

**BE REAL**  
BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE



# School Worries

A report investigating the concerns young people have about their appearance while at school

August 2019

In partnership with

**YMCA**

*Dove*  
self-esteem  
project



# BE REAL

## BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE

The *Be Real Campaign* is a national movement made up of individuals, businesses, charities and public bodies.

The *Be Real Campaign* was formed in response to the Reflections on Body Image report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Body Image. Chaired by Mary Glendon MP, and co-ordinated by YMCA, the campaign was founded in partnership with Dove.

The Be Real Campaign focuses on three areas in which it strives to bring about real change:

- ▶ **Real Education:** We want to give children and young people a body confident start to life.
- ▶ **Real Health:** We want healthy living and general wellbeing to be prioritised over just appearance and weight.
- ▶ **Real Diversity:** We want the advertising, fashion, music and media industries to positively reflect what we really look like.

# Methodology

This research was undertaken by YMCA on behalf of the Be Real Campaign.

The fieldwork for this research was conducted by YouthSights, a specialist youth research agency.

The sample consisted of 855 young people aged between 11 and 16 years-old from across the UK.

The fieldwork for this research was completed in August 2019.

# Acknowledgements

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A 'thank you' also goes to all the young people who shared their opinions as part of this research.

# Introduction

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Young people are worrying about their appearance as they struggle to confront a seemingly never-ending list of expectations about how they should look and who they should be.

The extent of the problem is illustrated by the fact that more than two-thirds of young people (67%) often worry about the way they look. This worry tends to increase with age as nearly three quarters of 17 to 24 year-olds (72%) often worry about the way they look compared to less than three fifths of those aged 11 to 16 (59%).<sup>1</sup>

The pressures and expectations young people face come from a variety of sources and are often dependent on the individual. However, previous research in this area found that celebrities were the most common source with nearly three fifths of young people (58%) identifying celebrities as where the expectations and pressures on appearance resonate from.<sup>2</sup>

Although celebrities are named as the source of the pressures and expectations, the influence of peer groups cannot be underestimated. While in many cases they do not specifically create the appearance ‘ideals’ that young people are subjected to, for the majority of young people it was the peer group that underpinned and reinforced these ‘ideals’ and expectations.<sup>3</sup>

For many young people worrying about the judgement of others was seen as an inevitable and inescapable part of growing up. This is perhaps not surprising given that more than half of young people (55%) have experienced appearance-based bullying and three quarters of young people (75%) have seen someone bullied about their appearance.<sup>4</sup>

While the focus of this bullying is not consistent between individuals, its prevalence often is as two fifths of young people (40%) who have been bullied about their appearance experience it at least once a week.<sup>5</sup>

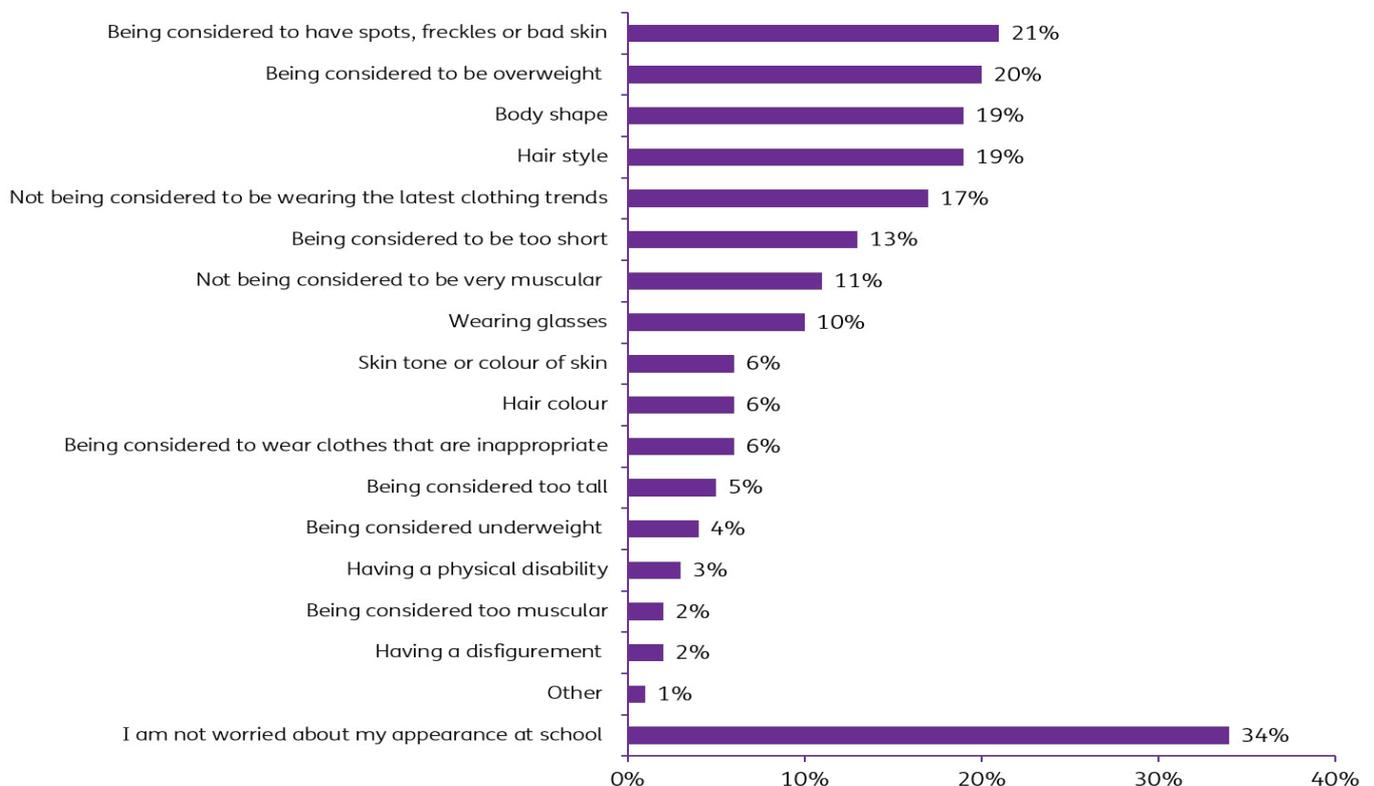
Educational environments are overwhelmingly the primary surroundings in which this bullying takes place. Accordingly, four in five young people (80%) who experienced this bullying related to their appearance do so in school or college, and more than a third of young people (37%) experienced it on their way to and from school or college.<sup>6</sup>

The association between educational environments and bullying is further illustrated by the fact that over two thirds of young people (70%) who have experienced appearance based-bullying did so primarily in term-time, with school holidays providing some light relief.<sup>7</sup>

# School worries

The extent of pressures facing young people in school is illustrated by the fact that nearly two thirds of young people (64%) worry about at least one element of their appearance while at school. Females are more likely to worry about an element of their appearance while at school than their male counterparts with 67% doing so compared to 60% of males.

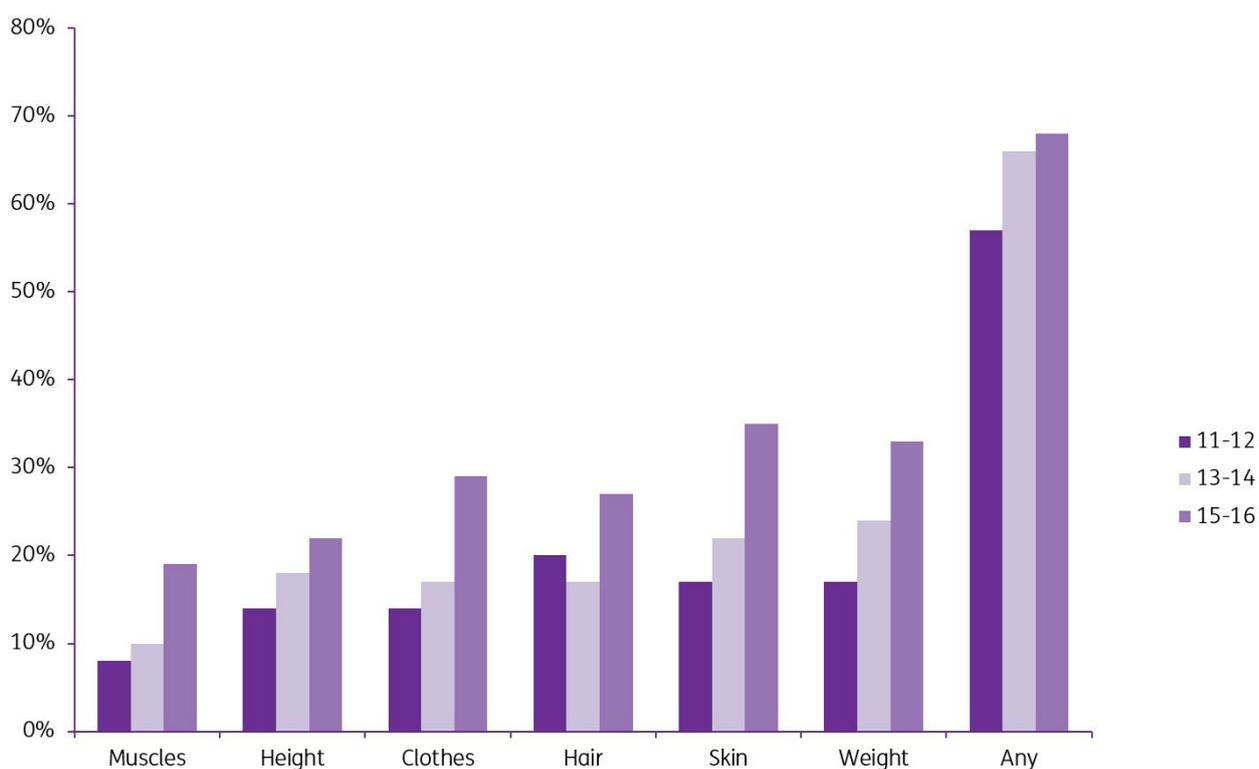
*Do you worry about any elements / parts of your appearance while you are at school?*  
(n=855)



The concerns most identified by young people surrounded their weight and skin. Indeed, nearly a quarter of young people (24%) said they were concerned about their weight while at school. While these concerns were primarily focused on being considered overweight (20%), a number of young people also worried about being considered underweight (4%). In addition, 19% of young people were concerned about their body shape.

Concerns about weight while at school tended to increase with age, with those aged 11 to 12 years-old being more likely to say they were concerned (17%) compared to those aged 13 to 14 years-old (24%) and 15 to 16 years-old (33%).

*Do you worry about any elements / parts of your appearance while you are at school?  
(n=855)*



In addition, nearly one quarter of young people (24%) said they were concerned about their skin. The most often identified concern was being considered to have spots, freckles or bad skin (21%), followed by the tone or colour of their skin (6%).

Overall, concerns with skin increased with age as 17% of 11 to 12 year-olds reported worrying about it at school compared to 22% of 13 to 14 year-olds and 35% of 15 to 16 year olds.

Hair was a concern for more than a fifth of young people (21%) while at school. This tended to focus more on hair style (19%) however, 6% of young people were concerned about their hair colour while at school.

# Conclusion

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Growing up can be a challenging time for young people. From pressures to do well at school and in exams to worrying about what comes next, young people face a multitude of stresses. While some of these are an inevitable part of life as they transition into adulthood, the worries young people have about their appearance are not.

Despite this, young people are worrying about their appearance, and worrying about it while in school. Schools should be a safe environment where young people feel comfortable to learn and share their opinions however, many are prevented from doing so over insecurities about their appearance.

Previous research undertaken for the Be Real Campaign revealed the important role that education plays in tackling body image anxieties and concerns about appearance. However, despite the recognition of education at a young age, just under half of young people (48%) have learnt about body confidence in schools.<sup>8</sup>

The beneficial impact that education on body confidence can have is illustrated by the fact that more than three quarters of young people (76%) who learnt about body confidence in school say it makes them feel more positive about their appearance.<sup>9</sup>

As such, in order for schools to become a positive learning environment they must become settings that promote and foster body confidence among young people and play their part in equipping young people with the means to tackle the causes of body image anxiety.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> YMCA, *The Curate Escape*, May 2019

<sup>2</sup> YMCA, *Great Expectations*, July 2018

<sup>3</sup> YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

<sup>4</sup> YMCA, *In Your Face*, February 2018

<sup>5</sup> YMCA, *In Your Face*, February 2018

<sup>6</sup> YMCA, *In Your Face*, February 2018

<sup>7</sup> YMCA, *In Your Face*, February 2018

<sup>8</sup> YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

<sup>9</sup> YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

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