

THE HIDDEN LOAD

When children cope on the outside but carry it inside

A short reflection tool for noticing effort that often goes unseen.

1) What am I noticing right now?

Social signs (tick any):

- Stays on the edge of groups or speaks less than peers
- Appears present but rarely initiates
- Clings to one safe person or adult nearby
- Stops trying socially after one awkward moment
- Replays conversations or worries they were judged
- Laughs along to fit in, even when uncomfortable
- Finds unstructured times hardest

Emotional signs (tick any):

- Holds it together during the day, then crashes later
- Appears mature but emotionally exhausted
- Goes quiet, freezes, or shuts down under pressure
- Apologises often or worries about being 'too much'
- Masks distress until reaching a safe space

If several boxes are ticked, effort may be happening quietly.

2) What might be underneath?

- Fear of being judged or rejected
- Fear of getting it wrong socially
- Language or processing demands
- Sensory overload (noise, crowds, constant input)
- Past experiences of embarrassment
- Feeling different and trying not to show it
- Uncertainty about where they belong

Belonging is emotional safety — not just proximity.

3) What do adults often misread here?

- “They’re fine at school — it must be behaviour at home”
- “They’re calm, so they must be coping”
- “They’re quiet, so they must be happy”
- “They don’t ask for help, so they don’t need it”

Calm doesn’t always mean safe.

4) What helps protect dignity in this moment?

When a child is masking:

- You don't have to perform being okay with me.
- You're allowed to have a hard day and still belong.
- I'm not disappointed — I'm here.

When social moments are hard:

- You don't need the perfect words. Take your time.
- We can pause and try again later.
- Feeling safe matters more than sounding fluent.

When emotions are rising:

- We'll talk after your body is steady.
- You're not in trouble — you're overwhelmed.
- The boundary stays, and so do I.

Connection first. Correction later.

5) One small change that helps this week

At school:

- One predictable safe adult
- Quiet reset during unstructured time
- Private check-ins instead of public call-outs
- Supported entry into group work
- Wait-time without pressure

At home:

- Decompression before questions
- Ask, "What was the hardest part?"
- Validate first, problem-solve later
- Track patterns, not behaviour
- One predictable after-school ritual

Support should never cost a child their dignity.

Progress follows safety.