

Written evidence submitted by The Gresham's School Prefect Team, on behalf of Gresham's School (BYC025)

BE REAL CAMPAIGN

Gresham's School

At Gresham's, we wanted to become involved with the campaign by evaluating attitudes towards body image throughout our own community. We created a survey which asked a range of questions, similar to those asked by the campaign. We gave the survey to randomly selected students from all year groups (ages 13-18) and equally across both genders. We found the information incredibly revealing regarding body confidence in our own community. We presented what we found to the school in an assembly, and suggested some ways that they could improve their own body confidence, which we hope will improve some body confidence attitudes in our school. We have answered a range of the presented questions, both from our own personal points of view and from the information we found from the surveys, which we hope will be useful to the campaign.

2. In relation to young men and boys, minority ethnic groups, and those who self-identify as transgender: what are the specific challenges facing young people in these groups? How effective is existing support?

We believe the specific challenges faced by these young ethnic groups and those who self-identify as transgender are the need to conform with society. This need to conform is within human nature and may pressure young men and boys to not identify themselves for who they truly are. As the majority of society is happy with who they are and do not self-identify as transgender, they feel no need to change the way they look or their beliefs. As this is normal it is most typically presumed amongst peers in a culture. This presumption (or stigma if you like) can act as a hurdle that some may choose not to jump and therefore refuse to accept themselves for who they are. If people removed this ideology of a world in which every member of a society is happy with themselves and who they are as well as their beliefs, then we think it would be a lot easier for these minority ethnic groups and those who self-identify as transgender to be true to themselves and not to feel the need to conform with the rest of their culture. Existing support for minority ethnic groups and those who identify as transgender is support such as counselling. Counselling may be extremely effective when it's used on lots of people, especially young men and boys. However, due to the idea that males should appear in a masculine and focused manner, many boys are too embarrassed to use the support provided. Thus, rendering existing support useless, unless the participant is bold enough to face up to their problems.

3. Do existing campaigns and initiatives to promote positive body image sufficiently take into account the different challenges faced by young people with particular characteristics?

We believe that existing campaigns do take in to account the challenges faced by young people with particular characteristics. For example, here at Gresham's, we heard from a representative from the 'self-esteem team' who spoke to us about body confidence. We believe that this campaign did take in the challenges faced by young people from all scopes of life, as it focused on the fundamental qualities of relationships and happiness. We were asked in the talk to write down what we loved about the person closest to us. It quickly became evident that these qualities were all focused on personality qualities rather than appearance. This considered all young people, as it made people focus on personal understandings of relationships that they could relate to, thus catering for everyone. We think that this is a good example of comprehensive body confidence promotion, as it made everyone focus on their own personal self-esteem boosters. We believe all body confidence campaigns should promote this idea of personal inner confidence that will in turn radiate through to become body confidence.

4. Can the internet and social media be used as a tool to promote positive self-image? What examples are there of this happening?

From the survey we created for our school, we found that 64% of pupils believed that social media should be used to help young people deal with negative body image. However, only 49% of pupils believed that there were many campaigns that promote positive body image on social media. Therefore, from this we can conclude that people want social media to promote body image but there is skepticism about whether it can do so. Some examples from the Gresham's survey about specific ways in which social media helps people deal with negative body image included the use of it as a motivational tool through campaigns and organisations such as the formentioned 'Self-Esteem Team' and the use of plus-sized models such as Ashley Graham. But, another surveyed pupil mentioned the potentially harmful nature of using plus sized models. Although the perceived positive image of plus sized models is that they promote all body sizes, it is potentially not the best way to combat body image issues. This is because plus sized models, like all models, have unachievable and exceptional beauty. It would be more beneficial to focus on making everyone happy with their body and make everyone feel happy within themselves. There is no doubt that social media can be used as a tool to promote positive body image, because of its specific target audience which is comparable to the age group which suffers issues with body image. It is a platform for topics to be widely discussed and seen; but there is doubt whether social media is currently promoting a positive self-image or not.

6. Do internet companies, social media platforms or other platforms have a responsibility to tackle trends which entrench poor body image? What are they already doing in this area? What more should they be doing?

Given that recent studies in America and Australia have found that the sexualisation of women in mass media has led to increased female anxiety, of course they should tackle this, as they are the origin of the problem. Mass media is called the fourth power because it surrounds us all the time and influences our perception of the world both consciously and subconsciously. Already there are videos around popular apps, emphasising the unrealistic idea of the "perfect body image". There are lots of empowering quotes, there are also plus-size models and many films have started to depict very strong and confident curvy and plus size women. However, this is not enough, because simultaneously they are glorifying certain people as well, be it models, for example the Victoria's Secret angels, or very muscular male actors. There are many videos and pictures about how "perfect" they are, also films are deliberately directed to emphasise how attractive this person is considered through the reactions of other characters and the use of music, for example. Furthermore, there are thousands of advertisements for weight loss, medications, and the "best" diet. The use of photo-shop should be reduced and there should be the same amount of unedited photos published. Moreover, there should be more emphasis and education on the dangers of malnutrition or taking growth stimulating medication to accompany all the adverts on weight loss or protein powders, for example. Finally, there should be equal attention to young people who have been very successful academically or musically or in the area of sports for example, not just the popular models, actors and singers.

7. Does the government have a responsibility to discourage the use of social media, the internet, and communication platforms in ways which promote poor body image? What should it be doing in this regard?

We do not think the government has responsibility to discourage the use of social media so that people have a better image of themselves. This is a problem people must learn to deal with themselves, as social media is only a small influence which includes certain images which could

make individuals feel less confident about their body image. There are many more influences in the world which could affect young people's confidence. Therefore, discouraged use of social media would not have a great effect; we individuals have to learn to feel confident about our body image. Moreover, we believe that social media itself should be tackling online negativity, rather than leaving the responsibility to the government. None-the-less, the main responsibility lies in the eye of the beholder; young people should be taught to use social media confidently rather than banning it altogether.

10. To what extent is dissatisfaction with body image contributing to the increase in mental health?

We believe body image among young people is a large contributing factor to the increasing rate of mental health. People are falling into the trap of becoming obsessed with the 'perfect body type' and thus take matters into their own hands in order to achieve said body type. Hence, the eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia become prominent as young people try to feel better about themselves. Cyber-bullying and negative judgments have become a popular issue as young people nowadays are able to comment on other people's appearance on social media. This problem is becoming severe as people do not realize the sensitivity of others thus some problems have even caused serious mental health incidents such as suicide. Therefore, it seems evident that many problems affecting mental health are down to the dynamics of the younger generation's attitude towards body image, especially regarding social media and the constant reminder of what people should look like.

11. Does the NHS have sufficient resources and expertise to manage mental health issues associated with poor body image? How have changes in education funding impacted on the ability of schools to provide in mental health services?

The NHS website contains information on a range of mental health issues, Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) being one of them. The service shows its expertise in the topic of body image issues through its extensive information and offers treatments such as drug therapies and counseling programs to help manage mental health issues such as BDD. Despite this, a 2007 survey shows that only 24% of people with common mental health issues such as depression and anxiety were being treated. Of these, 14% were solely on medication and the remaining 10% were the only people to get any form of counseling or therapy. To combat this, the Government Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) program was launched which improved the drastic state of things but not to the desired level. It can be inferred from this that the figures in relation to BDD are likely to be similarly distressing which suggests that while the NHS has sufficient expertise in how to deal with mental health issues, particularly associated with body image, there is a lack of resources which allow immediate and continuous treatment for the mentally ill. Drops in funding for education will undoubtedly have caused issues in relation to the ability of schools to provide mental health services as less money in the school means an inability for resources. Staff members such as school counselors are likely to have been cut, as counseling in schools is recommended but is not required. Mental health awareness is very important in schools as 1 in 5 children have a diagnosable behavioral, emotional or mental health disorder and 1 in 10 young people have a mental health issue severe enough to impair their function at school if left undiagnosed and/or untreated. Funding in education could be the key to getting these students the help they need and therefore minimize the effect it has before it worsens.

12. Are schools sufficiently linked with health professionals? What more can be done in this regard?

Currently, not all schools have the funding or facilitates to accommodate for separate employees with specific health training. We believe that all schools should receive help from the NHS to receive a counselor or doctor in which a student may contact if they do not feel like they can talk to someone without the professional training. Another answer to this issue could be to provide student ambassadors who will willingly want to help their fellow students overcome their mental barriers, or even make talking to others a mandatory curricular requirement.

Summary

As formentioned, we were keen to involve our school in the campaign as we believe it's a serious and ever-growing concern in our generation. We strongly believe that the real issue within body confidence issues is self-esteem. Therefore, the most integral part of this campaign, in our opinion, is to ensure that young people have the inner confidence to be proud of what they look like, and more importantly who they are. This confidence can be found within NHS assistance, a more rounded mental health education, and positive social media presence. We hope that our contribution to the campaign will be useful and we wish you the best of luck with a truly relevant and enthusing campaign.

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