

The Impact of Masking on the Identification of Autistic Students in Educational Settings

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Purpose

The purpose of this project was to examine how masking behaviors, also known as social camouflaging affect the identification of autistic students for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The goal is to raise awareness among educators and school-based teams about how masking can interfere with evaluations, potentially delaying or preventing access to essential supports. Through a qualitative literature review, this project informed the development of a practical resource guide designed to help educators and school-based evaluation teams recognize masking behaviors and make informed and supportive eligibility decisions.

Background

In U.S. educational settings, approximately 1 in 36 children are identified with autism (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). However, many autistic students remain unidentified, particularly those who engage in masking. Masking involves consciously or unconsciously hiding autism-related traits to meet neurotypical expectations (Hull et al., 2019). As a result, students may appear socially and academically competent while internally experiencing significant challenges.

To qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), there must be evidence that a disability adversely affects educational performance. When students engage in masking, their struggles are often not readily apparent (Cook et al., 2021). This can lead to under-identification, leaving students without critical supports and services.

Importantly, masking can also take a significant toll on the mental health and well-being of students who use these strategies (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Suppressing natural behaviors may result in exhaustion, meltdowns, autistic burnout, and an increased risk of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidality. Masking is also linked to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, identity loss, and increased vulnerability to abuse (National Autistic Society, 2025).

Masking behaviors are further shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and culture. Considering these intersectional factors is crucial to ensure that autism identification practices are accurate, equitable, and sensitive to the diverse ways masking presents in students’ lives. Without this lens, many autistic students may continue to go unsupported, further contributing to under-identification and limiting access to services under IDEA.

Developing a deeper understanding of autism and masking is essential for timely, equitable identification and support. This ensures that autistic students receive the services and accommodations they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally throughout their educational experiences.

Practical Strategies for Identifying Autistic Students Who Mask A Resource Guide for School Teams

Purpose

- Help school professionals better identify autistic students who mask a strategy that can obscure eligibility for special education services under IDEA.
- Emphasize equity in assessment, observation, and support, especially across gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

What Is Masking?

- Masking refers to conscious or unconscious strategies autistic individuals use to hide or minimize traits in social and academic settings.

Common Masking Behaviors:

- Rehearsing or scripting conversations
- Mimicking peers
- Forcing eye contact
- Suppressing stimming
- Hiding confusion, distress, or sensory overload

Why It Matters

Masking can result in:

- Missed or delayed identification
- Inaccurate IDEA eligibility decisions
- Barriers to services and supports
- Emotional distress, burnout, or mental health concerns

Assessment Strategies

1. Use Masking-Sensitive Tools

- Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q)
- Girls Questionnaire for Autism Spectrum Condition (GQ-ASC)
- Autistic Women’s Experience (AWE) Questionnaire

Conduct clinical interviews focused on internal experiences.

2. Collect Multisource Data

- Interview parents, caregivers, and students
- Observe in multiple settings (home, school, community)
- Review early developmental history

3. Train Your Team

- Provide **professional development** on masking
- Address **gender differences, cultural factors, and bias**
- Acknowledge limits of tools that focus only on **overt behaviors**

Consider Intersectionality

Gender

- Girls and gender-diverse students may use more complex masking strategies.
- Avoid reliance on male-centered autism profiles.

Race & Ethnicity

- Cultural norms influence how masking appears.
- Use culturally responsive evaluations and reflect on implicit bias.

Psychological Impact

- Anxiety, Depression, Self Harm and Suicidality.
- Identity struggles, exhaustion, meltdowns and autistic burnout.
- These challenges may be **invisible in school settings** but still impact learning.

Classroom & School Recommendations

- Foster inclusive environments where students can express themselves authentically.
- Implement social-emotional learning (SEL) that honors neurodiversity.
- Collaborate with families to understand the student’s full experience.
- Use flexible timelines and gather information over time from multiple sources.

IDEA Eligibility Criteria	How Masking May Obscure Criterion
Communication Impairments	Rehearsed or scripted language may appear typical
Social Interaction Difficulties	Surface-level friendships, mimicked social behavior may mask struggles
Repetitive Behaviors	Suppressed stimming or disguised restricted interests
Resistance to Change	Compliance at school, distress hidden and shown only in home environments
Sensory Responses	Avoidance of triggers reduces observable reactions
Educational impact	Academic overcompensation and avoidance of help-seeking mask challenges
Early Childhood Impact	Subtle or normalized early signs may be undocumented

Method

Research Question:

“What impact does masking have on Special Education eligibility for autistic students and access to special education services?”

Databases:

DELCAT, PsycINFO, ERIC, Education Source, Google Scholar, APA PsycNet.

Keywords:

Autism, ASD, IEP, diagnosis, masking, social, camouflaging, special education, youth, students

Inclusion:

- Last 10 years
- Peer-reviewed/high-quality
- Focused on masking in educational settings

Key Findings/Conclusions

Key Findings

- Masking behaviors can make autistic students appear socially and academically competent, hiding their internal challenges.
- This can lead to missed or delayed autism identification under IDEA, which requires observable educational impact.
- Masking disrupts accurate assessment, especially when evaluations rely on observable behaviors

Intersectionality: Gender, Race & Ethnicity

- Autistic Females and gender-diverse students often use advanced masking strategies, making them less likely to be identified.
- Students from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds face additional barriers, as cultural norms and educator biases can lead to misinterpretation of behaviors or delayed diagnosis.

Mental Health Implications

- Masking is linked to anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and identity struggles.
- Though it may promote short-term social success, masking can lead to long-term emotional harm

Limitations

- Limited research connects masking directly to IDEA eligibility decisions.
- Most studies focus on adults, limiting relevance to K–12 settings.

Implications

- Early Identification is Critical: Delays and masking increase mental health risks.
- Masking Obscures Autism Signs: Especially in girls and gender-diverse students.
- Shift the Lens: Move beyond male-centered diagnostic models.
- Create Inclusive Schools: Reduce stigma and support authentic self-expression.

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