

## **Boyhood: masks boys wear**

The scene is set: a boy at his desk ponders a question from his teacher. As the seconds tick by the silence and staring faces makes him feel uneasy. The boy is not sure the answer he has in his mind is the correct answer and things become worse as he feels all eyes in the room looking at him. He hesitates. Eventually he offers an answer that is incorrect. With his response comes a litany of giggles and jibes from his classmates. He turns to the class, smirks and gives an impression that his answer is deliberate and that he really does not care that they are laughing at him. He tries to project that it is all part of the game.

This scenario is played out time and time again in countless classrooms. Underneath the self-confidence and detachment to the situation the boy feels shamed and hopelessly inadequate. It is all a front. For the audience in the classroom, teacher and children, he acts cool and collected.

The reality is, he portrays feelings outside himself that are far different to what he really experiences.

Many boys carry the same outer covering that envelops a much softer and fragile interior. Boys tend to hide their real feelings behind a front of bravado and self-assurance. This front begins during early childhood. It creates a protective covering around a very fragile nature, giving the impression he is tougher and more resilient than he really is.

Boys can frequently exhibit a tough masculine exterior to promote a sense of being in control. This exterior is used like a shell to be a shield from life's troubles. The hard outer shell is used to deflect many of the hurts and difficulties they encounter, especially when they experience shame or fear. The tough exterior protects a personality that is often plagued with uncertainty, pain and real insecurity.

In later childhood, the tough exterior develops into an almost permanent mask. The mask creates the illusion that boys are resilient, independent, and not influenced or weighed down by hurts or doubts. The creation of the mask continues during the school years and becomes most noticeable throughout adolescence.

Boys often feel comfortable behind the mask as it shields their real self from others. The male mask is reinforced by other males and females. Society as a whole still expects boys and men to act with confidence and certainty, even when they have no cause to act so. Qualities of surety and confidence are viewed as extremely desirable attributes in the male world. Boys use the mask to create the illusion that they have these qualities, that they are ok and that they can survive almost anything and everything.

Boys learn quite early in life that men are required to exhibit a tough Teflon-like shell. The shell shades their true feelings about many important things. Peers, parents, other adults and the media, all have a significant influence on how boys will act out their masculinity. Through the socialisation process boys will determine what they keep hidden and will be shared with the world. These influences along with the male biological make-up enhance the development of the outer shell and accelerate the toughening and masking processes as they grow older.

From an early age, most boys play a traditional role of being tougher than girls. Many parents and teachers promote this role without fully realising or understanding it. Some adults openly promote the tough male image in their sons and students.

Boys generally behave in ways that others expect.

In reality the majority of boys are not as tough, self-assured, independent and confident, as they seem. Beneath the exterior they are afflicted with enormous self-doubt and uncertainty. These afflictions often accompany them into adulthood. Underneath the tough and hardened exteriors are boys who are much gentler, more dependent, more caring than they are allowed to admit or act.

In the book, *Get out of your own way*, Tom Rusk, author and psychiatrist, outlines some very powerful insights into the role that self doubt has in the lives and relationships of boys and men.

Rusk's emphasis on the development of self-doubt can be universally applied to both sexes. His ideas have special significance for boys, as self-doubt is masked by a charade of toughness that is not present, nor expected, from girls and women.

A mask forms around boys' feelings and needs. It regulates their actions, attitudes and beliefs about themselves and others. It influences their ability to accept support, guidance and care. The mask is a false self, an exterior or facade they develop to be and act, as males should.

Boys are not necessarily more doubt-ridden, or less confident than girls. They simply learn to hide their doubts and insecurities behind their masks. They tend to dismiss doubts and insecurity as a sign of weakness and dependence. They may also tend to ignore and discount the feelings and needs of others because they have not learnt to attend to their own.

Many boys have little or no avenue to remove the mask that so dominates their later childhood and adolescent lives. The end result, being a totally false and distorted self, portrayed through a mask that becomes a permanent fixture to their life and relationships.

Masking creates tension for growing boys and for others with whom they relate. The tough shell becomes a barrier they will carry for a great deal of their lives. It keeps the world out and sadly locks them in. The masking process produces considerable loneliness and pain as they turn away from their true feelings and vulnerabilities, and project a position of not caring, being, stoic, strong and in control.

Many of life's emotional difficulties are ignored or stoically carried, rather than attended to, or soothed. The end result is people who spend a great deal of energy denying their own feelings, especially when they feel vulnerable or sad.

Rusk believes children misunderstand their hurt and sense of loneliness in such a way as to turn it in onto them selves. They confuse feeling bad for being bad. This misunderstanding distorts many aspects of their life, including their capacity to relate to themselves and to others.

The mask creates the conditions for doubt, hurt and confusion to take hold. Boys will act out how they believe boys should behave and feel. For many boys, this is a distorted form of masculinity centred on toughness, independence, a lack of self-care and self-concern.

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Many boys and men view the expression of feelings as solely being the activity of girls and women. The most common emotional expression of many males is anger, the emotion of strength and power.

In many ways the development and presence of a mask is inevitable in the life of boys. A complex mixture of his brain development and biology, along with the influence of social conditioners and models determines that many boys will live behind a front that is not a representation of their true selves.

The challenge for parents and teachers is that they can make a considerable impression in the shaping of the mask. Adults, especially fathers, contribute to the development or reduction of the mask that their sons will create. Many fathers themselves struggle with their own masks and inadvertently are key players in shaping and reinforcing the mask their sons create and wear.