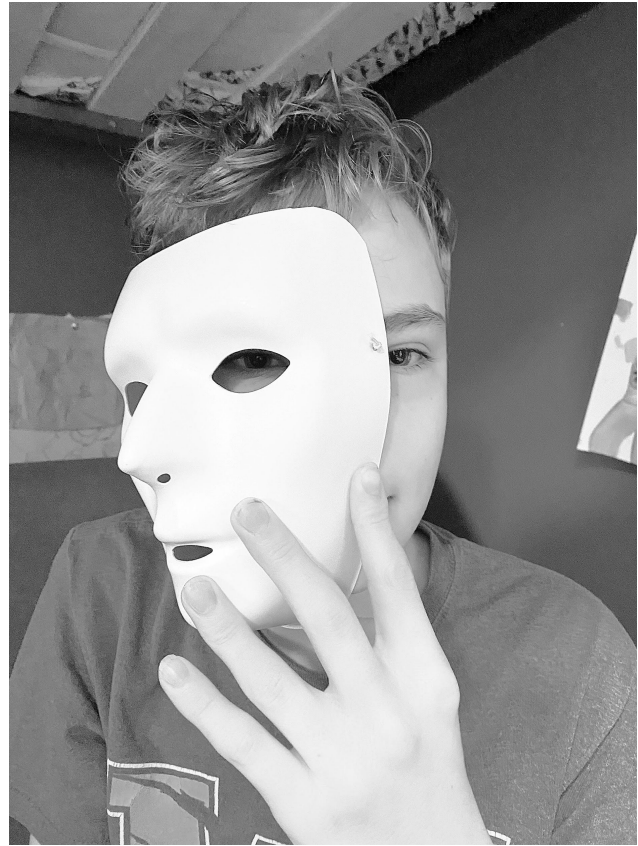


## **Masks That Hurt**

2nd Place

Sheri Klassen  
Occupational Therapy  
Master's program  
Image location: Edmonton, Alberta



### Image Description

This is a picture of my son wearing a mask. The picture was not easy to take - he is on the autism spectrum, and not only did he find the mask irritating, but he also had a hard time holding it to his face and looking at the camera. After he agreed to have the picture taken, I knew I only had a moment. And yet I happened to capture him looking at the camera through the mask.

Autistic youth, my son included, are often told to put on masks. Unlike the one pictured, these are virtual masks that health professionals use as a treatment to replace autistic tendencies with behaviors that are considered "normal". Autistic self-advocates call this phenomenon "masking" and worry that it may do more harm than good. The sustained effort of opposing one's natural tendencies has been shown to cause increased anxiety, exhaustion, loss of skills, and suicidality. My research will explore how a commonly used intervention for autistic youth, called social skills groups, influences their perception of self-esteem and well-being. By centering the voices of autistic youth, and their experience of learning to mask, I hope to promote awareness of how best support these individuals.