

Lesson Plan 1: Understanding Autism & Masking (Neuro-Affirming)

Theme: *Some Days I Feel Pressure to Hide Who I Am – Exploring Autism, Masking & Neurodiversity*

Duration: 60 minutes

Age Group: Upper KS2

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, pupils will be able to:

- **Explain what neurodiversity means** and recognise that all brains think and feel in different ways.
 - **Understand the concept of masking** in a simple, child friendly way.
 - **Show empathy** for autistic experiences and understand why it's important to feel like you can be yourself.
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Resources

- The poem verse (printed or displayed).
 - A3 paper each
 - Colouring pens or pencils
 - Autistic children's artwork examples
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Starter Activity

Class agreement – listen to each other, be accepting of each other's differences, confidentiality – create a safe space to discuss/share openly should children wish to share – there is no expectation to do so.

“All Brains Are Different” – Talk to your partner, then feed back

Ask pupils:

- “What are some ways people can be different on the outside?”
- “What about the inside — how we think, feel, learn or communicate?”

Introduce the term **neurodiversity**:

Neurodiversity means all brains work differently, and that's normal and wonderful.

Highlight: Autism is one way a brain can work — not wrong, just different.

Main Learning Session – Whole Class Discussion

Read the Poem Verse

Read the poem aloud slowly, or have volunteers read parts:

*Some days I feel pressure to hide who I am,
To seem calm, to seem quiet, to follow the plan.
That hiding is called masking — it's heavy to hold,
It comes with a cost I don't choose
And a story untold.
“I mask every day — it takes so much energy.”
“My brain makes tornadoes no one else can see.”*

*Masking isn't strength —
it's survival, it's strain,
It's pretending I'm fine
when it feels like thunder and rain."*

Discussion: What Is Masking?

Ask:

- *How is the person in the poem feeling?*
- *Why might they feel pressure to hide who they really are?*

Explain in child-friendly, neuro-affirming language:

- **Masking means pretending to feel OK or trying to hide your natural feelings or reactions.**
- Autistic people often mask to fit in, look calm, or avoid teasing.
- It is **not weakness**—it's something people do to cope.
- But masking can be **exhausting** and can make people feel like they can't be themselves.

Ask:

- *Have you ever felt like you had to pretend to feel OK?*
- *What do you think makes it easier for people to be themselves?*

Clarify: nobody has to share personal information — feelings examples can be general.

Independent Learning: "What You See / What You Don't See"

Give pupils a sheet split into two parts:

1. **What you see:**

Using the poem verse pupils draw what they think this person might look like on the outside – how they might want to look to others (calm face, smile, following instructions).

2. **What you don't see:**

On the other side of the page draw the person's inner experience – what the outside world doesn't see (e.g., "tornado thoughts," "buzzing energy," "need for quiet," "feeling overwhelmed").

Prompt with questions:

- *"What might someone feel even if they look calm?"*
- *"What could help them feel safe?"*

This activity teaches empathy without making autistic pupils disclose personal information.

Plenary: "What You See / What You Don't See" Artwork

Share the artwork created by Autistic children showing what you see/what you don't see.

Looking at examples ask:

- *How do you think this person wants to be viewed on the outside?*
- *What might they be experiencing on the inside that we can't see?*

Emphasize that how someone looks on the outside is not always how they are feeling on the inside.

This activity teaches empathy without making autistic pupils disclose personal information.



Teacher Notes (Important)

- Avoid deficit language (e.g., “symptoms,” “disorder,” “normal/not normal”).
- Ensure no child is pressured to self-identify as autistic.
- Focus on empathy, acceptance, and celebrating diverse brains.
- Use identity-affirming phrases like “autistic person” only if that matches your school’s preference; many autistic people prefer identity-first language.