

The Curious Case of Imposter Syndrome

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It's easy to assume that gifted students are confident and capable, bursting with self-esteem. However, high self-expectations and surprising insecurities cast a shadow over their accomplishments.

Television news anchor, Donna Draves, remembers telling her mother she wanted to quit dance lessons because they were becoming boring. She revealed to the research interviewer that... her reason for quitting was actually that *she was no longer the best dancer in the class*.

Impostor's Syndrome

Donna's story is surprisingly common. High achievers believe that somehow, they have "tricked" everyone into thinking they are great. They think no one else is aware of their limitations. Success is attributed to luck, not ability:

- I only won the science fair because Jimmy didn't enter this year.
- I did well in middle school, but only because the teachers liked me.
- You think I'm good at the piano, but that's only because I chose easy songs.

In an attempt to maintain the illusion of perfection, they avoid situations in which they might not be the best. This is Impostor's Syndrome.

Case Study: Me

When I learned about Impostor's Syndrome, I was shocked: it described me perfectly.

I attended [UC Irvine](#) on a full academic scholarship, joined the school's honors program, majored in Computer Science, and graduated with great grades.

UCI Graduate

After graduating, I was afraid that an attempt to start a career would reveal that I was a fraud. I dodged interviews and potential employers. With a university diploma in hand I worked part-time jobs.

I was too afraid to even try to get a “real job.” I knew that once I sat down for an interview, the illusion would vanish. The interviewer would see through me and realize I skated through school without learning anything.

They’d kick me out of the interview within minutes.

The Beginnings

In elementary school, I was confident and self-assured. I tried out for lead parts in class plays. I welcomed being team captain in PE. I sought leadership positions.

The transition to middle school and high school began the feelings of fraud.

I avoided answering questions and dodged discussions with my teachers. These on-the-spot moments were dangerous because I was unprepared. I might slip up, destroying the illusion.

Cool, but not confident 😊

I continued to do well on classwork because I could prepare, spending as much time as possible on my responses. But each time I succeeded, I felt like I had to hide more, because my deception was getting deeper and deeper.

As I moved on to college, these feelings intensified.

Increased Distance, Decreased Confidence

I see now that as the distance between my teachers and I increased, the worse these feelings became.

In elementary school, my teachers knew my interests, strengths, and weaknesses. By college, they didn't even recognize my face. I felt more and more like I was sneaking past their overloaded plates.

These feelings are consistent with others:

[Impostor syndrome is] a shared learned behavior common to high achievers – people are left on their own, competition is intense, and there's not much of a mentor system. *From [Feeling Like A Fraud](#)*

What To Do?

Ten years later, I understand the situation better. I needed:

- A mentor. Student teaching was wonderful for me because I was under constant observation by a caring expert.
- Feedback I could trust. My master teacher's feedback was based on my unedited performance, not an essay I spent hours getting just right.
- To know that my feelings had a name. Simply knowing others experienced the same thing somehow makes it more manageable.

Teachers, stay close to your students. Don't let the brightest kids just work on their own without help. This can increase the feelings of being an impostor. Give caring, honest feedback of how your best students can improve. Never give the impression that you think they've perfectly mastered a topic (because they *know* they haven't, and you will then appear to be un-objective).

Parents, connect your students with experts in their interests so they can get feedback and guidance from a master (whether that's guitar playing, LEGO building, or acting). And don't feel bad that your kids don't trust your opinions! Encourage risk and accept mistakes. Don't let the expectations of perfection cloud your students' judgements.

Most of all, make your high achieving students aware of Impostor Syndrome, especially as they move up in their educational careers.