

UNDERSTANDING MASKING IN GIRLS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

WHAT IS MASKING?

- Masking is when a someone hides or suppresses natural behaviours to fit in.
This often involves:
- Copying peers' social behaviour
- Hiding anxiety or confusion
- Forcing eye contact or smiling
- It's especially common in girls with autism or social communication needs.

WHY FOCUS ON GIRLS?

- Girls often present differently than boys.
- They may appear quiet, compliant, or socially aware.
- **This can lead to:**
- Delayed or missed diagnoses
- Increased anxiety and exhaustion
- Emotional “meltdowns” after school
- Masking can hide true support needs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can staff recognise masking in girls with SEN?
- What impact does masking have on emotional wellbeing?
- What can schools do to create a safe environment for girls to be themselves?

METHODS TO IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO MAY BE MASKING

- Observations: in classroom, break times, group work
- Student voice: informal, supported discussions (with consent).
- Reflective journal: personal notes and observations.

EXAMPLE OF OBSERVATION SHEET

Masking Observation Checklist: Girls with SEN

Observer name: _____
Date: _____
Class / Setting: _____
Student initials: _____
Time of observation: _____

1. Context of Observation

☐ Classroom lesson ☐ Break / Lunchtime ☐ Group activity
☐ Transition ☐ One-to-one support ☐ Other: _____

Area	Observable Behaviour	Tick	Notes
Social Copying	Mimics peers' speech or actions		
	Watches peers before responding		
Emotional Suppression	Appears calm but later distress reported		
	Avoids showing distress		
Communication	Short or rehearsed answers		
	Overly polite or agreeable		
Anxiety Indicators	Subtle fidgeting		
	Physical stress signs		
Academic Participation	Avoids independent tasks		
	Relies on peers instead of asking for help		
Behaviour Changes	Mood changes in unstructured times		
	Appears exhausted after interaction		

Summary / Next Steps:

IMPACT OF MASKING

- Emotional fatigue and anxiety
- Low self-esteem and identity confusion
- Missed SEN support or EHCP referrals
- Sudden “outbursts” or shutdowns at home
- Difficulty forming authentic friendships

HOW STAFF CAN RECOGNISE MASKING

- Notice inconsistencies (calm at school, meltdowns at home)
- Look for scripted speech or rehearsed social patterns
- Be aware of perfectionism and compliance
- Watch for subtle signs: fidgeting, zoning out, mimicking, exhaustion

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT

- Build trust and safety before expecting openness
- Provide quiet recovery spaces
- Offer predictable routines and gentle flexibility
- Encourage authentic self-expression (art, journaling, ELSA work)
- Regular check-ins to monitor wellbeing
- Model acceptance of differences and making mistakes

CONCLUSION

- Masking in girls is often misunderstood or unseen.
- Recognising it helps ensure early support and emotional wellbeing.
- As staff, we can make a difference by helping girls feel safe to be themselves.

STAFF HANDOUT

Masking in Girls with SEN

Recognising the hidden effort behind the 'quiet, coping' pupil

DO	AVOID
• Build trust before expecting disclosure. • Offer low-pressure check-ins. • Allow breaks and quiet spaces. • Accept different communication styles. • Work with families and colleagues.	• Don't assume 'fine' means coping. • Don't force eye contact. • Don't reward only compliance. • Don't dismiss after-school distress. • Avoid comparing pupils.

What is masking?

Masking is when a pupil hides or suppresses their natural behaviours to fit in socially, avoid standing out or meet expectations. Many girls become highly skilled at masking, meaning their needs can go unnoticed.

What you might see	What might be happening
Quiet, compliant, perfectionistic	High anxiety and constant self-monitoring
Copies peers	Using observation to navigate social situations
Smiles and says 'I'm fine'	Hiding overwhelm or confusion
Good behaviour	Expending huge amounts of energy to cope
Tired after school	Emotional exhaustion and recovery

Top signs to look for

- ✓ Different presentation at school and home
- ✓ Perfectionism and fear of mistakes
- ✓ Scripted conversations or mimicking peers
- ✓ Withdrawal after social interaction
- ✓ Anxiety hidden behind good behaviour

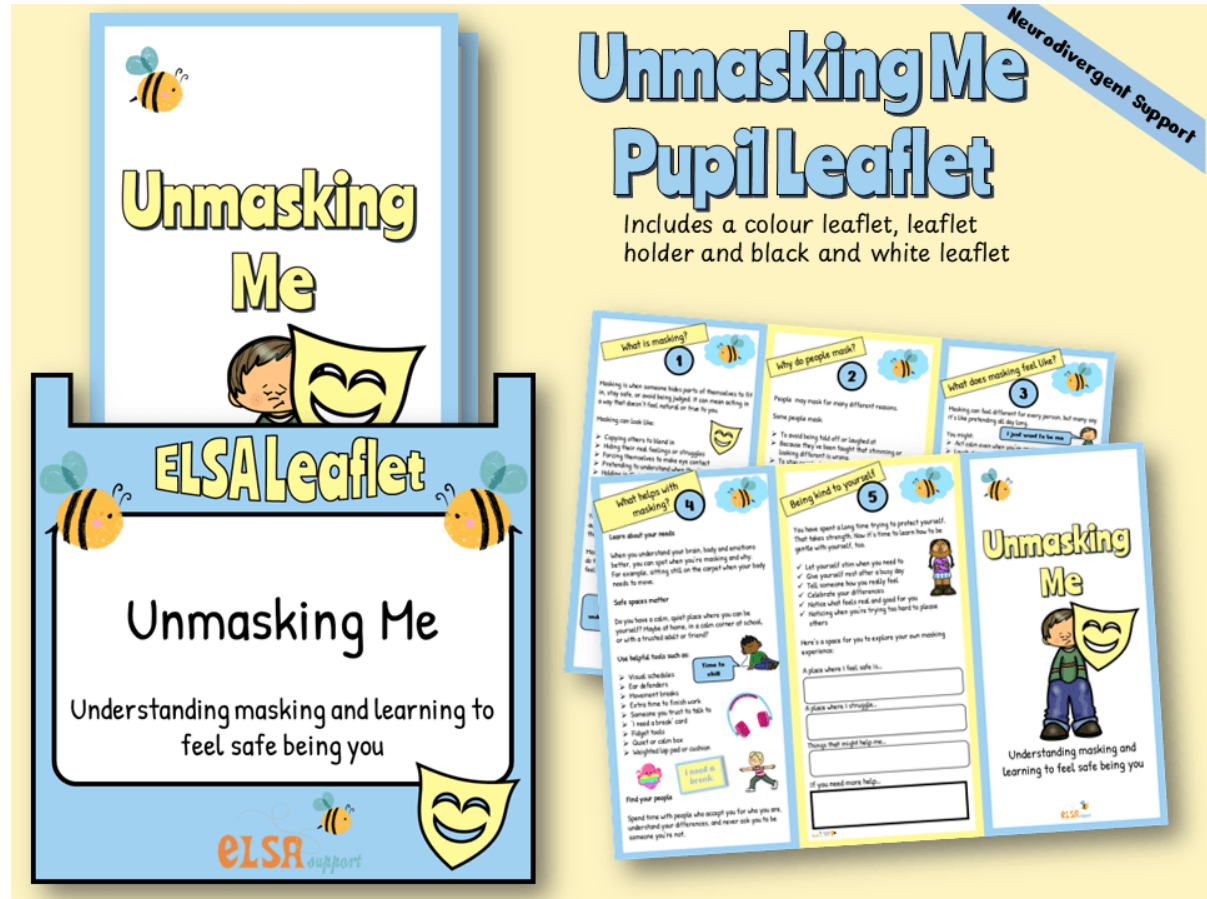
Reflective questions for staff

- Am I mistaking compliance for wellbeing?
- Have I spoken with parents about differences between home and school?
- Does this pupil have opportunities to be themselves without pressure?
- Have I noticed signs of exhaustion after social demands?

Key message: A pupil who looks as though they are coping may be working the hardest of all. Looking beyond behaviour helps us recognise needs earlier and provide support before anxiety escalates.

USEFUL WEBSITES

- <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/>



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- <https://slam.nhs.uk/estiacentre-blog/autistic-masking-in-women-and-girls-4941>
- <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking>
- <https://epicthinklearn.com/when-do-neurodivergent-girls-begin-to-mask-and-is-it-linked-to-mental-health-difficulties/>
- <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/mental-health-conditions/anxiety/>