AUTISM TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT

Supporting the "Social Chameleon:"
A Discussion on Autistic Masking

Presented by Haley Moss

Moderator Information

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AUTISM TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT

The Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project (ATTA) develops and presents resources that assist individuals with autism in their transition from secondary education to postsecondary education or employment. ATTAprovides training and support to important stakeholders as they work to provide an equitable experience for individuals on the spectrum.

The Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support

The Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support (ICSPS) creates, supports, and delivers professional development for education professionals across Illinois. ICSPS provides technical assistance, develops publications, and facilitates program improvement strategies for our partners as they relate to college transition, recruitment, retention, and completion—encouraging achievement of special populations learners. ICSPS was founded in 1977 at Illinois State University and is housed in the Educational Administration and Foundations department in the College of Education.

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Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project (ATTA)

https://autismcollegeandcareer.com

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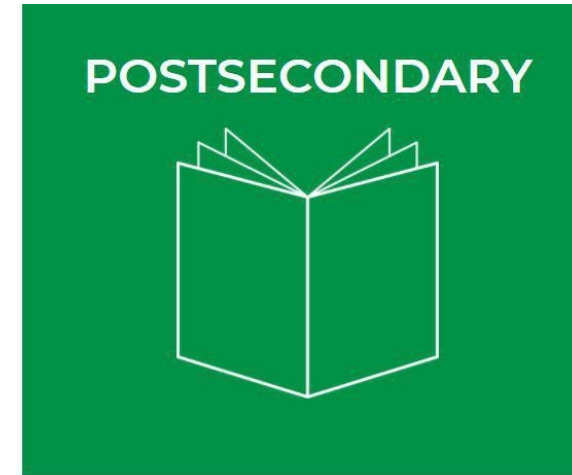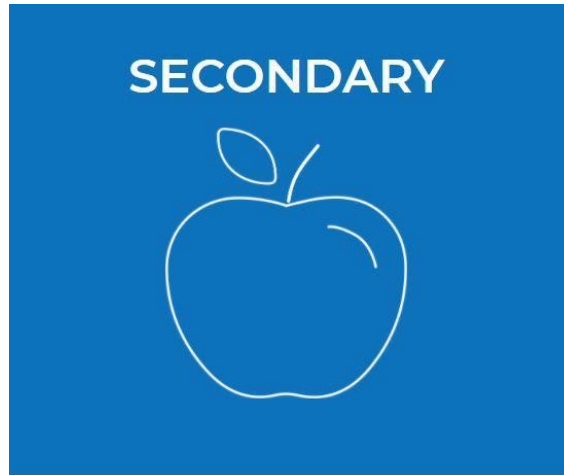Illinois State Board of Education

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Which Region are you Located in?

1. Chicago
2. Northeast
3. Northwest
4. East Central
5. Southwest
6. Southeast
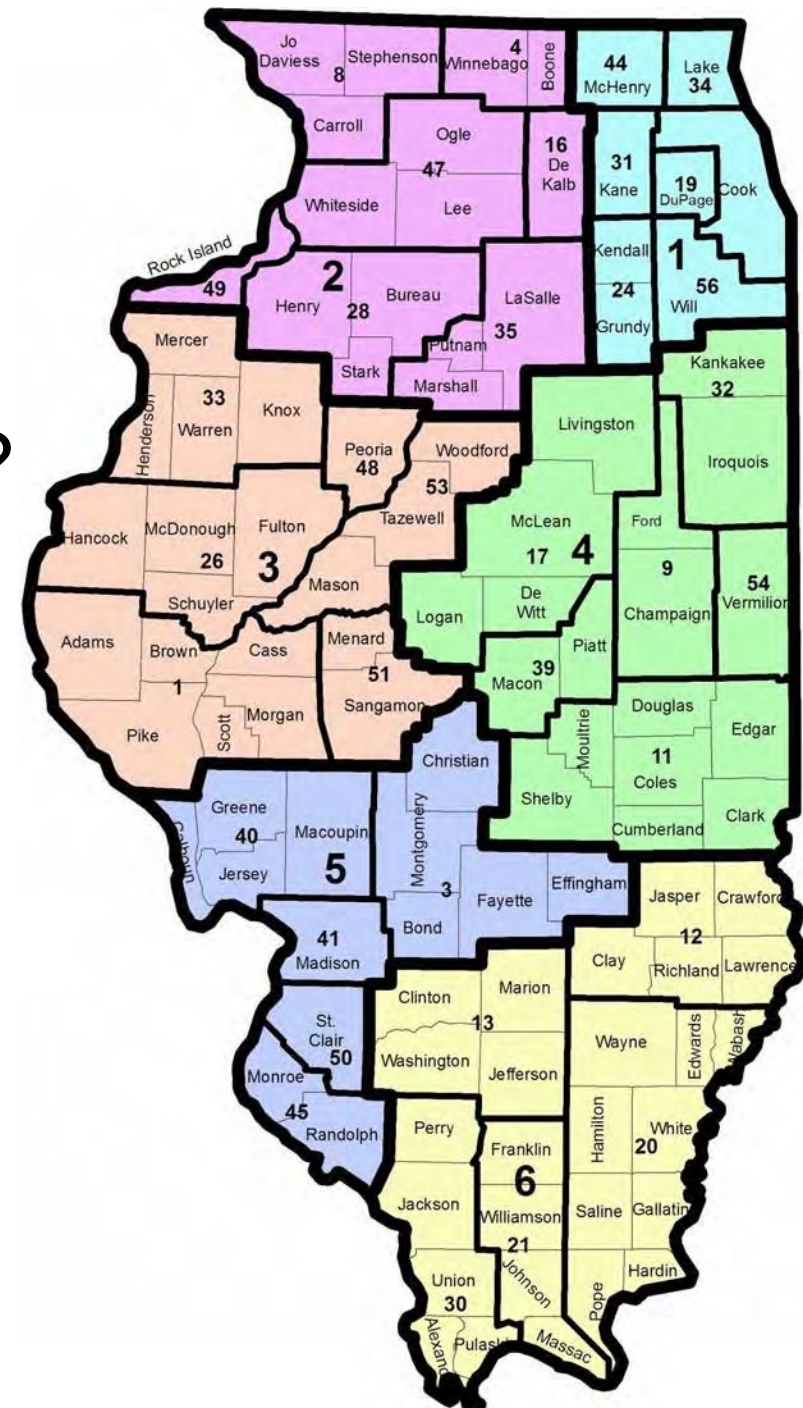
Presenter Information

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Masking vs. Camouflaging

Masking is taking on a persona that is felt to be more neurotypical.

Camouflaging is hiding behavior that might be viewed as socially unacceptable or "performing" social behavior that is felt to be more neurotypical

(Attwood, 2007; Lai et al., 2017)

These are **NOT** gender specific things

Masking might look somewhat different across gender identities (Lai et al. 2015).

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What Are Masking Behaviors?

- Mimicking other people's social behavior
- Forced eye contact/smiling
- Adjusting tone of voice or how they speak to match others
- Suppressing stims
- Imitating gestures
- Prepared scripts/ideas of how to act or talk to others

Why Do We Mask?

- "Camouflaging autism" to pass as neurotypical or otherwise fit in
- Social acceptance (in friendships or romantic/sexual relationships)
- Avoiding bullying
- Safety concerns
- **Motivation** for masking may be different across cultural and gender groups

The "Price" of Masking

- People (especially women, people of color, and gender non-conforming individuals) go undiagnosed often because of autistic masking
- Mental and physical exhaustion that can lead to burnout or meltdowns
- Suppressing stimming and other coping and regulating mechanisms
- Depression and anxiety
- Loss of identity/who you are
- Inauthentic social acceptance

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The Social Chameleon: Camouflaging

- Hiding behaviors associated with autism
- Using explicit techniques to appear socially competent
  - Plotting out conversations
  - Using the "right" expressions
- Finding ways to prevent others from seeing their social difficulties
- Historically, girls also camouflage by staying in close proximity to peers and weaving in and out of activities, which leads to fewer people noticing that they are struggling socially.

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Examples of Camouflaging

- Making eye contact during conversation
- Using learned phrases or pre-prepared jokes in conversation
- Mimicking others' social behavior
- Imitating facial expressions or gestures
- Learning and following social scripts
- Learning to speak more quietly
- Learning to not make personal remarks

Tai et al., 2017

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Pretending to be 'Normal'

- Without a diagnosis or understanding of why they felt "different," many just worked on fitting in or avoiding bullying or social ostracization
  - After years of trying to minimize differences, some receive diagnosis following burnout, slippage in school/work performance, mental health crises, or a child's diagnosis
- Social mimicry
  - More automatic, whereas masking was deliberate
- Learning social behaviors from TV, books, and movies
- Struggling to socialize in groups

(Bargiela et al, 2016; Bargiela, 2019; Holliday-Willey, 2015; Hull et al, 2017)

Putting On My Best Normal

Motivation to mask and camouflage is social acceptance and assimilation to avoid bullying or other external consequences

But autistic people face exhaustion, burnout, and feel they are not their true selves.

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Being My Best Autistic Self

- Friendship and support online
  - Online friendships easier to maintain
  - Can boost self-esteem and be validating
  - Ensure safety first!

- Special interests define identity and self-confidence
  - Especially if full-time occupation

- Improved education/acceptance of neurodiversity in general population would reduce need for camouflaging.
  - Some worry that if people recognize that autistics are camouflaging, maybe that will cause problems in the workplace
  - A better idea is to "treat the environment" to reduce stigma and barriers to social life

- Also, those supporting autistics need to be aware of the costs of masking and camouflaging.

(Bargiela et al., 2016; Bargiela, 2019)

Taking Off the Mask

- Autistic led movements to stop masking in order to break down stigmas and create authentic social acceptance
- #TakeTheMaskOff Campaign Founders:
- "We shouldn't need to so totally suppress who we are, to the point where late-diagnosed people literally fall to pieces after diagnosis, because they realize much of their life has been spent holding themselves in; where autistic children can't cope in school because the environment is like torture, so they end up burning out and self-harming or committing suicide; where autistic people can't get jobs, or get pushed out of jobs because they disclose that they are autistic."
- **But does this ignore some of the actual survival skills?**
- **How do we do this?**

Questions and Discussion