

WHEN
looking FINE
ISN'T THE SAME
AS
being FINE

A booklet for teachers and support
assistants working with young people
with an ASC who mask

Autism Consultancy
INTERNATIONAL

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN WHO *mask*?

If there is one group of children with Autism who are dismissed more than any other by professionals, it has to be those that mask... those who will come to school every day and look as though they are 'fine' yet who explode the second they walk through the door of home.

They are the children whose parents are often doubted. People will question their parenting, and ask what they are doing wrong. They are the child who never breaks a rule in class, yet who goes home and can destroy a room in seconds. They are the child who never outwardly looks stressed, but who inwardly are so anxious that there are days they can struggle to leave the house. They are the child who feels ill, the child who cries themselves to sleep at night....

They are the child - who even though they don't show it - needs your help more than you will ever know.

SO WHY DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE *mask*?

Just like everyone else children and young people with autism react to stress and anxiety in different ways. Some react instantly and with those children it's easy to see what the triggers are. This means it's much much easier for those around them to both understand and solve the problem.

Others however are able to keep a neutral face whilst being in inward turmoil. Those are the children, whose stress levels gradually build throughout the day, yet have no release. The ones who get to a point where they explode over what looks like nothing. The ones who often look 'fine' all day at school, yet get home and their world falls apart.

Because once they feel safe there is no more need to mask. There is no more need to look as though they are coping. The anxiety which has accumulated must be let out, and bewildered parents are often left wondering what on earth happened to cause the Meltdown they are seeing before their eyes.

SO WHY DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE *mask?*

Just because the meltdowns occur at home, does not mean that it's a home problem. All too often schools look at a student who is seemingly coping well during the day and assume that the issues are with parenting or home. The reality is the truth is quite often the opposite. Young people with autism who mask are often followers of rules, they know the strict code of conduct expected in school and do not want to get into trouble. They will follow the rules at any cost to themselves, until they arrive home. Only once they are somewhere they feel totally safe will they allow their true feelings out.

Masking is not discriminatory. Boys can mask. Girls can mask. Children with Asperger's Syndrome can mask. Young people with PDA can mask. Students with High Functioning Autism can mask.

The crucial fact to remember is.... if a parent reports a very different picture to the one you see at school... it is every bit as likely to be a school issue as a home one. Just because you don't see the behaviours in school, it doesn't mean the root of them isn't in school.

SO HOW CAN YOU *help* ?

Remember parents are the experts in their children

Firstly and most importantly, build a relationship with the child's parents. They are the ones who are the true experts on their child. They will be able to give you the history, and the strategies they find useful. Do not dismiss them or their worries. Until you are able to develop a relationship where their child can talk openly to you, they are their child's voice. The best way to help children and young people who mask is through a truly co-ordinated approach.

Find the triggers

Every aspect of the child or young person's day should be looked at for potential triggers. Talking to them when they are calm and feel safe can often be the best time to identify these. Some children find it easier to make a list whilst others find it easier to discuss things with a trusted adult. The key is to reassure them that you genuinely want to know which things they find hard and want to help them.

They need to understand that they will not be in trouble.

Some children will need to be able to talk about these with their parent, who will then be able to relay them to you. This is because if you are doing things that make it hard for them to cope, they will not want to tell you directly because you are an authority figure.

Remember saying things are 'fine' is not the same as them being fine.

SO HOW CAN YOU *help* ?

Consider the environment

Sensory issues often play a huge part in anxiety levels, and for some these can be difficult to identify. Some young people will be able to tell you that they find it hard to concentrate whilst the lights or bright or that the breeze coming through the classroom door is distracting. Others may only be able to tell you that their head or eyes hurt by the end of the day. Sometimes finding the contributing factors is a little like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You have to try lots of pieces until you find the ones that fit.

Work on ways of enabling the young person to recognise their own emotions building

Teaching students strategies like how to ask for time out when needed, how to scale their emotions or how to colour and recognise their feelings can all be helpful. Doing these activities as a class, rather than signalling the student out can be particularly helpful as they can help children to realise that we all feel anxious at times and need to develop ways of coping. Normalising their feelings will help them to feel less worried about opening up when there is a problem and help them, to see that they don't need to mask their true feelings.

SO HOW CAN YOU *help* ?

Provide a place where the child or young person feels safe to be themselves during the day.

For some children and young people the act of being surrounded by people all day can be a big cause of the build up of their anxiety. Giving them time throughout the day to be by themselves or with a smaller number of people can make a huge difference.

This could be accomplished by the use of a dark den or tent, a quiet room, or by giving the option to stay inside at lunch or break times to build Lego or play on a computer. We often feel that we should encourage children with autism to engage with others during social times. But we forget that we are already asking them to do a lot of this during lesson time. Following the lead of the child is important, sometimes time to themselves can make a world of difference.

Building trust is essential

If you are expecting a child or young person to open up to you about their anxieties and feelings, you need to ensure that you react in the right way consistently. Take time to talk to them and build a relationship. Discovering their interests and spending a couple of minutes each day talking about those can really help to break down barriers. Do not diminish their worries, take them seriously and ask how you could make it easier for them to handle it. This doesn't necessarily mean giving them permission not to do the task, but it does mean working with them to find ways to make that task less stressful.

SO HOW CAN YOU *help* ?

So if a child or young person tells you that writing is a major cause of their anxiety for example, you can look at ways to make that easier. For some an alternative way of recording, such as dictating into an iPad or typing on a computer may work well, for others breaking down the task into more manageable chunks using a writing frame or writing prompt cards may help. Whereas for others it may be that using ear defenders or listening to music when they do extended written work helps them to focus rather than being distracted by the classroom. The key is to ensure that the child or young person knows you want to help. You don't need to have all of the answers, but you do need to show them that you will keep trying until you develop a solution that works.

Feedback between settings

Develop a quick and easy way to feedback between home and school so that both parents and you are always in the loop about anything that's happened. This may work best through a home school diary, through quick emails back and forth with key information about the day or previous evening, or via a quick phone call. Deciding on the method should not only be about what is most convenient, but about what is most effective. A home school diary may be the easiest method, but a downside can be that the child has often been at school or home for several minutes before the diary is read. A phone call can mean the child is greeted differently and offered a different task on arrival at home or school depending on the day that has been had.

SO HOW CAN YOU *help* ?

Remember

Looking 'fine' is not the same as feeling fine. Saying you are 'fine' is not the same as being fine.

Children who mask, need you to see what they *can't* show you.

They are relying on you to make a difficult world a little bit easier.

SO WHAT *next* ?

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Talking Autism: Teaching The Unique Child