

WHAT IS MASKING?

THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL TOLL OF PRETENDING

“MASKING ISN'T IMPROVEMENT. IT'S SURVIVAL. THEY WANT TO FIT IN”

MAINSTREAM WITH SUPPORT

Chris was one of those kids who could run circles around grade-level academics but was miles behind socially and behaviorally. By second grade, everything collided. He was bored out of his mind, frustrated, and acting out – a lot.

He was placed in a Special Day Class because of the social and behavioral issues, and we kept telling him the same thing: he couldn't move to mainstream until he stopped the behaviors – the strange noises, the not following directions, all of it.

NON-LINAR TIMELINE

And then, in classic Chris fashion, he simply decided he was done. No gradual progression, no easing into it– this is the kid who never rode a tricycle and went straight to a bike; never crawled, just walked. So of course he chose to stop the behaviors cold turkey so he could move into mainstream second grade.

Fortunately, the elementary school housed the district's special ed program, and they were experts at managing transitions like this. It wasn't easy, but they knew exactly how to support him once he made that decision. It wasn't a perfectly smooth line, but he did finish second grade successfully with the help of a classroom aide who supported the teacher, guided transitions between activities, and stepped in wherever the kids needed extra help.

INDIVIDUALIZED MILESTONES

What I didn't understand at the time was that this transition came with something I now know as masking – the need to fit in by suppressing every “non conforming” part of yourself to match the norm. Plenty of people mask to fit into society, but for a neurodivergent child, it takes on an entirely different depth.

Masking is when a neurodivergent kid hides their natural behaviors so they can look “normal” enough to get through the day. It's not subtle – it's exhausting. And most adults miss it because the kid looks “fine.”

EXAMPLES OF MASKING

- Copying other kids' social behavior
- Holding in stims, emotions, or sensory overload
- Over-focusing on rules to avoid getting in trouble
- Pretending they understand something they do not
- Acting “easy” or “quiet” so adults stop labeling them as difficult