

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My daughter, who just turned thirteen, is a wonderful girl. She is very bright (an A student), and funny. Except for teenage moodiness, she is also quite sweet and loving at home, to her parents and little brother. Recently she had a friend spend the night, and I saw quite a different side of her. The sweetness was gone, and I could see that her “social” self was more tough and sarcastic. We all have different aspects of our personality, but I worry that by adopting this tough and cocky self with her friends, and burying her kinder self, she is setting herself up for sorrow. Is there any way I can gently broach this subject? At this age, she would not be receptive to direct advice from me.

-- Concerned Mom

Dear Mom,

It would help if I knew a little bit more about your daughter’s Mr. Hyde personality. Is her tough and sarcastic side a bully, or mean to other kids? Or is she just not the sweet Dr. Jekyll you and your family are used to seeing at the dinner table? That distinction makes a big difference.

It’s normal for thirteen-year-olds to want to fit into their peer group, and sometimes, that means putting on another persona for friends. Originally, the word “persona” comes from the Latin, and was used to designate the masks actors wore to play certain characters. We all do that, don’t we? We act one way with near and dear friends, and another way with casual acquaintances. We wear different clothes to church service than we do when we’re hanging out at home watching videos on a rainy day. We put on a different mask, depending upon the situation. To have a flexible persona is a sign of good health, of good emotional intelligence. This doesn’t mean that we’re “fakey” or inauthentic, only that we emphasize different parts of our personality depending upon the social circumstances we’re in.

Teenagers in particular want to try on different masks, and so long as these masks or personas are safe and reasonable, they should be allowed, as teens strive to define their personality in relationship to their peers as well as their families. That’s why I want to know more about your daughter’s tough mask with her sleepover friend. If she is gossipy and mean about other kids (including her brother), then you may have to say something. But I think you make a good point about not confronting her directly. However, that doesn’t mean that you cannot have a gentle conversation with her about the changes you observed in her behavior.

Consider watching some movies that show toughness and sarcasm as undesirable traits (*Mean Girls* and *Freaky Friday* are two of my favorites). Leave some time to have a conversation about the themes of the movie. Reinforce her sweet kindnesses when she exhibits these behaviors at home: “You are such a great big sister. Look at how happy you make your brother when you spend time playing with him.” Most importantly, show

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

3/16/05

your daughter how to be kind and sweet by behaving in those ways yourself. Kids always learn more by what they observe you doing, than by what you tell them to do.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.