



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



A practitioner's guide to body image and social media

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

The most popular social media platforms are almost entirely visual nowadays, so children and young people are constantly exposed to content (such as photos and videos) that may influence their perceptions of body image. With social media playing such a huge role in their lives, including their experience of school/college, it is essential for practitioners to understand the impact it can have on their self-esteem and physical and emotional well-being.

This guide outlines the ways social media can affect a child or young person's attitudes to body image and self-image, and what you can do to help them set boundaries for using social media in a healthy and positive way.

Why is it important to discuss body image?

[Research by The Education Policy Institute](#) found that social media can influence children as young as five to think about dieting and give in to pressures to be 'thin'. So, it is important to take time to discuss issues around body image and social media with your learners, no matter how old they are. You can help them to understand the risks of what they are seeing online and empower them to build resilience, recognise real or fake content and make positive choices.

Top tips for helping learners consider body image issues online

Being on social media is an integral part of many learners' lives, so it is important to discuss with them what they understand about body image issues online.

1. Explore what body image and self-image mean online

How learners define the terms 'body image' and 'self-image' may change with age and experience. For example:

- younger learners may refer to body image as looking 'pretty', 'ripped' or 'cool'
- older learners may talk more about creating a certain identity or 'brand' online that encompasses the clothing they wear, the type of content they post and the style in which they may post it
- for some young people, sexualised poses or behaviours may also form part of this 'brand'.

2. Talk about pressure and reputation

Help learners recognise and understand the pressures they may face that can influence perceptions of body image. These pressures fall broadly into two categories:

- pressure from celebrity and media culture
- pressure from peers.

[Research from YMCA](#) found that young people aged 11 to 16 said celebrity culture online created appearance 'ideals' that they felt under pressure to aspire to. They also felt that their peer groups reinforced expectations around appearance, and that their online reputation could be damaged if they didn't meet those expectations.

Similarly, [the 'Life in Likes' research project](#) also found that younger children aged 10 to 12 felt under pressure to appear a certain way and keep up appearances online in order to be 'liked' on their social media accounts.

3. Talk about effects of social media on well-being

Helping learners to understand how social media may impact their mental health and well-being is crucial to equipping them with the skills to use social media positively and safely.

[Research from the Royal Society for Public Health](#) found that use of some of the most popular social media platforms can lead to negative effects such as anxiety, depression, 'Fear of Missing Out' (or FOMO) and body image issues, particularly for girls and young women.

There are, however, positive effects of using social media. Aside from supporting education and learning, it can:

- provide access to health information
- provide emotional support
- allow for self-expression
- help learners build positive relationships with others.

Exploring social media and its issues with learners can help them to identify the causes and pressures that lead to negative effects. Help learners create a more positive online experience by considering strategies together to resist pressure from others and take control of what they see online.

4. Highlight and promote positive body image

Take opportunities to show learners examples or campaigns that encourage acceptance and appreciation of all body shapes, sizes and appearances.

[Research from Cohen et al \(2019\)](#) found that body positive (BoPo) posts on social media led to improvements in young women's body satisfaction and appreciation. They were also more likely to follow BoPo social media accounts in the future.

5. Raise awareness of content that has the potential to harm

- Some online content reinforces stereotypes around body image, particularly around gender (such as the idea that all girls should be thin and all boys should have six packs). If children and young people believe they need to pursue and achieve what they believe to be a 'perfect body', this can cause them physical and emotional harm and encourage them to have a difficult relationship with food, exercise and their own self-worth for years to come.
- Some online content may promote harmful behaviours or conditions such as eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia or binge-eating) and dangerous dieting or exercise regimes. It's important your learners realise how harmful this content is, and that some people post such content on social media with a view to negatively influencing others. Encourage your learners to seriously consider the types of account(s) they follow and how this content makes them feel.

Please note, that whilst it is vital to educate learners about problematic online content, you must take steps to protect vulnerable learners by ensuring lessons, activities or visiting speakers **do not** provide information on, or inspiration for, self-harm.

6. Teach critical-thinking skills and encourage questioning

Teach your learners to question the content they see by exploring different ways images have been manipulated.

You can explain to your learners:

- how online content from celebrities and social media influencers often use many techniques to portray an idealised or 'perfect' representation of bodies, for example using flattering camera angles, taking multiple photos to select the best one, and even using digital manipulation (adjusting body shape and smoothing skin)

- how many young people also take steps to edit their appearance before sharing a photo – research from the [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) found that 81 per cent of 13 to 17-year-olds said they had changed or edited a photo before sharing.

By teaching your learners to question such content, you can help them understand the motives behind creating it. This will help learners make better judgements about whether the content is realistic or achievable, and encourage them to resist the pressure to adjust their own appearance.

It is also important to help learners recognise that comparisons between their own bodies and those of people they see online are often unhelpful. Remind learners that huge physical and mental developmental changes take place throughout childhood and adolescence, and comparing their developing body to a celebrity might lead to low body confidence.

7. Explore ways to manage online experience

One of the best ways to help learners develop resilience to issues around body image online is to teach them strategies for managing what they see and experience on social media. This can be done through encouraging learners to:

- change the focus of their social media feeds by following users and celebrities who post content that improves well-being
- adapt what they see on social media by adjusting their account or privacy settings
- use reporting tools on social media to report content that they feel is inappropriate, harmful or may promote harmful behaviour
- develop strategies to disconnect from social media or limit their time spent on social media.

Finally, it is crucial that learners know what to do if they feel they have a negative body image or are worried by anything they see or experience online. Always encourage learners to ask a trusted adult for help and support. In some cases, they may also wish to seek help from mental health professionals.

Curriculum for Wales – Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience

The Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience (Area) provides a holistic structure for understanding health and well-being. It is concerned with developing the capacity of learners to navigate life's opportunities and challenges. The fundamental components of this Area are physical health and development, mental health, and emotional and social well-being. It will support learners to understand and appreciate how the different components of health and well-being are interconnected, and it recognises that good health and well-being are important to enable successful learning.

[Guidance is available](#) to help develop the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience of the curriculum.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) will be a mandatory element of the new curriculum for learners aged 3–16, and statutory guidance will be published in 2021 as to what should be included.

RSE learning will be developmentally appropriate, and it has an important role to play in supporting learners in recognising healthy, safe relationships and understanding, and developing respect for and differences between people. Schools have an important role for prevention and protection, discussion and responding to learners' questions and needs. They have the potential to create safe and empowering environments that build upon learners' own formal and informal learning and experiences, offline and online.

The refined [Curriculum for Wales framework](#) was published in January 2020, and detail was provided to reflect how RSE should be embedded across the curriculum in future.

Where to go for more resources:

- [Childnet – Online Body Image](#)
- [ProjectEVOLVE](#)
- [The Dove Self-Esteem Project](#)
- [Social networks checklists](#)
- [Internet Matters](#)

More information on supporting learners to understand how body image can be shaped by online experiences can be found in the [Keeping safe online 'The insta effect: Body image and self-worth in a digital age' resource](#).

Further help and support

[Keeping safe online](#) on Hwb provides a wide range of advice, guidance and resources about keeping learners safe online.

For further help, advice, support and to report content and concerns please visit [Support Services](#) on Keeping safe online.