

**Response to the Department for Education’s consultation on
relationships education, relationships and sex education, and
health education**

November 2018

- 1 The Nuffield Council on Bioethics is an independent organisation that examines and reports on ethical issues arising from developments in biological and medical research that concern public interest.
- 2 The Council’s response draws on the conclusions and recommendations of our report, *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, published last year. One of our recommendations called for the Department for Education to ensure that all children and young people have access to evidence-based resources on body image, whether through PSHE lessons or other compulsory elements of the curriculum.¹
- 3 The evidence reviewed for this report showed that young people are increasingly worried about their appearance. Research into the causes of rising levels of appearance anxiety is still at a relatively early stage, but a number of links are being made with features of contemporary life, such as an exponential growth in social media, growth in ‘self-monitoring’ apps and games, and cultural shifts in how the body is perceived, amongst others.
- 4 Many of the appearance-related pressures that we identified in our report are embedded in the technologies that are an increasingly important part of people’s lives. It is crucial to help children and young people to deal with them robustly from an early age, alongside action to challenge at source those pressures that are particularly harmful or discriminatory.

Response

- 5 We welcome the Department for Education’s aim that secondary pupils should know the similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world, including:
 - the impact of unhealthy or obsessive comparisons with others online through setting unrealistic expectations for body image;
 - how people may curate a specific image of their life online;

¹ Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, recommendation 7. Available at <http://nuffieldbioethics.org/project/cosmetic-procedures>.

- over-reliance on online relationships (including social media);
- how advertising and information is targeted at them; and
- how to be a discerning consumer of information online.

However, we believe that education about body image and appearance ideals should begin in this detail in primary school, as evidence shows that boys and girls of primary school age have reported unhappiness with their appearance, and that this unhappiness is associated with anxiety and depression.²

- 6 We therefore recommend that all children and young people should have access to evidence-based resources on body image through relationships education, relationships and sex education, and/or health education to help address rising appearance-related pressures. These resources need to address issues such as unrealistic appearance ideals, the impact of social media and celebrity culture, ways of reducing appearance-focused comparisons, and how to achieve positive behaviour change.
- 7 We encourage the Department for Education to work with the Be Real Campaign, who have created a Body Confidence Campaign Toolkit for schools.³ They have a number of resources available for teachers about the safe and confident teaching of body image in schools for a range of ages, and different curricula.

Contact

Hugh Whittall
Director
Nuffield Council on Bioethics
hwhittall@nuffieldbioethics.org

² Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017) *Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues*, paragraphs 1.6 – 1.19.

³ <https://www.berealcampaign.co.uk/>.