Body image:
Advice for supporting pupils

There is huge pressure on young people to conform to unrealistic body image, not least on social media. Yvonne Kekeliadis offers some tips for supporting young people to better understand social media and develop a positive relationship with their body image.

Yvonne Kekeliadis, founder of Brightstarz

In August, the House of Common's Health and Social Care Committee (2022) published a report exploring the impact of body image on physical and mental health.

This follows the well-documented increasing levels of anxiety and general mental health problems in young people.

While the report explores a range of external factors that affect young people's physical and mental health, the committee has also rightly highlighted the mounting pressure for children and young people to conform to unrealistic body ideals, which is in part due to social media and online content.

As a result, young people and in particular young girls are facing increased insecurities which can manifest in a variety of mental health and wellbeing struggles, from low self-esteem to anxiety and eating disorders.

Among its recommendations, the report calls for the government to 'initiate a comprehensive cross-government strategy to tackle the current growing problem of body dissatisfaction and its related health, educational and social consequences'.

While we hope that the government heeds the committee's call to action, schools can also play a vital role in educating children and young people about body image and the impact of social media.

There are a number of practical ways that teachers can support students to help them understand and navigate the differences between life online and reality to help them develop positive relationships with their body image.

Education

It is of paramount importance that we continue to educate and inform young people about how the online appearance of others is often distorted.

As technology continues to develop, it can be even harder to recognise when online content has been edited. The different ways a user will edit their appearance, experiences, and importantly only showcase the parts that shine a 'positive' light on their lifestyle should be highlighted when speaking about online social content.

As part of the workshops we run with young people, we attempt to use examples to show how easily real life can be distorted online and this can have a big impact on young minds. And remember, while young people and students may believe they understand these concepts, they may not necessarily connect this to the impact it has on how they feel about themselves.

Opening up the conversation

A successful way to demonstrate this has been to ask students, and especially young girls, if they have ever felt pressured to change their appearance, diet or anything related to their body image due to something they have seen online.

While they may initially believe the advice they have been given online is safe to follow, especially if it has been shared by a mutual contact, this is often not the case.

Often when the post is framed as a way to 'help' a person, they can turn out in fact to be harmful tips with no scientific evidence to back them up. It is important therefore to equip students with the practical tools to spot misinformation and misrepresentation on social media and how it can blur the lines between reality and fantasy.

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Comment

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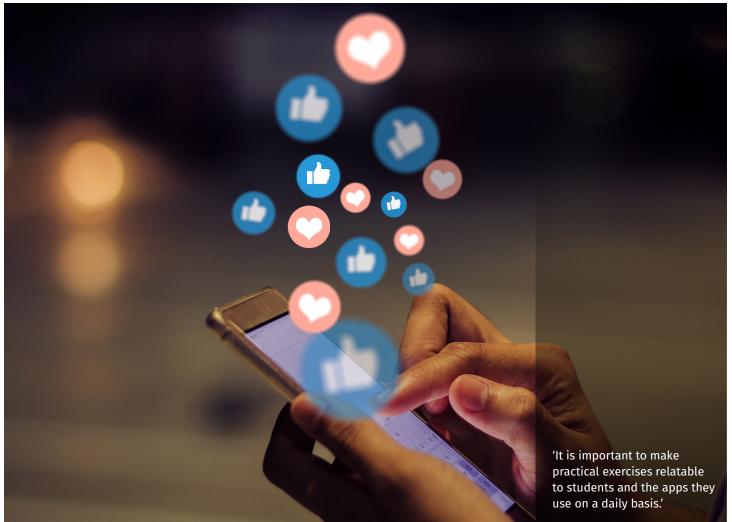
Image manipulation

Another exercise that works well in lessons is using a Photoshop or 'face-tuning' app which illustrates how easily, and quickly, a person can distort their image online. For example, I will ask students in my workshop to take a photo of me using the app and test out the different features to adjust my image.

With just a few buttons, my face completely changes and I usually end up looking like a Kardashian! We then compare the before and after images side-by-side on the screen, and it is scary to see the difference.

This helps students to see that in reality it is easy to manipulate images and create unrealistic body standards that are nothing like their true self.

Following this exercise with a group discussion about how this makes students feel is always extremely valuable and helps them to recognise the pressure social media creates to conform.

Real-life examples

It is important to make practical exercises relatable to students and the apps they use on a daily basis. For example, real-life TikTok and Instagram posts that have negative comments can be used to encourage students to talk about how that makes them feel, and how they would feel if these comments were directed at them – would it affect their mood or their behaviour or attitudes with friends and family? This helps students to better understand the importance of kindness and empathy when using apps in terms of how they treat themselves and others.

Healthy choices

To complement this education, schools must also focus on educating young people about making healthy lifestyle choices. This should be around diet and exercise but also about the way they present themselves, advising students not imitate a trend they see online, especially if they are only making these choices due to peer pressure. This will help empower them to ignore harmful advice.

It is important to promote high self-esteem and instil body confidence into students. Young girls in particular should be encouraged not to dwell on their differences and what they do not have compared to their peers, and instead celebrate what makes them unique. It can also be helpful to focus on encouraging young people to celebrate other successes in their life outside of their appearance, including working hard in school and taking part in extra-curricular activities they enjoy.

Meanwhile, schools should take a hard line on students who post photos of others online without their permission, especially in cases where this is done in a way to bully them.

Exposing their peers to other people's comments online can impact self-esteem, especially if others are commenting negatively. Schools should encourage

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students to have private personal accounts and limit who can comment on their posts.

Finally, schools should also ensure they are signposting pathways to external help from national and local organisations, as well as encouraging students to speak with a medical professional if they are starting to feel down or changing their diet due to content they have seen online.

Educating parents

Increasingly, parents are unaware of how to navigate different social media channels and do not understand the best way to control their child's device usage and screen time.

Even when limiting social media usage for their child, it can be difficult to be able to discern where negative content might come from or how to encourage children to use safety measures on social media apps. Even the social media content of a student's friends and peers or direct family members can have a negative impact.

This is especially important, as parents will also play an important role in helping to educate and support young people in developing healthy social media habits.

Schools and teachers should offer training and advice to parents on tools available to them to help their child set healthy limits on social media use.

There are tools allowing parents to set boundaries and time limits for each of their child's social media channels, but also to enable them to limit exposure to harmful content. This can include blocking known accounts that promote dieting culture or key terms related to negative online content.

In addition to helping limit content that may impact negatively on a child's body image, educating parents on how they can support their child to limit their exposure to harmful content can help them ensure their child is being more generally safe online. This is increasingly important as scammers and predators expand the way they target young people through social media.

While self-esteem and body confidence are not built overnight, giving young people the tools to be able to limit the things in their life that are contributing to a negative self-image is an important first step.

Educating young people and their parents on how they can control what they see and encouraging them to reach out when social media is having a negative effect can help to really mitigate the growing impact that prolonged social media use can have on their self-esteem and body image. **CHHE**

Health and Social Care Committee: Second report: The impact of body image on mental and physical health, August 2022: https://bit.ly/3RrTbFb

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Brightstarz

Brightstarz, which runs workshops for children aged nine to 16 focused on things such as tackle anxiety, standing up to bullies and building resilience. Visit: https://brightstarz.co.uk/