DIVERSE MINDS
LEARNING & LEISURE CIC

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & CARERS

Understanding masking

When appearing to cope
takes more effort than others see

You may see a child who holds everything together outside the house, then comes home exhausted or distressed. This guide takes those experiences seriously and helps you ask for support that reflects the whole day.

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UNDERSTANDING

What does masking mean?

Masking means hiding or changing how you act so that difficulties or differences are less noticeable. It may be deliberate, or become something a person does without much thought. [3]

There can be a reason for hiding

A young person may hide difficulties to avoid criticism or exclusion. Ask about their experience rather than assuming you know why they behave a particular way. [3]

Masking and helpful strategies are not identical

A checklist can help someone remember what to do. Pretending to understand an instruction can hide that they need help. The important questions are whether a strategy helps, how much effort it takes and whether the young person has a choice. [1]

ADHD, autism and other experiences

ADHD-specific research is developing. Findings about autism should not automatically be applied to everyone with ADHD. Boys and young people of any gender can hide difficulties too. [1,2,3]

You cannot tell from appearances alone

Quiet behaviour, good marks or a sociable manner do not show the whole picture. What your child tells you, and what you notice at home, deserve to be heard too.

EVERYDAY EXAMPLES

Look beyond the surface

These are examples to explore together, not a checklist. The same behaviour can have different explanations.

WHAT AN ADULT MIGHT NOTICE	WHAT MIGHT BE HAPPENING
Staying very still The child stays seated throughout the lesson.	They may be holding back a need to move because they worry about being told off.
Following the group They begin when classmates begin and seem to know what to do.	They may be copying others because they missed or could not process an instruction.
A different child at home School describes a child who is quiet and managing well.	At home, you see tears, anger or exhaustion. Some parents report this sharp contrast and feel their concerns are missed. [7]

The home-school contrast is reported in parent research. The other illustrations explore descriptions of hiding difficulties. None is a diagnostic test. [1,3,7]

A gentle starting point: ask what made the situation easy or difficult, and whether there was help they wanted but could not ask for.

FAMILY EXPERIENCES

When others see a different child

You may recognise this

You collect a child who has apparently had a good day, then spend the evening helping them through distress. Being told there are no concerns can leave you wondering whether anyone understands what family life actually feels like.

Parents have described this in research

In UK focus groups, parents and professionals described girls who appeared quiet at school but were much more distressed or talkative at home. Some parents felt that repeatedly raising concerns had not led to help. The researchers explored masking as one possible explanation. [7]

Trust your gut enough to keep asking

You do not need to know the explanation to recognise that your child is struggling. Your observations matter alongside your child's voice and what other people see. A difference between accounts is a reason to look more closely.

You deserve support as well

Action for Children reports parents feeling disbelieved when difficulties were less visible at school. Being tired, upset or unsure how to explain things does not make your concerns less important. You should not have to manage this alone. [8]

These are reported experiences, not proof that every home-school difference is masking. Sleep, pain, bullying and other pressures also deserve attention. [6,7]

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Make help easier to use

1 Ask privately and allow time

Offer talking, writing, drawing or a quiet check-in with a trusted adult. The young person should have a say in who knows personal information. [3,4]

2 Change the difficult situation

Consider written instructions, movement breaks or a quieter place to work. Agree a discreet way to ask for help and check whether the adjustment is useful. [4]

3 Keep what helps your child

Do not remove reminders, routines or coping strategies simply because they make difficulties less visible. Work together to reduce effort and discomfort, without pressuring the young person to stop masking abruptly.

4 Ask school about the whole day

Describe the evening as well as the lesson. Ask what could reduce the effort of getting through the day. In Scotland, additional support for learning does not require a diagnosis. [5]

When to ask for more support

Persistent exhaustion, anxiety, withdrawal or difficulty attending school deserves attention. Speak to a GP, school or an existing care team. You do not need to establish masking as the cause before seeking help. [6]

GETTING HEARD

When doors keep closing

A refusal does not make the difficulty disappear

If a referral is declined or you are told there is no concern, ask what led to that decision and what happens next. Trusting your gut means taking concerns seriously while staying open to what might explain them.

Make the next request specific

Keep a few dated examples and your child's own account, where they want to contribute. Include the help already needed and what happens afterwards. Ask for the decision, suggested support and review arrangements in writing. [4,5]

You can ask again, with support

Return to the GP or school if difficulties continue or change. Enquire can explain options when Scottish school concerns remain unresolved. A trusted person can help with notes or attend a meeting. Having to pause does not mean you have given up on your child. [5]

Words you can adapt

I understand that you are seeing a different picture. At home, we are seeing [example], and it is affecting [sleep, wellbeing or family life]. I would like us to consider both accounts. Please explain what support can be offered now and what the next step is if these difficulties continue.

You deserve help with the asking, too. A closed door is not a judgement on your parenting, and securing support should not depend on having endless energy.

COMPLETE TOGETHER

What would make things easier?

This page belongs to the young person. Write, draw or use another way to answer. Leave anything blank and choose what to share.

Name or initials: _____ Date: _____

Where I feel comfortable

Who am I with? What makes it easier to be myself?

Where I work hard to fit in

Is there anything I hide, hold back or find difficult to ask for?

What I want adults to understand

What might they miss when I look as though I am managing?

One change I would like

What could an adult do differently, and who could help?

Our next step

Person helping: _____ Change agreed: _____

We will check how it feels on: _____

I want to share this with: _____

This is an original conversation worksheet, not a masking test. Adults should check permission before passing it on, and explain if information must be shared to keep someone safe.

FURTHER READING

Sources and support

Numbers in the guide refer to these sources. Information and links checked 29 October 2026.

1. Williams and colleagues, 2025

12 adults recalling childhood ADHD; not a prevalence estimate.

ADHD and lived experience

2. McKinney and colleagues, 2024

119 girls aged 11-14; mixed diagnoses. Links do not establish cause.

Camouflaging research

3. NHS Healthier Together

Practical information on masking and support.

Understanding masking

4. NICE guideline NG87

Individual adjustments and information for families.

ADHD recommendations

5. Enquire

Scottish advice on support for learning and resolving disagreements.

enquire.org.uk

6. NHS: ADHD in children and young people

Understanding difficulties and seeking an assessment.

NHS ADHD information

7. Williams and colleagues, 2026

16 parents/carers and 19 professionals; reports home-school differences.

Read the parent/carer research

8. Action for Children: Parent Talk, 2025

Parent accounts (p.15); service report, not ADHD-only research.

Read the family experiences report