



THE CONFIDENCE TRICK

POOR BODY IMAGE CAN HAVE A DEVASTATING EFFECT ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES, SAYS KEIR MCDONALD – BUT FOCUSED TRAINING CAN HELP SCHOOLS REDUCE THE RISKS...

- ONE IN FIVE PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED GIRLS SAY THEY HAVE BEEN ON A DIET.
- ONE IN THREE ADOLESCENT BOYS HAS BEEN ON A DIET TO CHANGE THEIR BODY SHAPE OR LOSE WEIGHT.
- 87% OF GIRLS AGED 11 – 21 THINK THAT WOMEN ARE JUDGED MORE ON THEIR APPEARANCE THAN ON THEIR ABILITY.

Has that got your attention? It sure got mine. These are the shocking findings of a recent Government seminar to discuss the current state of evidence on body image.

I decided to do a little digging. So, the term body image describes how comfortable a person feels about their body, their integrated sense of body and self, and the extent to which their personal value is tied up with their physical appearance.

Evidence suggests that adolescents with poor body confidence are less likely to be physically active, less likely to eat fruit and vegetables, and more likely to try to control their weight with laxatives and vomiting. They are also more likely to partake in other risky behaviours, and there is a strong link between body image and depression and low self-esteem. Being bullied for being overweight is also very common and can badly affect people's emotional functioning.

The consequences of poor body image also have a disturbing effect on other areas of life:

- 16 percent of 15 – 17 year olds have avoided going to school because they felt bad about their appearance.
- 25 percent of girls say that unhappiness about their appearance has stopped them from putting their hand up in class.
- Almost a quarter of girls aged 7 – 21 do not participate in sport or exercise because they are unhappy with their body image.
- One fifth of 15 – 17 year olds have avoided giving an opinion in public.

The seminar report says 'The girls who are keeping their hands down in class today will be the women not daring to ask for a pay rise tomorrow. The girls who bunk off sports because they don't want to be seen in kit will be the women putting their health at risk by doing almost no exercise at all. And the girls who are being told their value is tied up in their physical

appearance are the girls who won't feel that anything else they could achieve is worth bothering with.'

Girls' and boys' poor body confidence has major implications for society now and in the future and it is the reason the Government has developed a work programme on the problem. They are in talks with health and education professionals as well as high-street retailers, the media and advertisers, and it is likely there will be a range of policy initiatives to help overcome the issue on a number of levels.

Helping children and young people to become more confident and resilient is a good way to boost self-esteem and this can have a positive impact on almost every area of their lives; from increasing their ability to bounce back from everyday problems to helping them to develop a positive body image and decreasing the likelihood of them being bullied.

As mentioned earlier, being bullied is a major factor in depression and low self-esteem. Bullying behaviour focuses on 'difference' and

the difference can be real or perceived – overweight, underweight, shape, shortness, tallness; with bullying, anything goes.

A recent survey of 250,000 children aged between 10 and 15 showed that nearly half had been bullied at school. And even if they had not been bullied, a quarter of the sample said they were worried about it. Today, bullying does not just exist within the perimeter of the school. It can carry on day and night through the use of mobile phones and the internet via chat rooms and social media. In short, it can create a vicious cycle that can make a child or young person feel worthless and unvalued.

Whatever your role with children and young people, we all have a responsibility to do everything we can to give out positive messages about our bodies and the need to value ourselves for who we are – whatever our shape or size. Specific training about body image, bullying and other associated issues, such as that offered by my organisation, is an excellent way to start raising awareness throughout a school, with the aim of developing a culture of confidence, inclusivity and mutual support.

★ THE LONG TERM

Being bullied is a very stressful ordeal that manifests itself in damage to a person's emotional, physical, social and academic wellbeing. Its effects can be severe both at the time of the bullying and right into adulthood.

These may include:

- feelings of deep unhappiness and sadness, that may lead to depression, anxiety, self harm, suicide or attempted suicide
- feelings of shame, inadequacy and weakness
- feelings of deep anger and bitterness
- physical illness including stomach aches, stress, insomnia and exhaustion
- low self-esteem that can affect success in education or work, as well as the ability to make friends and form healthy social relationships.

↙ ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Keir McDonald MBE is Managing Director of Educare (educare.co.uk).

Over the last 15 years, Keir has helped to inform over half a million people about child abuse, and in acknowledgement of his work and achievement in safeguarding children, was honoured with an MBE for Services to Children in the Queen's 2012 Birthday Honours.

★ WARNING SIGNS

Parents or carers may be able to tell by a child's behaviour that he or she is being bullied; it's worth communicating with families about signs that could indicate there is a problem and encouraging them to open a conversation with the young person about what may be happening.

Signs include:

- asking for money – or starting to steal (to pay the bully)
- clothes/possessions are missing or destroyed

- unexplained bruises, cuts or scratches
- truanting or saying they are going somewhere, but not turning up
- asking to be driven to school and other places
- stopping eating, or coming home starving
- changing their usual routine
- claiming to feel unwell before they are due to go out
- becoming withdrawn, starting to stammer, lacking confidence
- starting to self-harm, attempting or threatening suicide
- refusing to talk about what is happening
- crying themselves to sleep, having nightmares.

