misbehaviour — it's release.
When we see it as the body's way of finding balance after a long day of holding it together, we can respond with empathy, not punishment.

### SCHOOL DAY:

The child works hard to follow rules, stay focused, and manage big feelings internally. Small stressors build layer by layer.

### SIGNS YOU MIGHT NOTICE:

- Emotional outbursts or meltdowns after school
- Refusing to talk about the day
- Overeating or comfort-seeking
- Irritability or defiance toward parents
- Needing solitude, screens, or sensory soothing
- Tears without clear cause

### JOURNEY HOME:

Signs of fatigue appear — quiet withdrawal, irritability, or zoning out. The nervous system starts to let go of control.

### ARRIVAL HOME:

A small request ("take off your shoes" or "Get your homework done") can trigger tears, shouting, or shutdown. The release isn't about the request — it's the day's emotional backlog.

### RECOVERY:

After the storm, they may crave comfort, food, movement, or silence. Connection — not correction — helps them return to regulation.

Want to understand more about after school restraint collapse?
Explore the full After School Restraint Collapse Toolkit by The Contented Child for visuals, guides, and practical tools that help uncover what's behind the collapse — and support children to feel safe.

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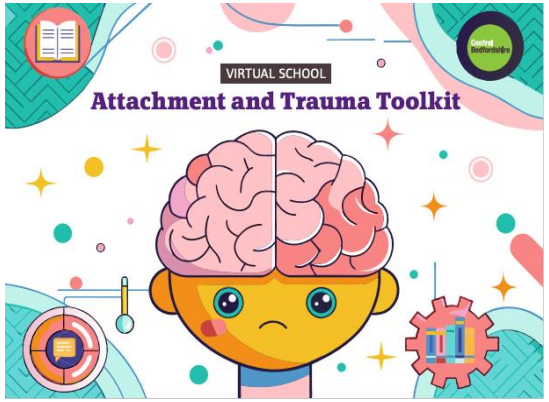
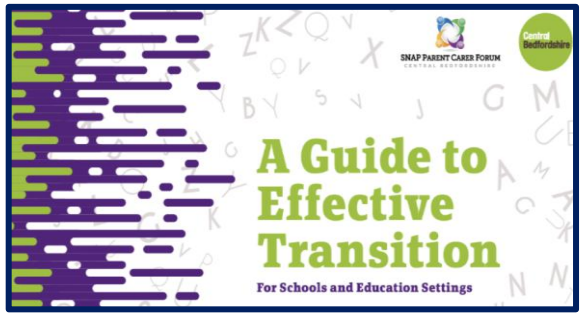
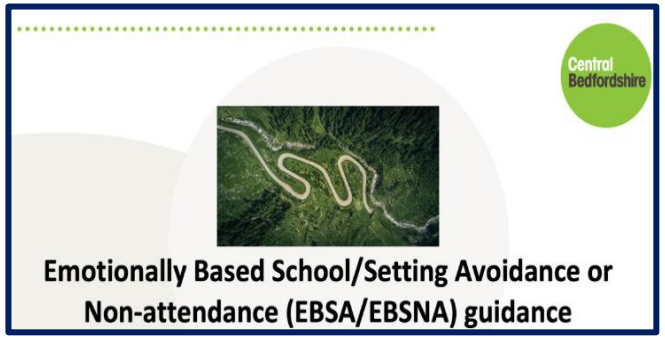
# Useful resources





# What can you do? Useful websites

**Mind BLMK Web**: https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/how-we-can-help/young-people/
https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking

**Girls Flying Under the Radar NASEN**: https://nasen.org.uk/resources/girls-and-autism-flying-under-radar

**NAS Masking and Autism**: https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking

**NHS What is Masking?:** https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/autism-space/health-and-lifestyle/autistic-masking/
https://www.autisticslt.com/masking

SNAP : Supporting your neuro-diverse child
https://www.snappcf.org.uk/supporting-your-neurodiverse-child/

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