

BE REAL

BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE



In Your Face

A report investigating young people's experiences of appearance-based bullying.

February 2018

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 quantitative fieldwork for this research was conducted by YouthSights, a specialist youth research agency. The quantitative sample consisted of 1,006 young people aged between 11 and 16 years-old from across the UK.

To supplement this, YMCA also undertook qualitative research in the form of focus groups held in 12 different locations in the UK, with young people aged between 11 and 16 years-old.

The fieldwork for this research was carried out between August 2017 and February 2018.

Acknowledgements

A 'thank you' goes to all the young people who shared their opinions as part of this research, as well as the local YMCAs across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland who helped facilitate this.

Executive summary

The relationship many young people have with their appearance is a negative one. It is a relationship that is powered by constant comparisons with others, self-doubt, and in some cases, crippling insecurities.

For many, this relationship is reinforced by an explicit barrage of messages, comments and even physical attacks, which tell them their appearance is not good enough and is deemed in some way unacceptable by those around them.

It is clear comments and criticisms of young people's appearance have become part of everyday life. However, while largely expected by young people, such criticisms should not be accepted.

As such, *'In Your Face'* seeks to challenge the norms by allowing young people the space to discuss their views and experiences to reveal the real impact of appearance-based bullying on the lives of individuals in the UK, and to create practical solutions that can be implemented to tackle the problem.

Bullying around appearance is an inevitable evil for young people

- ▶ More than half of young people (55%) have been bullied about their appearance.
- ▶ Two fifths of these (40%) experienced this bullying at least once a week.
- ▶ For most people experiencing this bullying (54%), this starts by the age of ten years-old.

Although young people get bullied for a range of things, size and weight remain the focus

- ▶ Being considered as overweight was the most common reason why young people (14%) reported being bullied about their appearance.
- ▶ In addition to weight, people's body shapes were also a primary focus of the bullying with 12% of young people having been bullied for it.
- ▶ More than one in 10 young people (12%) reported being bullied for not wearing the latest trends or brands, and 6% reported being bullied for wearing clothes deemed inappropriate to their peers.

While social media adds a new dimension to bullying, traditional forms still prevail

- ▶ Nearly nine in 10 of those who had been bullied about their appearance (87%) experienced verbal abuse.
- ▶ Of those young people who had experienced bullying based on their appearance, more than one quarter (26%) were cyberbullied.
- ▶ Four in five young people (80%) who had experienced bullying related to their appearance did so in school or college.
- ▶ More than half of young people who had experienced this bullying saying it had come from either their acquaintances or peers (53%) or their friends (51%).

The most significant impact this bullying has on young people is on their mental wellbeing

- ▶ More than half of young people (53%) who had experienced appearance-based bullying said they became anxious and a quarter (29%) said they became depressed as a result.
- ▶ Three fifths of young people (60%) took action to change their appearance as a result of the bullying they received. The most prominent focus being to change their size and body shape, with almost a quarter (24%) of young people dieting and nearly a fifth (19%) doing more exercise.

Despite the impact of the bullying, young people are suffering in silence

- ▶ One in five young people (20%) who experienced this bullying did not speak to anyone about it. When they did, parents and carers (58%) were the groups they turned to most often.
- ▶ More than one in five (22%) of those who did not speak about the bullying said it was because they did not think they would be taken seriously.

The causes of appearance-based bullying are multifaceted

- ▶ More than half of young people (53%) believed people bully others about how they look because they have insecurities about themselves and their own appearance.
- ▶ More than a third of young people (37%) believed appearance-based bullying was caused by the pressures put on young people to look a certain way.

Interventions and actions targeted at young people must be rooted in their experiences and opinions. Accordingly, to bring about this change, this research is calling for:

- ▶ **Lessons on bullying, body image and sexual harassment to be made a compulsory part of the school curriculum.**
- ▶ **More robust measures to be taken to tackle sexual harassment in schools.**
- ▶ **Lessons on bullying to be provided by external experts in the form of interactive workshops.**
- ▶ **Young people to be empowered to challenge bullying and speak about their experiences of it and body image anxiety.**
- ▶ **School policies to be enacted in full and for suitable punishments to be enforced for bullying.**
- ▶ **Whole-school approaches to promote body confidence and diversity.**
- ▶ **All schools and organisations working with young people to have anonymous reporting systems.**
- ▶ **Greater clarity and advertising processes for reporting bullying on social media.**
- ▶ **Targeted anti-bullying and body positive advertising on social media.**
- ▶ **More prominent links to helplines and online resources for those in need on social media platforms.**

Introduction

The relationship many young people have with their appearance is a negative one. It is a relationship that is powered by constant comparisons with others, self-doubt, and in some cases, crippling insecurities.

The extent of the problem surrounding young people's relationship with their appearance was illustrated in our previous research '*Somebody Like Me*', which revealed that more than half of young people (52%) often worry about the way they look.¹

For many, this worry is reinforced by an explicit barrage of messages, comments and even physical attacks, which tell them their appearance is not good enough and is deemed in some way unacceptable by those around them.

This is bullying, and more than half of young people (55%) had experienced it based on their appearance. Additionally, three quarters of young people (75%) had seen someone bullied about their appearance.

While the focus of this bullying is not consistent between individuals, its prevalence often is, as two fifths of young people (40%) who had been bullied experienced it at least once a week.

For the majority of those experiencing this bullying, the words and actions they are subjected to fuel the negative relationships they have with their appearance and succeed in cementing feelings of self-doubt and insecurity.

This insecurity and self-doubt is often embedded from a young age as the majority of young people (54%) who had experienced bullying relating to their appearance said it started before they were ten years-old.

Consequently, many of these individuals had been subjected to years of such bullying, each day enduring attacks from those around them.

While the number of young people experiencing bullying around appearance points to a wide-ranging problem, interpretations of bullying differ significantly.

The disconnect is illustrated in the fact that while over half of young people (55%) had been subjected to appearance-based bullying, just more than one in 20 (6%) admitted to having bullied someone about their appearance themselves.

While much of the disparity between the two is due to young people not being honest about their involvement in bullying, it is also illustrative of the lack of clarity around the exact classification of what constitutes bullying to young people. As such, that which some brush off as merely banter, others indisputably call bullying with the harmful intent that goes with it.

In recognition of this, *'In Your Face'* holds that intent is in the eye of the recipient, and as such, no formal definition of bullying was given to the young people participating in the research to explore their own interpretations and experiences.

However, whether bullying or banter, it is clear that comments and criticisms of young people's appearance have become part of everyday life. However, while largely expected by young people, such criticisms should not be accepted.

As such, *'In Your Face'* seeks to challenge the norms by allowing young people the space to discuss their views and experiences to reveal the real impact of appearance-based bullying on the lives of individuals in the UK, and to create practical solutions that can be implemented to tackle the problem.

Uncovering the bullying

Assessing the problem of appearance-based bullying is made more difficult by the lack of clarity around what constitutes ‘bullying’.

Speaking to young people reveals the extent to which they are surrounded by comments about their appearance. From explicit bullying to ‘harmless’ banter from friends and peers, to pressures over school uniforms, it is clear thoughts and considerations about appearance take up a significant amount of their days.

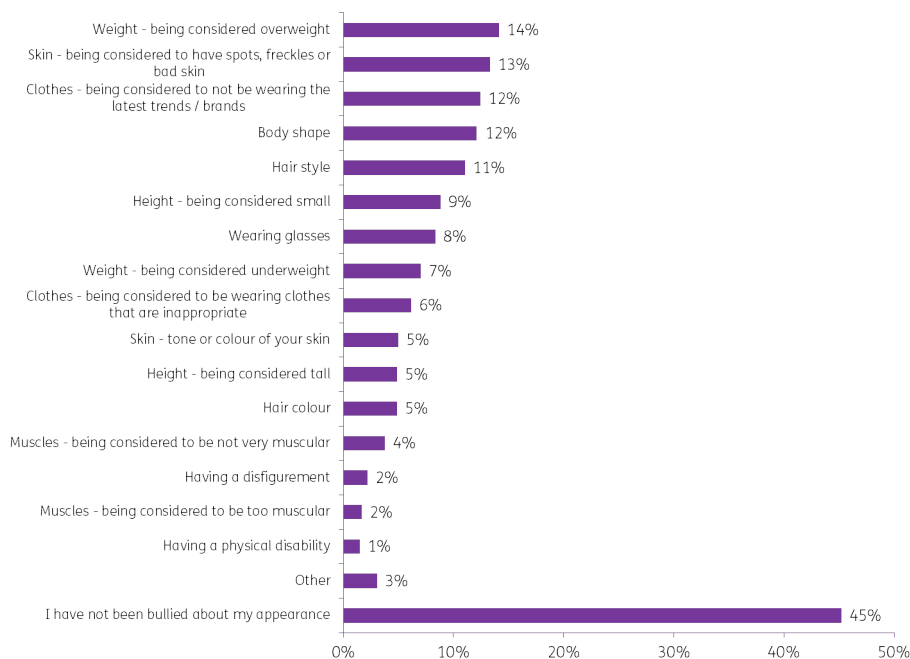
Our previous research - ‘*Somebody Like Me*’ - found young people’s understandings of body image extend well beyond the narrow concerns of shape and size that are traditionally presented. Instead, their understandings were said to be more encompassing with an importance placed on the broader image they present to the world, of which their body shape and size were just two elements.²

Inevitably with broader conceptions of body image, come increased numbers of potential vulnerabilities for young people; this is matched by an increased number of opportunities for people to exploit these to cause harm.

“You can’t be too skinny, and you can’t be too fat. You can’t have a big nose, or bushy eyebrows. You can’t have like, small lips, and you can’t have big ears. Like, it’s just the expectations.”

15, County Durham

Have you ever been bullied about any of these parts of your appearance? (n=1,006)



Being considered as overweight was the most common reason why young people (14%) reported being bullied about their appearance; this was matched by those who reported having seen another young person being bullied about their appearance, with 41% of young people saying being overweight was the focus.

Indeed, for those participating in the research, there was near universal recognition that people's weight is scrutinised by those around them; this was true even of those who had not experienced such bullying themselves.

While the majority of this bullying was focused on those who were considered to be overweight, it also extended to those who were deemed to be underweight, albeit to a lesser extent.

A minority of young people thought considerations of weight were less of an issue among young people these days given increased efforts to tackle weight-based discrimination. Nevertheless, the majority believed people still deem it acceptable to judge people based purely on their size.

However, this bullying based on size was not always explicitly about the physicality of the young person, but instead often extended to the negative characteristics they were deemed to have as a result; this included that a plus-size person was inherently lazy and thus they deserved to be criticised as a result.

“If you are too skinny you are anorexic, if you are too big you are fat.”
12, Antrim

“In school, if you're slightly on the bigger side, you get bullied for it, for being big-boned or chubby. Most of the time, we don't really have a choice, like, how big we are or that kind of thing.”
15, Devon

“Body thickness. Girls here they really get bullied on that. Yeah, especially in my school, um, yeah, it's the main one.”
16, London

In addition to weight, people's body shapes were also a primary focus of the bullying with 12% of young people having been bullied for it and 27% of young people having witnessed people being bullied about it.

Girls were thought to experience more bullying based on their body shape than boys. While this was explained by the fact girls had specific elements of their shape under scrutiny, it was also felt there was more pressure on girls to fit body 'ideals' and as such, they faced bullying when not living up to them.

Such ‘ideals’ were encompassed in body ‘trends’ they felt pressurised to meet like having a ‘thigh gap’, as well as the longer lasting concerns of not being deemed ‘flat chested’ and having the right amount of curves without being seen as overweight.

“At the end of the day you can’t help how big your bum is or how big your boobs are because you’re just born, and that’s your whole life set out.”

16, Nottinghamshire

“It’s like, you’ve got more to be inspected on ‘cos you’re a girl.”

13, County Durham

While boys reported experiencing similar pressures, these were less wide-ranging and tended to focus on size. Also, these tended to be seen to be constant, without the level of ‘trend’ experienced by girls.

The extent of the difference is illustrated by the fact that 15% of girls reported to having experienced bullying about their body shape, compared to 9% of boys.

In addition to shape and size, young people’s skin was the focus of much of the bullying they received with 13% saying they had been bullied about having ‘bad skin’, spots or freckles.

“If you wear certain make-up you get called like, a whore and a slag. If you wear no make-up then you’re ugly, and then you’re trolled.”

14, London

“There’s a lot of kids in my year with a lots of spots. They might get picked on for that.”

15, Devon

Again, more girls (16%) reported being subjected to bullying around their skin than boys (10%). Similarly, more girls reported witnessing another young person being bullied about their skin (27%) compared to boys (20%).

The differences between genders are illustrative of the fact that the additional pressures and expectations placed on girls bodies are supplemented with those placed on the more aesthetic elements of their appearance by ‘beauty ideals’.

Notably, these ‘ideals’ tended to change among different groups and were often dependent on preferences of the peer group.

Consequently, while in some groups young people felt pressurised to wear makeup and appear ‘flawless’, in others young people were either bullied for wearing make-up and ‘trying too hard’ or criticised for using it in the wrong way.

While the ‘ideals’ and expectations differed, the pressures faced to match them was the same, as was the sense of failure felt when they did not. This internalised sense of failure and judgement was then reinforced by the comments and actions of those who were bullying them.

Although bullying based on appearance is prevalent among all young people, the problem can be acuter for those with disabilities, visible differences or disfigurements, who often face a more significant set of challenges than their peers.

Indeed, half of all school children who have a disfigurement experience discrimination because of it.³

Much of this bullying was felt to be driven by ignorance and misunderstanding around certain conditions, as well as intolerance for that which does not match society's perception of the 'norm'.

"I suffer from psoriasis...they would just start to call me rude names and stuff about it."
16, Suffolk

"I get bullied because of obviously, I have no fingers."
12, Devon

While bullying around physique was the most common experienced, it often extended beyond physical attributes to all aspects of young people's appearance.

The most common of these were clothes, with 12% of young people reporting to have been bullied for not wearing the latest trends or brands, and 6% reporting to have been bullied for wearing clothes deemed inappropriate.

Attitudes towards clothing varied considerably among young people participating in the research. While some completely rejected the pressures around clothing, the majority of young people spoke of a need to 'fit in' with their peers and the bullying they received if they did not.

Frequently it was the brand of the clothing that was deemed most important to young people, and more often than not, these were the brands with expensive price tags attached to them. This added an additional concern for those from lower-income backgrounds who could not afford such items of clothing, leaving them more vulnerable to bullying.

"When I went to a different youth club for a couple of weeks, my first day there I got bullied and I stopped wearing that and wore something completely different. The situation I was in, if I wore the clothes again, I would have got bullied again for that, so I had to change it."
12, Antrim

"Their clothes, like, they don't wear, like, big brands like Nike and Adidas."
14, Lincolnshire

"In secondary school, say if like, your parents haven't like, got as much money as someone else's, and you're not wearing the newest trainers, then that kid will straightaway judge you."
16, Nottinghamshire

The importance bestowed on expensive brands was reported more by boys than girls with some noting a contradiction existed between the two, especially in regards to the expectations placed on them to impress their preferred sex.

“Boys will wear like, £100 tops, £100 jeans, and £500 shoes to impress a girl with a £20 dress. It makes sense, like, girls don’t have to spend that much money on clothes, but boys do.”

16, London

For those who recognised the pressures, branded clothing was often seen as a status symbol, helping boost their ‘reputation’ within their school and preventing them from being the victims of bullying.

As such, this clothing was seen as providing young people with a source of power, affording them the opportunity to judge and criticise their peers, particularly those who could not afford them.

In contrast, for others, it was not the brand of the clothing but the style or type of clothing that was seen to be most important. In such instances, young people felt they were forced into dressing to meet certain gender-based and cultural-based norms to avoid standing out and receiving bullying from those around them.

Young people’s experiences of appearance-based bullying are illustrative of the wide-ranging pressures they face to ‘fit in’. Indeed, many young people noted the lack of acceptance of individuality and spoke of the burden they felt trying to fit into a predefined ‘mould’ created by their peers but driven by society’s standards.

The result of these pressures is a generation of young people who are increasingly consumed with concerns about the way they look. For the majority, this focus is not one of vanity, but instead the desire to simply be accepted by their peer group.

A new dimension

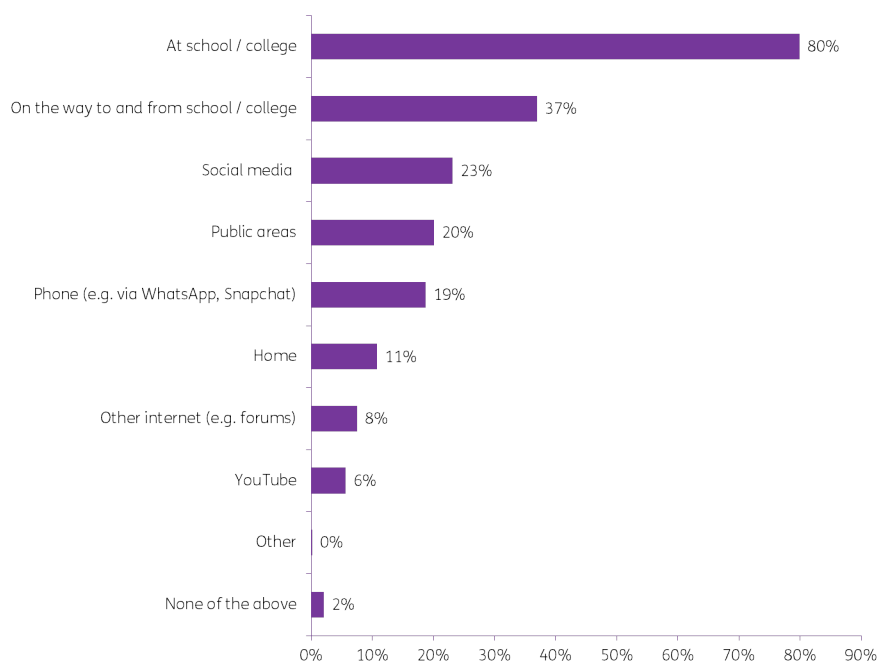
It is an inescapable fact young people are living in an ever-connected world as social media and messaging platforms play an integral part in their lives. However, with increased screen-time comes increased vulnerabilities.

Indeed, *'Somebody Like Me'* revealed how in many cases, young people's relationships with social media and messaging platforms are fuelling an on-going internal battle in those trying to keep up with appearance-based 'ideals' to gain acceptance from others.⁴

However, as well as perpetuating their subconscious internal battles, social media platforms and messaging apps have also become a means by which young people are subjected to external negativity and abuse, if and when they do not match such 'ideals'.

Of those young people who had experienced bullying based on their appearance, more than one quarter (26%) were cyberbullied. Similarly, 23% of these young people had experienced bullying via social media, and 19% had experienced it via their phone on apps including WhatsApp or Snapchat.

Where have you experienced bullying about your appearance? (n=528)



Inevitably, young people's perceptions of cyberbullying tended to differ depending on their experience of it.

A minority of young people reported paying little attention to the negative comments they received online, most dismissing them as ‘childish’ or ‘sad’. Also, some were able to turn them into a positive, stating they felt flattered by the attention they got when others felt the need to spend their time concerning themselves with how they look.

“That says you have the time to be sitting at home thinking about me. So like, your life revolves around me. Like you’re a fan. You might as well make a fan page, or start some YouTube channels ‘cos you’re admiring.”

16, London

However, the majority of young people who had experienced abuse online felt it was a particularly brutal form of bullying. The increased intensity of cyberbullying was attributed to the sense of detachment perpetrators felt when using such platforms. This resulted in them pushing the boundaries they would usually have when speaking to someone in person, as they were desensitised to their effects.

“People can just hide behind the internet and you don’t really know who they are or anything, so they feel like they’re protected, so they feel like they can say whatever they want to anybody.”

14, Surrey

“There is the cyberbullying instead of the in person bullying. I think social media is worse, because they can say whatever they want.”

13, Vale of Glamorgan

“Something like, through Snapchat, someone said something on there, but then they don’t say anything to you in school.”

14, Manchester

The sense of detachment and boundary-pushing was exacerbated when the platform used allowed the perpetrator to remain anonymous.

The problem with anonymity was illustrated by young people’s experiences of Sarahah, which were repeatedly raised throughout the research process.

Sarahah has been dubbed the ‘honesty app’, allowing the user to improve their friendships by discovering their ‘strengths and areas for improvement’.⁵

While a few young people reported a positive experience of the app, having received morale boosting compliments from their peer group, the majority were merely subjected to a tirade of negative abuse from anonymous users.

Often the messages and comments received were profoundly offensive and in many cases highly sexualised and inappropriate given the age of the young people who both sent and received them.

Importantly, given that Sarahah is linked to existing social networks, typically Snapchat, comments are written by someone already in their social network although they do not know who. As such, while there is no way of telling who wrote the individual comment the recipient is aware it is someone they know.

The extent of the problem is illustrated by the fact that 22% of young people who had experienced bullying based on their appearance did so from a stranger, and 15% did so by someone who was anonymous.

The anonymity provided by the app removes much of the ‘network’ element of many other social media channels. As such, by using Sarahah, young people are seemingly opening themselves up to the potential for online abuse without any obvious social benefit.

Often the explanation given by young people for using the app was they wanted to know what their peers ‘really thought of them’, and Sarahah provided a means by which they could find out.

This quest for positive affirmation is reflective of young people’s need for acceptance and external validation from those around them.

“Because have you ever like, been in a room and wondered, I wonder who really does like me and who doesn’t.”

14, London

“You’re looking to see what people will actually do if you give them the freedom to do it.”

15, County Durham

“To see what people think about you.”

14, Lincolnshire

“I’ve been told to kill myself on a daily basis from my Sarahah.”

15, London

However, for the majority of young people, Sarahah fails to provide this validation. Instead, it delivers a stream of abusive messages to their phone young people can, and often do, become consumed in, feeding their insecurities and body image anxieties.

In addition to Sarahah, young people also reported being bullied about their appearance on some of the more traditional social media platforms.

Snapchat was frequently named as a platform on which young people received such bullying. While not anonymous, Snapchat has the ‘benefits’ of being able to send private content specifically to individuals, and that content is automatically deleted after a predetermined period.

While such features in themselves can be harmless, it seems some young people are exploiting them to bully others in the knowledge they make evidencing such actions harder.

This is because a sender is notified if and when a screenshot is taken of a message they send, and thus collecting evidence and anonymous reporting is made near impossible.

“Well I used to think it was Instagram, but then Snapchat came, and then it’s just like took over everything. ‘Cos like, people use that the most.”
14, Manchester

Although age restrictions have been put in place on social media sites, young people are continuously evading these. Indeed, young people frequently spoke of having signed up to multiple social media accounts by the age of seven illustrating the protections being put in place to protect young people are currently failing to do so.

While problems are apparent in social media platforms, it is important to recognise they merely provide a vehicle through which young people are bullied. As such, the wider determinants of bullying and body image anxieties must also be noted in order for it to stop.

Traditional forms of bullying still prevail

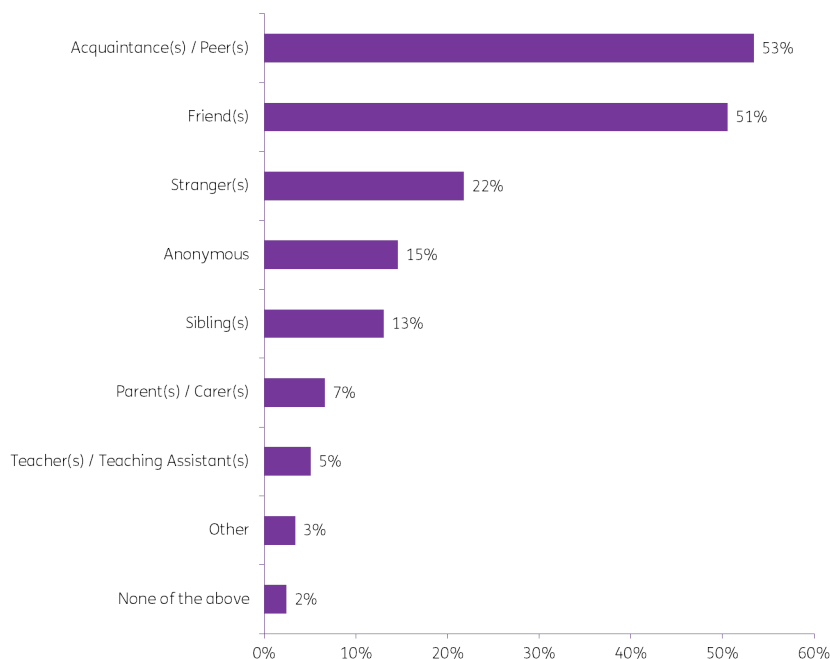
While there is a growing focus on the abuse young people receive on social media about their appearance, it is clear the more traditional forms of bullying still dominate.

Indeed, far from merely being a side effect of too much time on social media, appearance-based bullying is encompassing all areas of young people's lives with cyberbullying being seen as an extension of the day-to-day.

Educational environments are overwhelmingly the primary surroundings in which this bullying is taking place. Accordingly, four in five young people (80%) who had experienced bullying related to their appearance did so in school or college, and more than a third of young people (37%) said that it also happened on their way to and from school.

Crucially, the bullying young people received was predominantly from those involved in their everyday lives, with more than half of young people who had experienced this bullying saying it had come from either their acquaintances or peers (53%) or their friends (51%).

Who have you been bullied by about your appearance? (n=528)



The implication of school life in bullying for young people and the dominance of traditional forms of bullying is further demonstrated by the fact that over two thirds of young people (70%) who had experienced appearance-based bullying said their bullying tended to happen most in term-time, with school holidays providing some light relief.

“With my experiences, without my mum boosting up my confidence, for me to have been able to have got through the 11 years of school, without her giving me that boost and other members of my family, I wouldn’t have been able to get through it.”

16, Nottinghamshire

“My bullying started in school and now it is everywhere.”

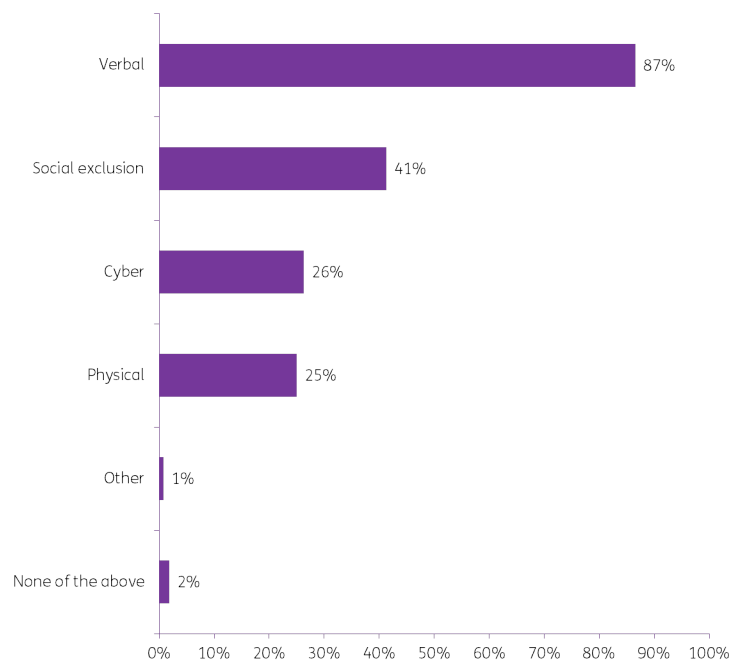
12, Fife

While a focus is often placed on cyberbullying, nearly three quarters of those who had experienced this bullying (72%) said it tended to happen in person, and 65% said it tended to happen in the daytime illustrating the problem extends beyond just social media.

As such, verbal bullying is still the most common form experienced by young people. Indeed, 87% of those who had been bullied about their appearance experienced verbal abuse; this included anything said to offend, such as insults, malicious or harmful banter and abusive language.

Similarly, of those young people who had witnessed someone being bullied about their appearance, 84% said it took the form of verbal abuse.

What kind of bullying about your appearance have you experienced? (n=528)



Young people tended to have differing definitions of what constituted verbal abuse with a distinction often being drawn between harmless comments or ‘banter’ and explicit bullying.

As always, the barrier between the two was blurred with a variety of differentials given. These included the intent behind the comments, the frequency of the comments and the relationship between the individuals concerned.

“Obviously when you get called a ‘fat slag’ and you’re clearly not, you’re just like, yeah that’s banter. But if they point out obvious shortcomings, it starts to get a little bit more personal.”

15, County Durham

“It depends how well you know the person.”

15, Devon

“If it was banter then like, both people would find it funny, but if it was bullying then like, only one person would find it funny.”

15, Manchester

“Do you know what I think the difference between banter and bullying is? What side of the fence you’re on. I think if you’re the victim it’s bullying but if you’re on the other side it’s banter.”

16, London

“There is a line for sarcasm and banter but then the line for bullying is not that far.”

13, Fife

Irrespective of whether it is intended as bullying or banter, it is clear from speaking to young people that comments about their appearance have become part of their everyday lives, and the implications of them are mostly similar no matter the intent.

Often verbal abuse consisted of name calling focusing on a specific part of their appearance, particularly when this was deemed to differ from the ‘norm’ or the ‘acceptable’.

However, while originating from concerns of appearance, comments experienced from young people often extended beyond those realms with more generic and seemingly throwaway terms like ‘whore’ and ‘slag’ being used excessively without any apparent conscious justification in the mind of the perpetrator.

Much of this language young people reported seemingly crossed a line from bullying to sexual harassment, yet those who had experienced it did not often make this distinction either in their description of the events or the repercussions of reporting it.

While often supplemented with verbal abuse, social exclusion was the second most common way young people experienced bullying about their looks. Indeed, 41% of those who had been bullied about their appearance had been socially excluded.

Likewise, 47% of young people who had witnessed someone being bullied about their appearance said it took the form of social exclusion.

Again, experiences of this social exclusion varied among young people. In most instances this took the form of being left out from friendship groups; however, in some more severe cases, young people reported feeling like they had to exclude themselves from their peer group for fear of their safety.

“It makes me not want to come into school and it makes it harder in lessons.”
13, Vale of Glamorgan

“They’re gonna disconnect from everyone. They don’t wanna be around anyone. They won’t go out like, with friends because they feel like, they’re not gonna be good enough.”
15, Devon

“You will feel like you have a mask on your face all the time and you are worried that it is going to crack and break away and people are going to see what is really underneath and what is going on but no one wants that.”
14, Surrey

“Because of it I have taken myself off social media, I won’t go on it anymore.”
13, Fife

A quarter of young people (25%) who had been bullied about their appearance said they had been physically hurt; this including being hit, tripped or pushed and extended to becoming involved in fights or being beaten up.

As such, the physical violence was multidimensional with some targets taking the ‘fight back’ approach when targeted, and others who were feeling unable to defend themselves responded more passively and ‘took it’.

“You’ve got to deal with it yourself, just go up to them and batter them. Like, I know it’s a bad choice, but if you tell your parents it’ll get worse.”
11, Birmingham

“I would probably use violence.”
15, Manchester

“God gave us fists for a reason.”
12, Birmingham

Importantly, while it can take a variety of distinct forms, the majority of young people who have experienced bullying based on their appearance have faced a multitude of types, often with a variety of forms being used in unison. Sometimes this was explained by opportunism, and in other instances, people viewed the multiple forms as a tactical attempt to increase the impact.

In some instances, young people reported the progression of their bullying as something which began as the 'odd comment' in school and then progressed to more sustained attacks both in person and online.

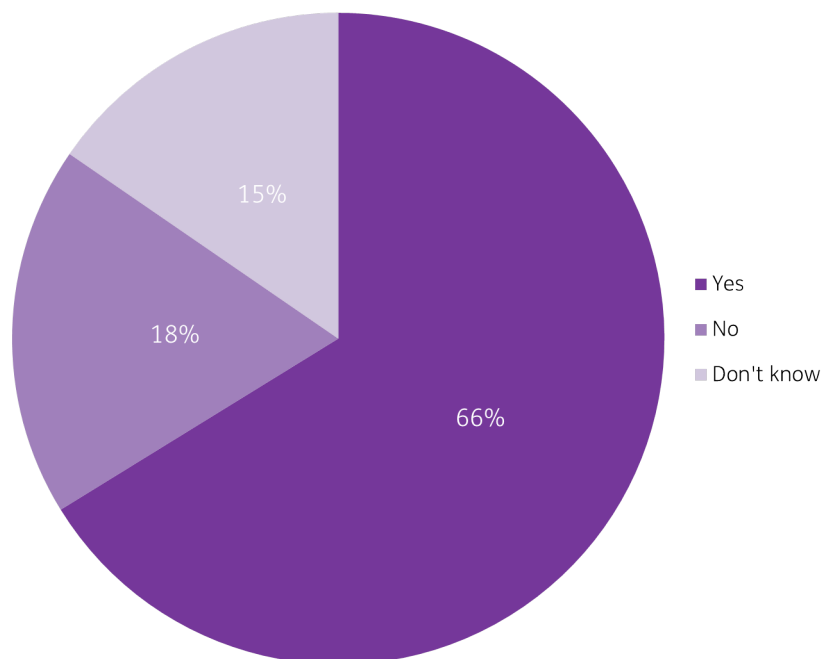
Bullying, therefore, is not a static phenomenon and a young person who is receiving it can often find their experiences changing on a near-daily basis. Given this fact it is crucial interventions to tackle bullying focus on the individual perpetrators, rather than just the specific means by which they chose to sustain their attacks.

Assessing the impact

The prevalence of appearance-based bullying has led to it becoming seen as an inevitable part of life by young people. Something they have come to expect and something they think will never be tackled efficiently.

This pessimism is reflective of the fact that two thirds of young people (66%) believed the adverse actions and comments made about people's appearance are typically intended to be harmful.

Do you believe these negative actions or comments are generally intended to be harmful? (n=1,006)

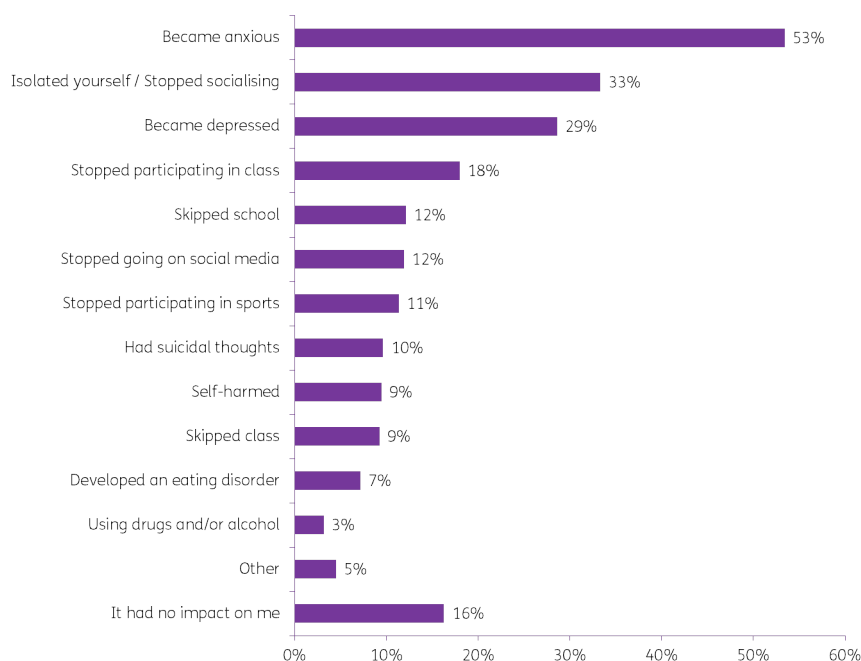


Indeed, for the majority of young people who had been subjected to appearance-based bullying, it was difficult to dismiss such comments and actions as well-intentioned or merely jokes as they highlighted the negative implications such bullying has had on their lives.

By far the most significant impact this bullying had is on young people's mental wellbeing, with more than half saying they became anxious (53%) and a quarter saying they became depressed (29%) as a result of the bullying they experienced.

Furthermore, one in ten of those who had experienced this appearance-based bullying (10%) said they had suicidal thoughts as a result, and 9% said that it had caused them to self-harm.

What impact did the bullying about your appearance have on you? (n=528)



The impact of the bullying on the lives of young people is inevitably affected by a multitude of factors, including both its intensity and longevity. However, the primary response reported by young people was of a feeling of inadequacy and that they are just not good enough.

Persistent attacks on appearance, therefore, succeed in reinforcing the message to young people that their worth is based solely on their appearance, and given that their appearance is inadequate, so is their worth.

“I think what it is when someone calls you ‘ugly’ or something, I don’t know whether it’s just me, but then when I’m like, alone, and I have nothing to do, and there’s just that moment of silence, I kind of think about everything that was said, so then I’m just like, deep in what was said, and then I start thinking about myself, and then I start to think whether everyone else thinks that’s true.”

14, London

“It makes you feel like disheartened. As if you’re not going to be good enough until you’re like anorexically thin.”

15, Devon

The anxiety and depression that young people experience as a result of the bullying are linked to this feeling of inadequacy, and the failure to match up to others they are conditioned to compare themselves to. However, in many other cases, it is also in part linked to the sense of fear that accompanies bullying.

The result of such bullying was often a hyper-awareness of their appearance, actions and general demeanour as young people attempted to stave off negative comments and attacks. For these individuals, each day becomes an endurance test as they become weighed down by the expectations of others.

Linked to increasing feelings of anxiety and depression, a common consequence of receiving appearance-based bullying is withdrawal and isolation. As such, a third of young people (33%) who had been bullied about their appearance said they had isolated themselves or stopped socialising as a result.

While some of this isolation may be a product of the bullying itself, with social exclusion a common tactic used, young people repeatedly spoke of the need to hide away so as not to draw any further attention to themselves and not to antagonise their bullies. In such instances, young people would rather be invisible than risk drawing attention to themselves.

Young people were clear about the importance placed on not showing weakness in front of their bullies for fear of further attack. While some were able to hide behind a happier façade, those unable to do so concentrated on retreating from their peer groups so as not to reveal the real impact of their bullying.

This quest for invisibility extended beyond the social sphere to educational environments.

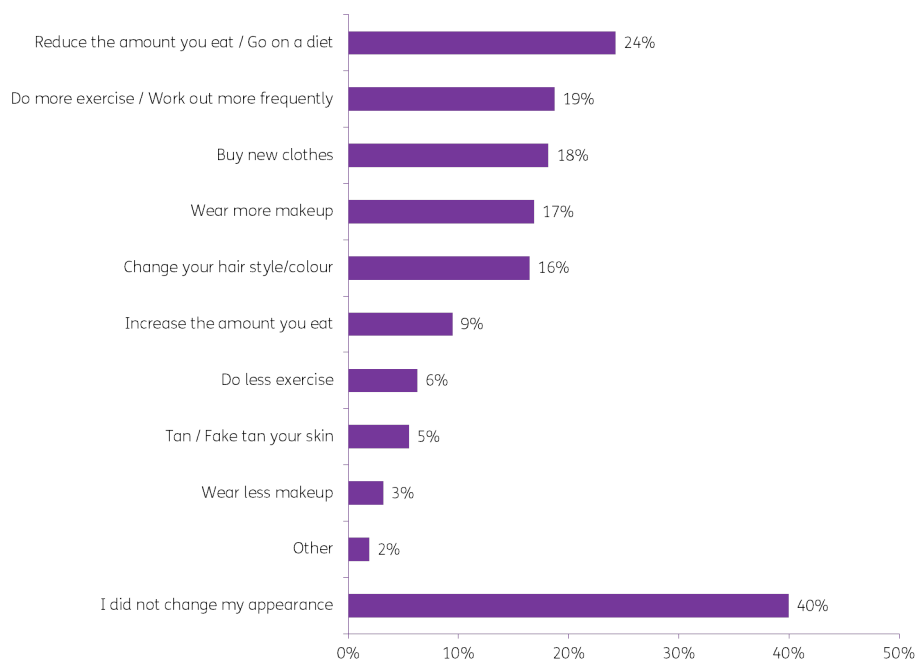
Nearly one fifth of young people (18%) who experienced appearance-based bullying said it stopped them participating in class and 12% said it caused them to skip school altogether.

Again, this is likely to be linked to several factors including increased anxiety, depression and isolation, as well as another attempt to remain hidden among peers or to temporarily provide relief by removing themselves altogether from the environment in which they get bullied.

Young people's desires to stay 'hidden' or to blend in with their peers so as not to attract unwanted attention is also illustrated by the fact they are taking action to change the way they look to fit in with their peers.

Three fifths of those young people who had experienced appearance-based bullying (60%) said they had changed the way they look as a result.

Did being bullied cause you to take any action to change your appearance? (n=528)



The most common intervention young people took was to either reduce the amount they eat or to go on a diet (24%); this was followed by young people doing more exercise or working out more frequently (19%).

Such interventions are likely reflective of the amount of bullying that focuses on weight and body shape. It is also indicative of the wider importance placed on physicality in appearance-based norms.

Girls were more likely to report having dieted as a result of the bullying they received (29%) than boys (18%). Again, this difference can be attributed to the differing expectations placed on different genders and the ‘ideals’ they feel pressured to match as previously discussed.

*“As soon as I got to like, Year 7, then I started getting loads of comments about my weight and I wasn’t like, I wasn’t even fat like, or like, I wasn’t big or anything. Then it started this whole like spiral of like, me getting f**ked up. So, like, I’d like, lost a shit tonne of weight and then I like, put it all back on in Year 8, and that like, created a load of s**t ‘cos I started getting called fat again.”*

14, London

“I am going to the gym and that because I have weights in my house I am trying to lose a bit because I am getting bullied about my weight.”

12, Fife

“It causes issues down the line that is what is not understood. It will cause mental issues or sometimes physical issues. If you are told you are fat it can cause eating disorders, if you are told that you are too skinny it can also cause eating disorders.”

14, Surrey

Buying new clothes (18%), wearing more make-up (17%) and changing hairstyles or hair colours (16%) were also measures taken by young people to change the way they look as a result of the bullying they had received.

While such measures may not be considered severe in themselves, they are telling of the scale of the pressures put on young people, their lack of confidence and the extent to which they feel they have to change themselves to fit in with those around them.

Indeed, for many, taking steps to change their appearance was seen as a way to meet expectations, and therefore bring about an end to the bullying. However, the majority of those who had changed the way they looked noted it failed to either make them feel more self-confident or to stop the tide of bullying.

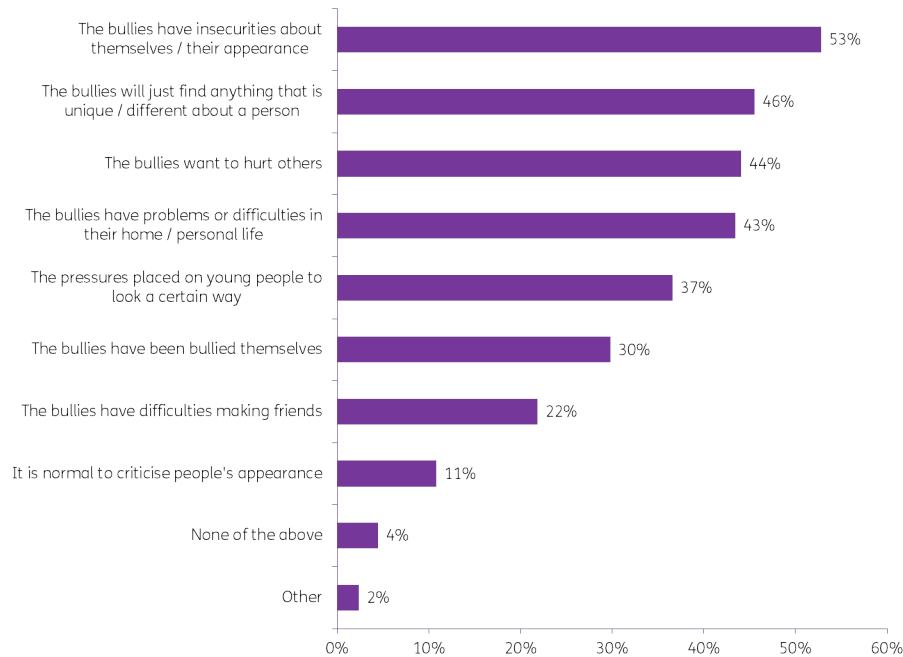
“Even though they look good outside, they don’t feel it inside. So basically it’s not really helping them. It might give the illusion of them looking better to others but not to them.”

13, County Durham

Understanding the inevitable

While appearance-based bullying was seen as an inevitable evil by young people, the specific causes behind it were less clear, illustrating the complex world they operate within.

Why do you think young people are bullied about their appearance? (n=1006)



More than half of young people (53%) believed people bully others about how they look because they have insecurities about themselves and their own appearance. As such, it was argued they often feel the need to bully others about their appearance to make themselves feel better.

However, in other cases, it was thought bullying became more of a ‘self-preservation’ tool people used to prevent themselves being bullied. This defensive mechanism meant an individual could build their reputation as a bully, to instil fear among their peer group and not be targeted themselves about their insecurities.

“Because they’re jealous.”
11, Birmingham

“Like, they could either be jealous of that person, or like, something’s going on at home that makes them angry, and like, they’re gonna take their anger on you.”
14, Manchester

“I think bullying is not right, but I don’t think it is anyone’s intention to make someone go and kill themselves.”
12, Antrim

In such instances, it was thought those who were seen as ‘easy targets’ or those who were less likely to fight back were bullied to create maximum effect with a minimum threat to themselves.

Often, these ‘easy targets’ were those who do not fit into conventional appearance-based ‘norms’. As such, more than a third of young people (37%) believed appearance-based bullying was caused by the pressures put on young people to look a certain way.

Consequently, those who did not meet such ‘ideals’ were automatically more vulnerable to criticism from those around them with the stereotypes and negative connotations behind such differences being exploited to attack the person.

However, while these pressures were generally accepted to exist among young people whether they subscribed to them or not, often their utilisation against others was felt to be an unconscious effort.

Indeed, 46% of young people said bullies will just find anything unique or different about a person to focus on and sometimes this is appearance.

Therefore, while the content of bullying tended to focus on people’s appearance, often this was thought of as more opportunistic and a way to exploit a person’s ‘weaknesses’ or ‘vulnerabilities’ rather than a considered criticism of their appearance.

“I think your appearance is the easiest thing to pick because it’s like, obviously the most obvious thing. Like, when you first see someone, the first thing you see is what they look like, and so it’s like, immediately that, and then the fact that everyone, I think everyone has some sort of insecurity, like, about their appearance.”

15, London

“I don’t think it’ll ever stop. Because it’s just such a big thing, like, in life. It won’t stop.”

14, Manchester

Importantly, while the intent behind the bullying might be more generic, the victim was still faced with negative comments on their appearance, and so the resultant implications and insecurities were likely the same.

Less than half of young people (44%) thought appearance-based bullying is caused by bullies wanting to hurt others.

In cases where the hurt was thought to be intentional, actions were often linked to a power dynamic between both individuals and in wider social groups. In such instances, bullying was not seen as a defensive move, but a proactive one to ensure they are seen as the toughest person and to secure their social status.

Often this concern with ‘reputation’ was linked to wider dynamics within the community with young people wanting to maintain the reputation of, and their place within, their family or group. As such, bullying was seen as a group activity that binds people together at the expense of the victim.

However, in contrast to this, such bullying was also attributed to just ‘kids being kids’, something that was a product of their age and something they would grow out of with time.

Indeed many saw bullying people about their looks as a ‘bit of fun’ that had no serious implications. Again, this is linked to the bullying versus banter debate and the fact many perpetrators are seemingly unaware of the negative implications of their comments.

The young people advocating this view tended to be those who had either no or more limited personal experience of being bullied about how they look. Those who had experienced prolonged and sustained bullying tended to have a more pessimistic view of their bullies and found it hard to dismiss their actions as merely ‘harmless’ and ‘something they will grow out of’.

“No one’s gonna stop bullying people. They even have detention and isolation but it doesn’t stop anyone. They might have detention tonight but it’ll still go and make ‘em do it and I don’t know why.”

11, Birmingham

“Say if someone came up and started having a laugh with me, but then you told them to stop and it still continues, and you’ve got to continuously ask them to stop and they still don’t, I think then it’s classed as bullying. Because obviously they know the effect it’s doing on you, but they’re still choosing to carry it on. That’s when they’re actually doing it to offend you intentionally.”

16, Nottinghamshire

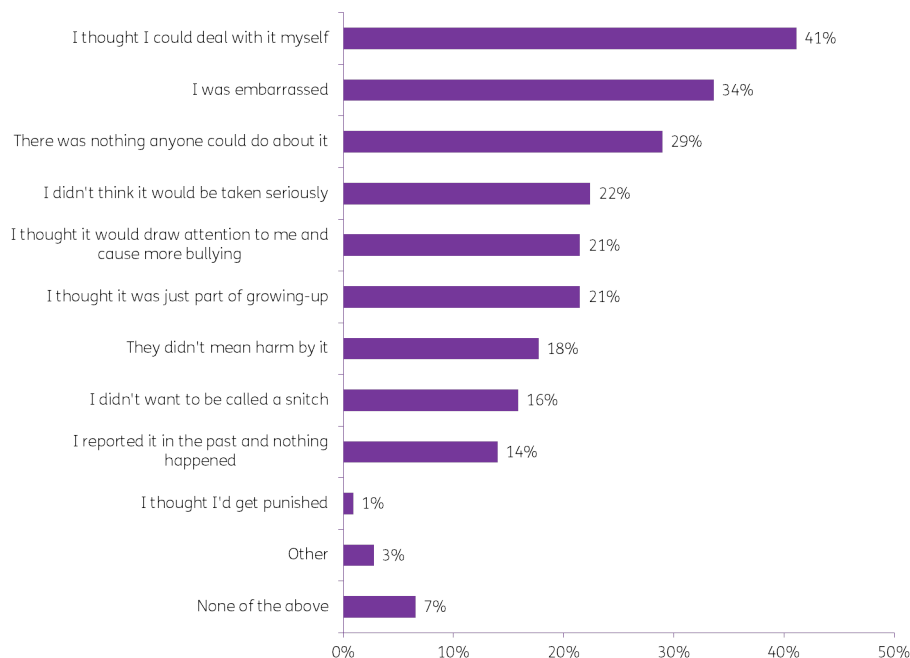
The complexities surrounding the causes of appearance-based bullying illustrate it is not merely an issue of right and wrong, or good and bad. Instead, it is a complex phenomenon that requires a multifaceted approach to tackle.

Supporting those in need

Given both the prevalence of appearance-based bullying and the impact it is having on young people, it is critical they feel able to speak out and get support when they need it. However, despite this, one fifth of young people (20%) who experienced this bullying did not tell anyone about it.

The most common reason for not speaking out given by those who did not was they believed they could deal with it alone (41%). Often these individuals were those who experienced lower level or less frequent bullying.

Why didn't you tell anyone about the bullying you experienced about your appearance? (n=107)



However, this sentiment was also echoed by those who experienced more severe bullying but for whom dealing with things alone was preferable to asking others for help. Often this was due to a lack of faith in the ability of anyone to help or to change their situation and that reporting it might make it worse.

Certainly, embarrassment, not believing anyone could do anything to stop it, and not thinking allegations of bullying would be taken seriously were also cited as key reasons why young people failed to seek support.

“Most of the time, you have to like, pretend that you’re okay.”
15, Devon

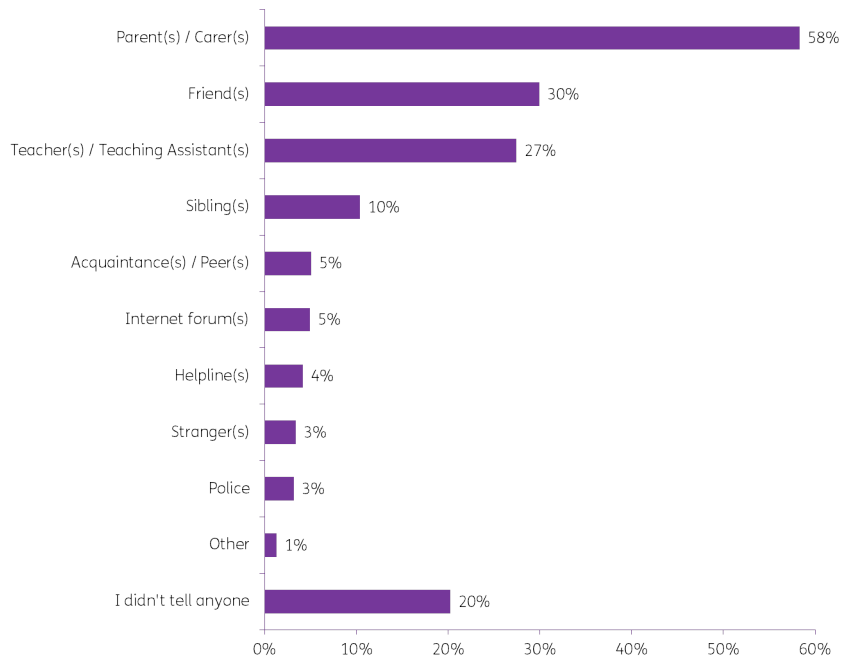
“You can’t. ‘Cos no one, not everyone listens to everyone, like, it’s just one of ‘them things that happens in everyday life’, and you just have to deal with it.”
14, Manchester

“No one. ‘Cos I’m one of those people that don’t speak about their emotions.”
15, Lincolnshire

“When I get insulted, I sort of like, pretend it doesn’t matter, and just like, keep it inside me, and I don’t care, then I end up crying over something really stupid. I let everything build up and then like, I like, end up crying over like, burning my toast, and it’s just ridiculous.”
14, London

When young people did speak out about the bullying they had received, parents and carers were the ones they were most likely to turn to with 58% of young people saying they had told them about the bullying they received.

Who did you talk to about the bullying you experienced about your appearance? (n=528)



After parents and carers, friends were the group whom young people were most often sought support from for the bullying they received (30%).

While the number of people telling friends about the bullying they experienced remained relatively consistent, as young people got older, the numbers telling their parents and carers decreased significantly.

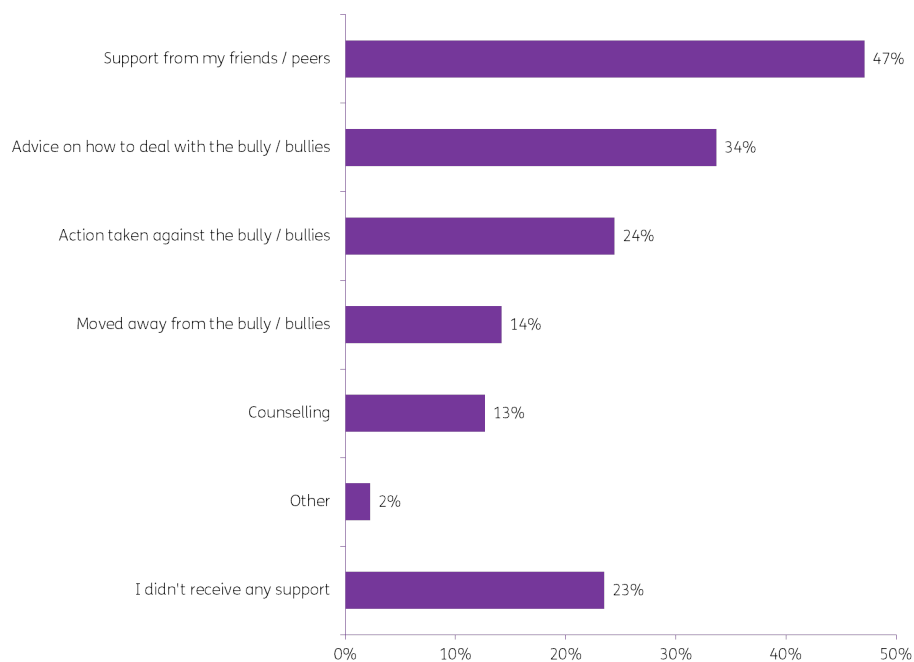
As such, only 28% of young people aged 16 years-old said they told their parents and carers about the bullying they had received about their appearance, compared to 74% of 11 year-olds.

The changing nature of support-seeking behaviour is also reflected in the fact that more than two fifths of young people aged 16 years-old did not tell anyone about the bullying they had received (41%), compared to 12% of 11 year-olds. Indeed, those in the older age range increasingly spoke of being disillusioned about reporting the bullying they had received as little had been done to help them in the past.

Accordingly, young people's reasons for speaking out about the bullying they received were two-fold. Firstly, young people wanted support to make the bullying stop; and secondly, they were seeking emotional support and advice to help provide comfort and deal with the insecurities arising from the bullying.

More than three quarters of young people (77%) received support for the bullying they had experienced around their appearance and of these, 71% said the experience was a positive one. Much of the support received was emotional support and advice designed to help them deal with the effects of bullying.

What support have you got for the bullying you experienced about your appearance? (n=528)



Indeed, just under half of those who received help (47%) said it constituted support from their friends and peers. Also, more than a third of young people (34%) said they received advice on how to deal with their bully or bullies.

While experiences of emotional support were high, lower numbers of young people reported receiving practical support to stop the bullying they received. As such, just less than one quarter (24%) said action was taken against those who were bullying them.

Young people repeatedly raised their frustrations with the lack of practical action taken to stop bullying and the lack of repercussions for those involved. It was felt punishments were often at best, too lenient, but more often wholly non-existent.

*“I think schools definitely need to deal with the after effects, and like, just in like, in general everyone needs to deal with the after effects a lot better because I’ve been told like ‘oh, you’ll get over it’ and it’s like, well, like, I need help to get over it because I’ve been trying for like, three f**king years, and look at me now.”*
15, London

“It’s took my mum, what, five years to actually get them [teachers] to listen.”
15, Lincolnshire

“I have come home crying to my mum and she has called the school and nothing really has happened. I have told teachers and they are like, ‘oh yes, we will get it sorted’ and it never gets any better.”
13, Fife

“They don’t believe us, we talk to our Head of Year and he tells us to ‘grow up’.”
13, Vale of Glamorgan

However, while frustration and anger existed with the lack of action, particularly in schools, young people’s reluctance to approach teachers and report their bullies does hinder their ability to take action.

Many were reluctant to speak to teachers for a fear their complaints would be shared with other members of staff, or escalated down official channels; this was particularly the case in more serious incidences when the police or social services would be required to get involved.

Parents and carers were therefore favoured as many felt they could provide support without the problem being escalated or ‘spread around’. For these individuals, confidentiality was key, as they feared the repercussions of their bullies finding out they had ‘snitched’.

“Like the only thing I feel like teachers could do is either give you advice, or like, they go straight to the bully and then like, tell them off and like, give them attention, but that won’t work stopping it, they’ll be even more angry because like, you’ve like, as they would say, grassed on them.”
14, Manchester

“I was telling teachers and all that but it got worse, so I really did nothing because every time you did something, it just got worse, so I couldn’t really do anything.”

12, Fife

“It is quite scary to report it in case there is more retaliation especially cyber and then that is probably easier because if you think about it, with the cyber bullies they can hide behind it but in real life it is a lot harder, especially when you are being bullied at school or something, then it is a lot harder to report because it is easier for them to retaliate but once you have reported someone and blocked them on social media it might be harder for them to do anything.”

14, Surrey

For appearance-based bullying to be tackled efficiently, young people must feel able to speak openly about their experiences and have faith that those tasked with protecting them will be able to do so. However, at present, it is clear there is often a disconnect between young people experiencing bullying and those around them.

This disconnect is preventing young people from getting the support they need and prolonging incidences of bullying.

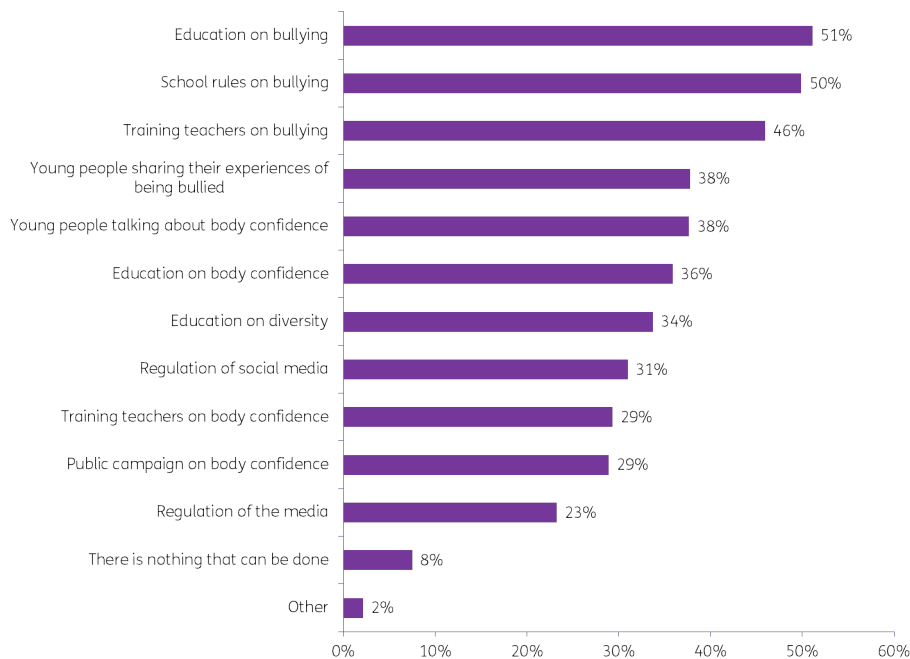
Creating change

Young people are pessimistic about the possibility of change. Their experiences of being bullied about their looks have ingrained a sense of inevitability, and it is hard for them to envisage a world in which they do not come under constant attack about their appearance.

However, viewing bullying as an inevitable part of life, and ‘just something that kids do’ is providing tacit acceptance for the actions of the perpetrators. Indeed, it was reported many young people bully others without concern for either the effects of their actions on their victims or negative consequences for themselves.

To tackle the status quo, young people must be made more aware of all aspects of bullying, including what constitutes bullying and its effects. Indeed, over half of young people (51%) thought education on bullying would help to tackle appearance-based bullying.

What do you think can be done to tackle bullying about young people’s appearance? (n=1,006)



Young people were divided on the current presence of education on bullying within the curriculum, and its quality where it did exist. Lessons were often said to be delivered by teachers who were deemed as ‘out of touch’ by young people, and many found content ‘boring’ and ‘un-engaging’.

“You’ll have that lesson and then the next day you won’t talk about it, so you don’t really remember what went on. Also PHSE (Personal, Health and Social Education) is the last lesson of the day, so everyone just wants to go.”

15, Devon

“No, we haven’t really had anything on body confidence and there has barely been anything on bullying but I do remember in primary school we had assembly and there were some leaflets that got handed round, in secondary school the only thing they have done is literally gave us a card saying here is a number you can call if you are getting bullied which might be helpful but is still not doing much to reduce it or help people who are struggling.”

14, Surrey

“We have them anti-bullying weeks, then everyone just forgets about it.”

16, London

“We used to get told like, if bullies bullied you about your body shape you should be like, more tell the teacher. We only spent five minutes on it.”

12, Fife

Instead, to help transform education around bullying, young people felt such lessons should be made a compulsory part of the curriculum and external experts who can provide specialist interactive sessions and workshops should deliver them. These should include stories of people who had experienced appearance-based bullying themselves and how they overcame it.

While young people felt teachers were often not the best placed to deliver lessons on bullying, they did recognise the wider role they had in tackling bullying in schools.

As such, half of young people (50%) said school rules on bullying and 46% said training teachers on bullying were essential to stop appearance-based bullying.

Many recognised policies were already in place in their schools, but few said they were effective at tackling the problem. This was particularly apparent in those schools that declared themselves a ‘bullying free zone’ or stated they took a ‘zero tolerance stance on bullying’, which young people called ‘simply delusional’.

“They said they’re going to be more strict about like, say the slightest bit of bullying they’ll be on top of it that day, but they’re not.”

14, Devon

“Apparently here is ‘no-bully zone’, Jesus Christ, they’ve obviously dreaming. Hallucinating man.”

13, County Durham

While the intentions of schools were deemed to be correct, many thought such policies were more about reputation than reality and there was little tangible action behind them.

Too often those being bullied reported the onus being put on them to adjust to avoid bullies, rather than attempts made to stop the bullies themselves. In the majority of instances this resulted in young people moving their class to avoid bullies, but in more extreme cases young people were forced to move schools.

As such, schools must ensure policies are matched with practice and young people are both aware of procedures around bullying and that appropriate punishment will be enforced when needed. Where possible, this should include as minimal disruption to those being bullied as conceivable.

The reticence of young people to report incidences of bullying is illustrative of a more systematic problem within schools, in which young people lack trust in teachers and staff members to tackle the problem and do not believe their problems will be taken seriously. This is in part due to the lack of priority given to promoting body confidence among young people.

As such, attempts to tackle appearance-based bullying should be supplemented with a 'whole-school' approach that seeks to promote body confidence and challenge the norm in which it is considered acceptable to judge or attack someone based on how they look.

Indeed, over a third of young people thought education on body confidence (36%) and education on diversity (34%) would be effective in helping to tackle appearance-based bullying.

Such education helps young people to become more accepting and embracing of differences between individuals, which in turn helps to delegitimise appearance-based bullying.

Also, educating young people on body confidence can help to reduce their body image anxieties by enabling them to challenge and question the criticisms they are faced with, thus minimising the impact of bullying.

While meaningful action by schools is critical, effectively tackling appearance-based bullying requires a holistic approach in which all partners accept responsibility.

Given the prevalence of cyberbullying experienced by young people and the dominant role social media plays in their lives, it is evident more must be done to tackle bullying on social media and make it a safer and more positive environment.

While broader interventions are likely to have some effect, it is clear social media adds a new dimension to bullying, which must be tackled accordingly.

Although much is said about the negatives of social media, the reality remains it is a critical part of young people's lives and this is unlikely to change.

As such, social media must be efficiently utilised for anti-bullying initiatives, to signpost young people to support services and to help promote body positivity.

Firstly, despite the number of young people who had received harmful comments online, there was a reticence to report it using official mechanisms due to being unaware of the process and what would happen as a result. As such, to stop the harmful activity, reporting processes on social media platforms must be made more transparent so young people feel more confident in utilising them.

As well as taking action to ban users posting harmful content, the reach of social media should be utilised to provide young people with positive messages; this should include targeted adverts on body positivity and anti-bullying to create behavioural change.

Moreover, links to online resources and helplines should be more prominent on social media sites so young people know how they can access support if they experience bullying.

As previously argued, while schools and social media sites provide the context in which young people bully, it is the individuals who perpetrate the actions.

While few young people admit to bullying their peers about their appearance, accounts of the extent of the abuse received suggest the numbers are much higher. To tackle such bullying young people must be empowered to help end the cycle of judgement and scrutiny peer groups end up in by questioning the behaviours of both themselves and others.

To help promote this change and stop the bullying, nearly two fifths of young people thought people sharing their experiences of being bullied (38%) and talking about body confidence (38%) should be promoted.

Creating an environment in which young people feel able to speak openly about their experiences and concerns helps to increase help-seeking behaviour, allowing for more effective interventions and peer-to-peer support; this, in turn, helps to minimise the impact of the bullying received.

Conclusions and recommendations

Young people in the UK are battling a negative relationship with themselves. It is a relationship which encompasses their body, their appearance, and in some cases, their entire being.

This negative relationship is being fuelled by the bullying they receive from others about their appearance. The constant criticisms about the way they look succeed in filling them with self-doubt and insecurity, and reinforcing the message they are not good enough.

For many, this bullying has become the norm, an accepted part of life that, despite the negative repercussions on them, seems unlikely they will ever live without.

This acceptance is powered by the belief people will always judge others by the way they look and see differences as ‘weaknesses’ that can be utilised.

In reality, while the intent behind such comments may differ, the outcomes for the young person on the receiving end of them are often the same.

To create change so no young person is left in the position to live each day expecting to be bullied about their appearance, it is vital a holistic approach is taken.

Given schools are the places in which bullying most frequently occurs, it is clear interventions to tackle appearance-based bullying must start here.

However, given young people’s accounts of the bullying they receive illustrates it extends beyond the school boundaries and, in many cases, comes to permeate all areas of their lives, it is clear schools cannot be left to deal with the problem alone.

Instead in-school interventions should be supplemented with affirmative action from partners, which help to tackle this behaviour and give young people the confidence they need to challenge the things they hear.

Significantly, these interventions and actions targeted at young people must be rooted in their experiences and opinions, as highlighted throughout this report.

Accordingly, to bring about this change, this research is calling for:

- ▶ Lessons on bullying, body image and sexual harassment to be made a compulsory part of the school curriculum.
- ▶ More robust measures to be taken to tackle sexual harassment in schools.
- ▶ Lessons on bullying to be provided by external experts in the form of interactive workshops.
- ▶ Young people to be empowered to challenge bullying and speak about their experiences of it and body image anxiety.
- ▶ School policies to be enacted in full and for suitable punishments to be enforced for bullying.
- ▶ Whole-school approaches to promote body confidence and diversity.
- ▶ All schools and organisations working with young people to have anonymous reporting systems.
- ▶ Greater clarity and advertising processes for reporting bullying on social media.
- ▶ Targeted anti-bullying and body positive advertising on social media.
- ▶ More prominent links to helplines and online resources for those in need on social media platforms.

Notes

¹ YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

² YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

³ Changing Faces, *Disfigurement in the UK*, May 2017

⁴ YMCA, *Somebody Like Me*, January 2017

⁵ Sarahah.com, available at <https://www.sarahah.com/Home/About>, [Accessed 15 February 2018]

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