



The Teen Mask in the Classroom

Understanding Why Teens Wear a Mask and What it is Really Covering Up

Those who live with or work with teens may be familiar with the notion of 'masks.' They can appear physically and metaphorically.

Physical masks can appear via body piercings, tattoos, heavy makeup, interesting hair styles and choices of clothing, and masks may also be an absence of these!

The metaphorical masks tend to turn up via behaviour in the choices that teens make around others, especially their peers and friends.

To understand the mask during this uncertain time of massive change, from 12-18 particularly, we first need to appreciate the biological drivers that are at play.

Three of these are particularly important. The first is the increasing need for autonomy and independence: making their own choices! The second is the search for identity: the 'who am I' search? The third really important one is the need to belong somewhere in the adolescent world.

Adolescents do a lot of work around trying on identities, especially in classrooms. When they are feeling confused, dumb or not good enough, they often create a mask to cover their vulnerability.

When they feel inadequate, disliked and that they don't belong, they need their mask to hide behind.

For example, my protection as a teen at school was to assume the academically superior mask. It meant I was always trying to make my grades give me a sense of worth and value because I believed I didn't have any. I occasionally diminished and belittled people with my comments on others' low achievements or failures on tests and assignments. I did the 'eye rolling' thing if I heard someone received a low mark, purely to make them feel 'less than' so I could feel better. When I grew into a mature adult on reflection I definitely came to regret this mean, insensitive behaviour.

Some other masks that adolescents may try on in our classrooms include:

1. The invisible mouse: The teen who doesn't want anyone to notice him or her and seldom speaks in class, often with a long fringe over their face, ear phones or looking towards the ground.
2. Princess Nast: She wears makeup, jewellery, trendy clothes and acts as the fashion police, also very good at 'tsk tsking,' eye rolling and is even worse online.
3. The jock: This is the sports freak who just loves wearing tracksuits and playing sports. They can be male or female. They can use sports as an excuse for not being studious!
4. The Smart Alec or Smart Alice: These students usually try to disarm teachers and big-note themselves to be seen.
5. The Drama Queen: Oh my Gosh! Everything is always a negative drama or a potential moment to perform so everyone notices ME!
6. The Clown: Always trying to make people laugh, although usually at someone's expense, slightly less painful than the Smart Alec.
7. The Bully: Deliberately shoves their power around either physically, verbally or psychologically.
8. The People Pleaser: Always appealing to adults to make people like them.
9. The Victim: Everyone else is to blame and they have a 'poor me' mask.



We all wear masks to a degree. It helps us belong in a wider social circle because we don't want others to see our 'shadow' or our worst character traits. Teens need them to help them survive in their chaotic worlds, especially in high school. Many will adjust their mask to fit in somewhere.

The more uncertain and threatened a student may feel, the stronger the need for the mask. The more respected and safer they feel, the less they feel the need to armour themselves, and the closer they will be to their authentic selves.

Sometimes an adolescent may want to drop their mask, but others find it difficult to accept the change. For example, a student may want to stop being a bully but their reputation makes it hard for others to trust them.

I have worked with adolescent boys who wanted to stop fighting and bullying younger students and it was difficult for them to drop their mask and so they went back to using the mask for which they were known. Their peers often find it hard to accept they have changed and they could end up becoming socially excluded or friendless: That is a scary place to be.

Under that mask is a unique, emerging individual yearning to be independent, accepted, respected and valued by other people.

Sometimes teachers and other significant adults find it hard to believe someone can change. This is partly because we form concepts and beliefs that influence the way we think and behave. These concepts become unconscious and it takes time or a powerful new experience to change them. Sometimes, it's easier to just keep playing the game if an identity appears fixed.

So while masks can be frustrating for parents and teachers, they are important in helping our teens to navigate the uncertain journey they are treading until they develop the full capacity of the executive functioning of their brain. Know that under that mask is a unique, emerging individual yearning to be independent, accepted, respected and valued by other people, especially their family and friends.

When teens feel connected and safe in their homes and their schools they can take their mask off. Therefore, as educators and administrators we must be careful not to believe that teens are defined by the mask they wear in the classroom, just the same as they are not defined by the grades they get, or the clothes they wear.

Our students are so much more than that and it is our responsibility to guide them to grow in independence, while supporting them to discover who they really are in the busy world of their friends and peers. 

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