



Masking in School Report

PFBA and AWARE

October 2021

Both Parents Forum for Bradford and Airedale (PFBA) and Airedale and Wharfedale Autism Resource (AWARE) have identified increasing numbers of parents having issues with their children masking in school, not receiving the required support and also children unable to attend school for varying reasons (reason not always known). There seems to be a large disparity in how schools manage these issues and parents have been told that their poor parenting is the reason that children seem to behave in school but not at home. This report will look at parent feedback from mainstream school settings, both primary and secondary, from the beginning of the school year, September 2021 to the end of October 2021. A very short period of time. It is worth noting that there was a lot of parent dread and anxiety in August in the lead up to the schools returning after the summer holidays.

What is masking?

By definition, autistic masking is a survival strategy for autistic people. It is used to hide autistic traits and to mimic the neurotypical. For many autistic individuals, masking is a way to avoid bringing attention to their neurodiverse behaviours and can help them feel like they can fit in better around people who have a limited understanding of autism.

Hiding these traits are often extremely exhausting and can exacerbate mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and harmful behaviours.

Masking can also lead to an increase in meltdowns. When an autistic individual finally feels safe or comfortable enough to 'de-mask' (for example: being at home or around other individuals with autism), the stresses of the day will build up and the tiniest sensory issue or other problem can lead to a meltdown. This is because the autistic person has been consistently dealing with situations that they find difficult and forcing themselves to be in

environments that create anxiety but haven't been able to regulate their emotions in an effective enough manner, leading to a meltdown.

NB: It is worth noting that both PFBA and Aware have extensive and long term lived experience and experience of supporting families with neurodiverse children and young people.

How many parents have reported that their child is masking in school and were not being supported?

We had 20 documented cases of masking without support from school from school return at the beginning of September up until this report was being written on 22nd October 2021. A 6 week period. This does not include conversations with parents that were ad hoc or they didn't want it documenting. This number would be significantly higher.

Running Themes

- The main reported issue is that school say that the child is fine once they are there and then the parent is not listened to in terms of the behaviour they are then having to manage at home as a result of the masking (see parent comments)
- The second most reported issue is that schools do not understand what masking is and children do not get the required support because of this
- The lack of support can then result in a child feeling that they are unable to attend school
- Schools and services do not understand the lasting mental health implications of forcing a child into school nor the strain that this puts on the parent
- Schools do not understand that threatening to fine the parents of a child will not suddenly make them able to attend school

Parent Comments

- My son masked in primary. It was horrendous trying to get him in to school. They wanted him there at all costs and weren't interested in the damage it was doing to his mental health. As they put it, he was fine once he was in there. It took him trying to take his own life for the powers that be to finally listen to him and to me.

- My daughter is the model student at school which means she is masking all day at school. As soon as the car door closes when I collect her she breaks down, one time this resulted in the windscreen being smashed! School refused to help and reported to CAMHS that they don't seem an issue at which point they closed her case
- My child masks in school and school are useless. I haven't experienced any parent blaming, however school seem to think that masking is a good thing because they do not understand what masking even is as far as I can tell. No matter how many times I try to explain it isn't a good thing or explain exactly what masking is I get "smiled and nodded" at and then basically ignored. It's infuriating. I realise it's because they don't understand, but they never seem to want to try.
- Yes our daughter mask heavily at school, wants to be the perfect student, appear no different to anyone else, puts so much pressure on herself it is exhausting!
 She mask within friendship groups also to try and fit in.
 We definitely have the "Coke can effect" at the end of day when she is at home and can act normally!
 Primary school didn't listen as they didn't see it, school nurse exactly the same, early help exactly the same! Eventually in year 6 they agreed to refer to Camhs but we had been round the houses for 3-4 year prior so ended up having to pay privately!
 Teachers need to be more trained in hidden disabilities, just because she isn't throwing chairs, has no friends or lining up cars in the corner of the classroom etc doesn't mean nothing is going on!
- My son was so well behaved in class that I was told at parents evening that they wish every child was like him. Their job would be so much easier. Yet when I pick my son up from school from the second he gets into the car he melts down and this can last between a couple of hours to the rest of the night resulting in a smashed up bedroom, holes punched in the door and screaming and shouting. When I approached school teachers and then the school nurse about what I was experiencing at home, I was made to feel as though I was lying and suggested I went on a parenting course and no onward support. I have never felt as belittled in my life

Suggestions for Improvement

After discussion between myself and my colleague from AWARE and discussions we have had with parents, we have thought about what could help our families that find themselves in this situation and here are some of our thoughts:

- As we have found a disparity within and across schools in the definition of masking.
 - Training for ALL teachers on the issue of masking so that everyone understands what it is, knows what to look out for and the best course of action if masking is happening
- As highlighted in this report there can be a negative impact on children's mental health if school staff do not manage the situation well.

Therefore,

- Training for all teachers and school support staff on the damage to mental health that forcing a child into school can cause and schools to take a more compassionate, trauma informed, less punitive approach to managing non-attendance
- We have become aware that not all Senco's have enough dedicated time for SEND children.
 - More SENCO time spent on SEND issues rather than half a role and half time spent teaching
- As highlighted in this report, there is a lack of communication between school, services and parent/carers that has led to parents feeling they are not listened to and some parents being blamed for out of school behaviours or discharged from services due to school only observations.

Therefore,

- Provision of a neurodiverse network for Senco's and schools to enable improved communication and co-production.
- Alongside different definitions there was differing actions in response. This created an inequality of provision and support across the district. We feel there is a need to provide:-
 - Minimum guidelines so that all schools have the same approach to managing children who are too anxious to attend school.