

Finding Balance - Navigating the Tension Between Skill Building and Masking

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What is masking?

Masking is hiding, camouflaging and suppressing your thoughts, feelings, interests, needs, personality or behaviours in order to be accepted or avoid being bullied. It is often not a conscious decision. Many autistic youth and adults are now sharing their experiences living behind a 'mask' and caution autistic people and their caregivers to consider the impact it can have on mental health and wellbeing.

Is teaching someone skills teaching them to mask?

The goal of teaching social and life skills should not simply be to teach autistic people to act neurotypical or reduce disruption to others. It is important to consider how learning a skill or achieving a goal will benefit your learner. Will the skill allow them to get their needs met, experience meaningful social connections, have more autonomy and independence, alleviate pain or discomfort associated with medical conditions, pursue a meaningful career or keep them safe from physical harm? When skills are aligned with your learner's values and wellbeing, they are wonderful tools.

Is it okay for someone to struggle as they build skills? How do I know when and how hard to push them?

Learning new skills can be difficult and uncomfortable for everyone. It is also equally rewarding. Supporting a person in learning new skills, whether it be joining a conversation, transitioning off of a screen, facing fears, crossing the street safely, using a communication device, eating a variety of foods, wearing a winter coat or taking turns in play, may come with some discomfort and other negative emotions. Stress is often a part of learning and growing and not all stress is harmful.

The key to finding balance is honest reflection about who the goals are benefiting. A good question to ask yourself and the person, if they are able, is what skills will allow them to participate and engage more fully in what matters to them and to experience autonomy, wellbeing, health and safety. For example, if a person loves hockey but finds wearing skates and the buzzer uncomfortable or overwhelming, teaching them to wear skates and tolerate the sound of a buzzer is a worthy goal.

This can be coupled with accommodations such as ear plugs and scheduled breaks. Balancing expectations and skill building with accommodations, rest, solitude, stimming, compromise, and leisure, can help with finding this balance and mitigate the side effects of masking. Even with the best of intentions, sometimes we push too hard or do not push hard enough. Observing, reflecting, listening and learning from the individual as you go is an ongoing process.



Speaking from experience - Jane Vincent, Co-Presenter, Lived Experience.

It is important to keep in mind that, “an autistic child may have different values and goals than you might envision for them. For example, some parents may think that having lots of friends and doing many activities will be good for them, and push them to do so, but speaking from experience, I prefer friends who I can go months without seeing, and they understand the limited contact, and many of my activities are done on my own at home. While it may look lonely to someone who does crave social interaction and outings, it is just as fulfilling and important for me to do solitary activities, engage frequently in my interests and spend lots of time in a safe space like home. This can all help prevent burnout.”

To learn more about this topic, watch the webinar [‘Finding Balance: Navigating the Tension Between Intervention and Neurodiversity’](#) with Katy Albert featuring Jane Vincent.

