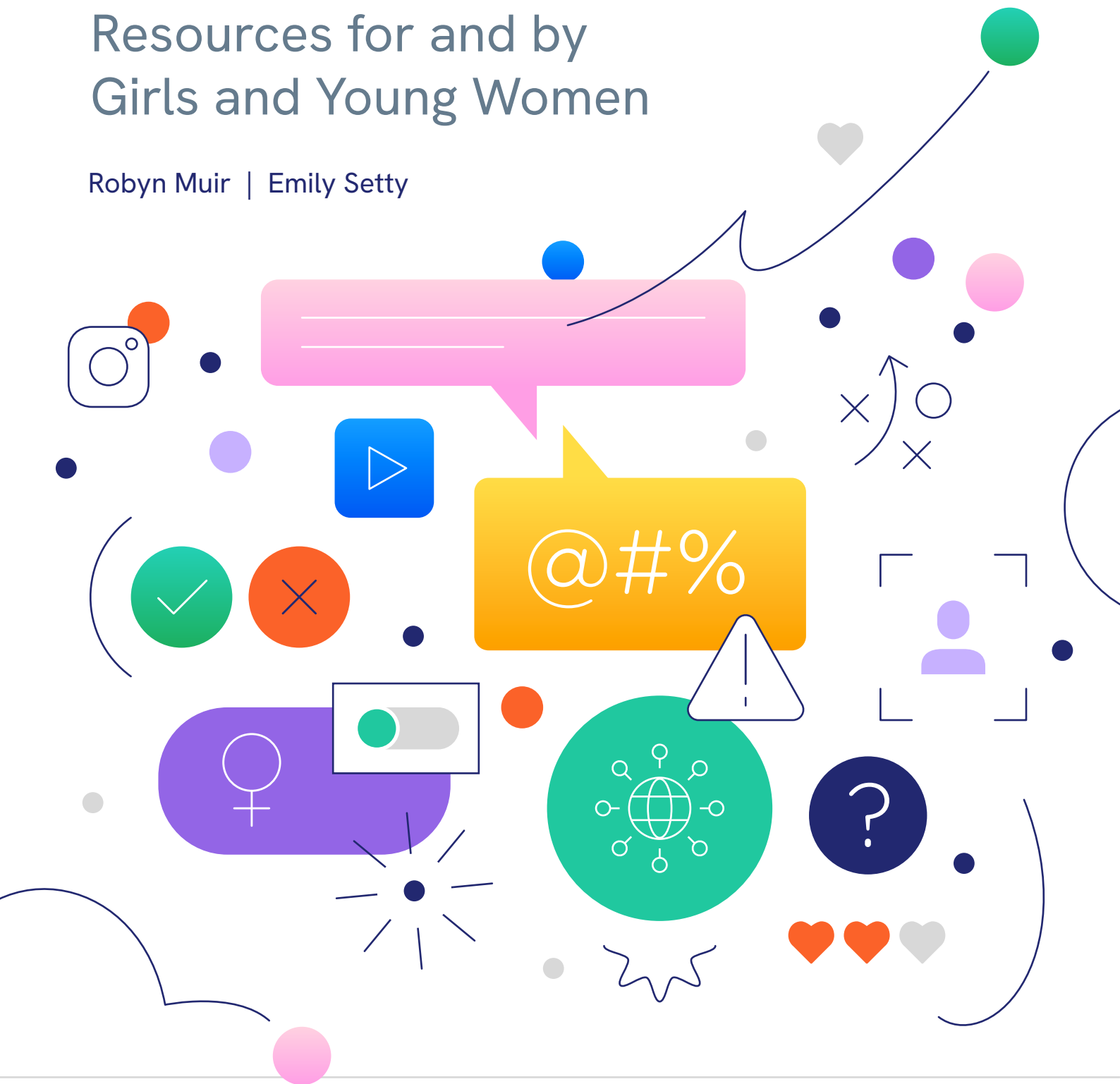


Influencer Culture in the Digital Age:

Resources for and by
Girls and Young Women

Robyn Muir | Emily Setty



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Introduction

This guidance has been designed to address the opportunities and challenges for girls and young women arising from 'influencer culture' online. It is based on primary research conducted with girls and young women because of an identified need to understand and address their perspectives and experiences. The issues with influencer culture are, of course, experienced by young people of all genders but this particular guidance is rooted in the voices of the girls and young women who participated in the research.



By 'influencer culture', we mean the trend towards celebrities and others with large followings on social media seeking to use their platform to influence the lifestyle and purchasing decisions of their followers. Even where girls and young women do not use or are unfamiliar with the term 'influencer', they are nevertheless aware of and affected by the culture.

What will you find in the guidance?

The guidance comprises three main sections:

- First, it outlines **girls' and young women's perspectives on and experiences of influencer culture online**, based on primary research conducted in 2023.
- Second, it identifies the **implications of this evidence for understanding and responding to influencer culture**.
- Third, and finally, it **presents tangible recommendations for addressing the risks and challenges girls and young women face while supporting them to access the opportunities and benefits presented by influencer culture** in the digital age.

The suggestions and ideas for practice relate to three interlocking dimensions to supporting girls and young women to navigate influencer culture to positive effect:

- The **critical media and digital literacy skills** required to identify the dynamics of influencer culture that shape the content encountered, consumed and used by girls and young women.
- The **'cognitive-affective gap' in such literacy, whereby a critical orientation to influencers' content does not necessarily prevent or address a negative emotional response** to the content or ongoing consumption and use of the content.
- The wider **social and cultural context to girls' and young women's perspectives on and experiences of influencer culture**.
 - This includes the ways it interweaves with their offline lives and realities and reflects the societal standards and expectations for girls and young women found in other forms of media and elsewhere in society.

What is the aim of the guidance?

The guidance aims to support key actors – teachers, other children’s workforce professionals, parents and carers, and girls and young women themselves – to support girls’ and young women’s positive social and emotional development and wellbeing in the digital age, as they navigate the often-times complex and contradictory messages and depictions they encounter and engage with online from influencers. These adult actors have not necessarily grown up in the digital age, or, at least, not in the same way as current girls and young women. Perceived and actual generational gulfs in experience and understanding can create challenges for adults seeking to manage issues like influencer culture and, therefore, this guidance aims to upskill key actors.

As we found during the project, girls and young women display varying levels of awareness and agency as they navigate influencer culture and may experience internal conflict and ambivalence about the risks and opportunities of influencer culture.

This guidance is designed to offer a balanced, constructive and evidence-based take on influencer culture as it affects girls and young women with the suggestions and ideas intended to offer practical ways of engaging with girls and young women about the issues and challenges presented by it. Importantly, the guidance recognises and celebrates girls’ and young women’s rights to participate and have their voices heard on the issues that affect them; hence, the guidance is based on primary research undertaken with a sample of girls and young women and includes recommendations regarding what they can do for themselves and for other girls and young women to address some of the problems and challenges posed by influencer culture both online and offline in their wider peer social contexts.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for girls and young women and for anyone who works with and/or is interested in the contemporary nature of girls’ and young women’s lives, specifically as it pertains to influencer culture online. These other key actors may include teachers and other school staff; specialists involved in the design and delivery of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE); and parents, carers, and other relatives.

It may also be of interest to those involved in policy development and implementation at the local and national level because it contains recommendations both broad and specific as to how to address girls’ and young women’s health and wellbeing in response to influencer culture. It is vital that frontline professionals and practitioners have the support and leadership embedded within policy and institutional culture and, therefore, we recommend thorough engagement with this guidance by relevant policy professionals and institutional leaders.

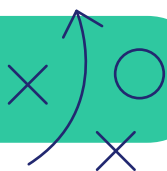
While the guidance has been co-designed with girls and young women and an expert advisory group based in England, the findings and recommendations may apply in other countries and the literature reviewed pertains to studies conducted in other parts of the world as well as in England. However, in general, the guidance has been designed with a focus on England, as a devolved jurisdiction for education and public health policy and practice. We also do not claim that the guidance is fully inclusive and recommend that further work is done to produce resources for boys and young men and gender-diverse young people.

How can this guidance be used?

The guidance is provided free-of-charge and can be adapted and applied by individuals and organisations to use as they wish and as they feel would be most effective for them and in their context. For schools and other education providers, the activities and guidance can be used separately and in combination to ensure they can be adapted for the current curriculum. Any use or re-use of the guidance in the public domain should be accompanied by the following citation:

Muir, R. and Setty, E. (2023) *Influencer Culture in the Digital Age: Resources for and by Girls and Young Women* Available at: <https://influencer cultures.wixsite.com/influencer culture>

Methodology



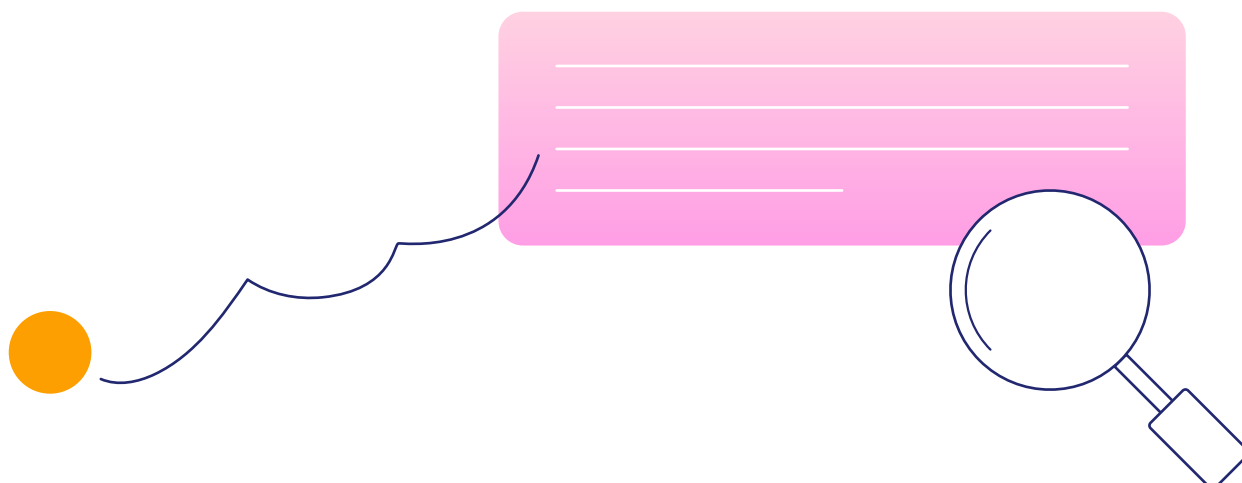
This guidance has been produced through workshops conducted in 2023 with girls across three age groups: Years 5-6 (ages 9-10), Years 7-8 (ages 11-12) and Years 9-10 (ages 13-14), with ethical approval from the University of Surrey Ethics Board. We held three workshops with each age group (nine workshops total), discussing definitions and experiences of influencer culture; opportunities and challenges of influencer culture; and how girls want to be supported to engage with influencer culture. Each age group had between four and six girls, with each workshop focusing on a different element of influencer culture and the project. The first workshop focused on girls discussing who their favourite influencers were and why (girls were invited to provide a picture of their favourite influencers), how they defined influencers, and where they engaged with them (e.g. online or offline spaces). The second workshop built on the first, where girls discussed what they thought the opportunities and risks of influencer culture were, and what kind of things they would want to see in a toolkit to help them navigate influencer culture. In the final workshop, the draft ideas for the toolkit were presented to each age group for their opinions and suggestions. The toolkit ideas were produced based on the textual analysis of the workshop transcripts.

In addition, between each workshop, the research team met with an advisory board of youth practitioners and educators to inform the research. In each advisory board meeting, the key findings from each age group workshop were presented and discussed to identify practitioner perspectives on supporting girls and young women to navigate influencer culture.

How reliable are the findings?

The workshops with the girls and young women were designed to facilitate open and frank – and, importantly, youth-led – discussion about the nature, opportunities and challenges of influencer culture from the perspective of girls and young women. The data was subjected to in-depth textual analysis and the development of the guidance has benefited from the input of expert practitioners and educators through the advisory board meetings.

This process ensures that the findings, conclusions and recommendations are based on a youth-led understanding of the issues and expert assessment as to what is desirable and feasible within practice settings. Yet, we do not suggest that the sample of girls and young women that participated in this research are reflective of the full population of girls and young women in England nor that the range of expert insights we've obtained through the study is exhaustive. It is inevitable that those who participated in the research (the girls and young women and the experts) were sufficiently motivated and interested in the topic and had the willingness and ability to participate.



How valid are the findings?

Workshop participants had the opportunity to contribute their perceptions and beliefs about the topic without necessarily sharing private or personal experiences, although we found that oftentimes, girls and young women wanted to speak directly about their experience of influencer culture as well as what they felt was generally the case for girls and young women their age.

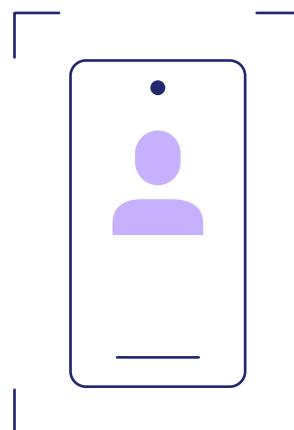
Overall, we feel that the findings provide a realistic portrayal of their perspectives; yet we found that, particularly among some of the older participants, there was extensive normalisation of some of the features and impacts of influencer culture and, therefore, careful workshop facilitation and data analysis was required to ensure an in-depth and nuanced picture was able to emerge regarding what may be happening and to what effect for these girls and young women.

Readers should be mindful that girls' and young women's voices have been interpreted by us during data analysis. In our final workshop with each age group, we presented the draft toolkit based on their previous comments and suggestions about influencer culture to ensure we had accurately captured their thoughts and opinions. We have carefully cross-checked our interpretations and conclusions within the research team and have drawn upon the wider evidence base and the advisory board expertise to further situate the findings and conclusions and, in turn, ensure maximum applicability and relevance of this guidance for readers.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in line with professional ethical principles for research with human participants regarding informed consent, anonymity, and safeguarding and received institutional ethics approval from the University of Surrey.

All participants gave informed consent to participate, with parental consent also required because participants were under the age of 16. Participants' identities have been kept anonymous as have the identities of the schools from which they were recruited. Any identifying details in the data have not been shared in this guidance. Confidentiality was upheld with exceptions in place for safeguarding, whereby any disclosures indicating a risk of harm were to be shared with the appropriate authorities. No such action was formally required; however, one participant shared a story of a recent experience online that was somewhat troubling and so the school-designated safeguarding lead was informed. The participant agreed to the research team sharing the story with the gatekeeper.





Part 1

What are girls' and young women's perspectives on and experiences of influencer culture?

This section draws upon the findings from the workshop to outline the nature of girls' and young women's perspectives on and experiences of influencer culture. The aim is for readers to have an understanding of the issues and challenges that girls and young women face but also to appreciate the opportunities and benefits of influencer culture, as articulated by the girls and young women who participated in the project.

As is elaborated upon in part 2 and 3 of the guidance, it is vital to take a youth-centred, balanced and constructive approach to discussing and educating about influencer culture with girls and young women. Of course, the specific nature of the findings outlined below are inevitably just a snapshot of the current and recent situation for girls and young women from the perspective of the sample of participants. Influencer culture, like online culture more generally, will continue to change and develop as social media and other internet spaces – and tastes, fashions and lifestyles – evolve. Furthermore, girls' and young women's media diets and engagement with influencer culture are heterogenous and are shaped by a variety of personal, social and contextual factors. Yet, we hope that this section offers some broad and transferable insights that can help inform policy and practice within an ever-changing digital media landscape. To that end, we offer reflections on how the girls and young women engaged with the topic of influencer culture through the workshop to identify implications for *how* to intervene and effectively support their agency and self-governance as developing (digital) citizens.

The workshop findings are organised in terms of each age group. As outlined above, we do not claim that these findings are applicable to every girl and young woman of the same age but instead they offer some insights into the types of perspectives and experiences that girls and young women may share.

Girls in Years 5 and 6 (age 9 – 11)

During each workshop, this group of girls demonstrated that **they were very open to discussing issues around influencer culture**, for example identifying what they felt was 'real' and 'fake' on social media. They did not always use the terms 'influencer' or 'influence' but described the idea of individuals seeking to sell and promote products, lifestyles, beliefs and so forth to their followers. The girls were highly motivated to build their critical media literacy and awareness about influencer culture. The key takeaway from the workshops with these girls was, therefore, that **it is a vital age regarding receptiveness to conversations around media literacy**.

In the main, influencer culture to these girls was about the **promotion of an idealised appearance by conventionally attractive (although sometimes with appearances being 'enhanced' or edited) celebrities or others with large followings**. It was because they are conventionally attractive that such influencers were deemed able to build their follower base.

"[Popular influencers have] ... really long lashes and a really slim body, probably a nice-shaped nose. Probably lip fillers, maybe." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

The girls felt that the standards espoused by influencers **may affect how individual girls and young women believe they should look** and their choices in these regards, for example wearing make-up:

"Yes, they usually wear lots of makeup and that makes you feel like you have to wear a lot of makeup but that's not really a choice. That's not really what you have to do but then, you start wearing lots of makeup." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

Their awareness of the challenges faced by girls and young women pertained to **appearance-related pressures and the negative emotional affects** that may arise for them:

"I also think it affects how everyone grows up. By the time we all get to teenagers and stuff, we think we have to wear loads of makeup and look our best, so that people will like us more. That's probably because a lot of people on social media who get less hate always meet the beauty standards and usually, they're older than us. They usually wear makeup and they also, have their hair done and I think that affects the way everyone grows up and it ruins your childhood because then, you're just all sad and you think that you're not perfect. Then, it ruins your whole growing up and childhood. Then, you get sad for the rest of your life." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

However, their awareness that not all content shared by influencers is necessarily 'real' did not translate to being confident to assess the content they see:

"Sometimes, you're like, 'Is that a filter, is it not?' Then, they put their hand over it, and it doesn't show. Then, you're like, 'Oh, wait. It's not a filter.' And you're talking to yourself, saying it is." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

Likewise, simply knowing that content may not be real does not stop it being aspirational or setting the tone for what they should be doing personally:

"Sometimes, when you can tell that that's just not possible to have eyelashes that are up to the ceiling because sometimes, there is a balance where you know they do have makeup on but then, you still feel like, well, I should wear makeup so that I can look like that." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

Notwithstanding these challenges, **the girls appreciated the opportunity to talk about influencer culture in the workshops and said that this had helped them to be more mindful** when they subsequently engaged with the content online:

"[Since the first workshop] I think, instead of looking at what they look like, I look at what they're doing (inaudible 00.12.46). I just look at what fun it looks like and how it would be to be there, instead of being them. Just having fun." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)


They were also critical of the idea that appearance is all that matters for girls and were able to **identify that positive and healthy self-concepts and friendships go beyond appearance** and that what may be 'normal' online is often different and more one-dimensional compared to what is the case offline:

"...I just feel like appearances don't really matter as much but online, they always matter more. It's like with your friends, if you've got really close friends, they don't care what you look like because they're your friends but online, you feel like it matters more because people just look at you and judge you by what you look like." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

However, when asked about alternatives to appearance that are important to them, **there was repeated mention of the need to be 'nice' and that girls should aspire to be 'nice'**, by which they mean to be conscientious and to treat others with kindness. There was a sense that *niceness* was infused with passivity and was a feminine orientation, so it was more of a standard for girls to adhere to than for boys.

The workshop discussions suggested that key with this age group is to focus on: (i) building self-esteem and resilience; (ii) embedding support networks; and (iii) building critical media literacy.

It was clear that the girls were troubled by the edited imagery found online and the detrimental effects of 'comparison culture'. Important here is not just telling girls that such content is 'not real' but also encouraging critical reflection on the very definition of 'ideal beauty' (and, perhaps, 'niceness' as an alternative feminine construct) and, in turn, (i) building self-esteem and resilience.



"Also, there's like loads of filters, like on Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram where they put long lashes and rosy lips and like a slimmer face and slimmer nose, and then when you come to take it off, you're like, 'Wait a second,' and you get so used to looking like that that you forget that that's not what you look like. So, when you next look in the mirror you might feel like, 'Hang on a minute that's not what I look like;' sometimes [it is] not that nice for yourself and it's not healthy for your mental mind-set." (Workshop 1, Years 5-6)

"I think today loads of people are making different body shapes, but I feel like I agree but for a long time all of the models had the same exact body and they're all slim, thin noses, blondish-brownish hair, blue eyes, brown eyes. And for example if you wanted to be a model when you're older and you didn't fit that and like for example actors and singers and you see all of these famous ones you're like, 'I don't look like them, or them or them,' or you don't have the same body as them, it might make you feel a bit like pushed down and make you feel like you can't do it." (Workshop 1, Years 5-6)

Girls cannot just manage these issues as individuals, however, and (ii) embedding support networks is vital to ensuring that girls can collectively inspire positive and healthy self-concepts with one another. As outlined further in part 2, **it is important to make these efforts at this receptive age, because as girls and young women get older, the negative peer dynamics that reinforce and exacerbate the pressures presented by influencer culture may increase.**

"Me and my friends we sometimes compliment each other to try and make them feel more happy and less insecure." (Workshop 1, Years 5-6)

While this age group is typically too young to access age-restricted social media apps and platforms, it is nevertheless important to (iii) build critical media literacy. They are being bombarded with edited and enhanced imagery that is affecting how they feel and what they expect of themselves and others. **This imagery cannot easily be removed from their lives but must be dealt with through giving girls the knowledge and skills they need to navigate it.** The girls were aware of and receptive to efforts to tackle assumptions about what they are seeing online:

"I saw a video once. I think my mum showed it to me, where a girl revealed what influencers do. Sometimes, they use Photoshop. They showed a girl with makeup and stuff. Then, they took the filter off and they were completely different. Sometimes, they don't look like that, but they've put so much filters and they've made themselves look like that... But actually, they're not like that. They've made themselves look thinner and better eyelashes and all that stuff. It's like this and then, they change that to what they actually look like." (Workshop 2, Years 5-6)

Girls in Years 7 and 8 (age 11 – 13)

During the workshops with this age group, it was apparent that **the girls had become quite ambivalent about social media.** They described their engagement with influencer content as about enjoyment of content for content's sake, rather than any further meaning making or significance.

R6: I just like the things I like and if I don't like it, I don't.

R4: I don't really put much thought to liking stuff. If I like it, then I'll like it.

(Workshop 2 Years 7-8)

For these girls, **'influencer culture' was somewhat about celebrities but mostly about 'random' individuals who build a large following through posting enticing content that people want to see and through adhering to conventional aspirational standards for beauty and lifestyle.** Influencers may gain a steady following and consistent impact and some names were commonly known in the group.

However, there was also a sense that influencers could be ‘fly by night’ and followings may come and go depending on trends and, furthermore, any ‘scandals’ that may affect influencers who, for example, are found to have misled or deceived their followers.

Typically, the girls were **not consciously deciding who to follow or seeking out influencers but were being shown content that they may be interested in via social media algorithms**. They were often just ‘scrolling through’ content and engaging with whatever seemed interesting to them. Such content may include ‘get ready with me videos’, and other clips giving insight into influencers’ lifestyles and engendering a sense of intimacy and personal connection (which has been deemed a form of ‘parasocial’ relationship).

There was almost a **disregard of any significant problems with influencer culture because of a common-sense belief that it is easy to just stop and disengage with content that negatively affects them**:

“Because you’ll just stop watching it, the content. Say if it’s TikTok that’s affecting you, you’ll probably just stop. If you think it’s affecting how you think, then probably you’d just stop watching it.” (Workshop 2, Years 7-8)

There was somewhat of a **lack of critical awareness about first, how easy it is to disengage and second, the extent to which individuals always know whether they are being negatively affected by what they are seeing and consuming**. There was some suggestion that it is possible to control what appears as recommended content via the algorithm (because the algorithm is, at least somewhat, shaped by previous engagement with content) but this awareness was not particularly well developed, or acted upon, among the girls (i.e., they were still just ‘scrolling through’ and watching ‘whatever’ regardless).

The girls were aware of **girls policing one another through social media**, for example by reporting each other’s accounts (which can be impactful, particularly when the girl is not of the required age to be using the platform), although this was somewhat **normalised as an expected behaviour online** (e.g., reporting accounts following fallouts between girls or due to jealousy). It was not, therefore, social media itself that was the issue to these girls but how other girls behave toward each other and the wider peer dynamics at play:

“Social media doesn’t really do anything. I don’t think it makes you think bad of yourself. I think it’s just mainly people around you because they judge you all the time.” (Workshop 2, Years 7-8)

Yet, they would often **discuss social media with their peers and co-create meaning and enjoyment together** (e.g., about who and what is ‘perfect’, ‘funny’, ‘scandalous’, etc.), suggesting that peer-oriented support would be a helpful approach for girls this age. There was thus a **tension between the idea that peers can cause problems but are also the source of pleasure and enjoyment online**. There was a sense of sociality to the girls’ engagement with influencer culture; on the one hand, they were engaging with content often by themselves (e.g., at home) but **there was evidence of sharing and discussing content with one another and the development of joint ideas about who is interesting, funny and otherwise aspirational online**.

While they were somewhat dismissive of any concerns about influencer culture, it may not be that they did not perceive, or were unable to perceive, any issues or challenges with influencer culture. It is more that **they wanted to engage with other young people about it rather than just be told what the issues are by adults**. There was a sense of an anti-teacher and anti-school orientation among some of the girls in the group, which was characterised by a cynicism toward adult involvement and a description of any attempts at intervening as disingenuous.

With parents, there were **stories of mothers being interested in talking to them but also as potentially becoming overly emotional in response to any disclosures made by the girls** about what they encounter and experience online. The girls were averse to the idea of having to take on any emotional response from their parents and so, overall, felt that it is often easier not to speak to parents.

The key takeaway from these workshops was that **building critical media literacy may be challenging because of ambivalence among girls about their media diets and the help they perceive they will receive (or may have already received) from adults.** The girls were, however, open to talking about problems and issues with others but were selective about who they can trust and how personal it is to them:

*"I would tell someone who I'm related to because I know that I can trust them."
(Workshop 1, Years 7-8)*

"I wouldn't share it with a teacher. I share most stuff with my friends but sometimes, I just ... there's some stuff that's personal and I don't want to share." (Workshop 1, Years 7-8)

The important areas to focus on for this age group are (i) **considering how ambivalence may play a role in building critical media literacy;** (ii) **embedding peer support networks;** and (iii) **safe adults being mindful about their approach when communicating with girls.**

It must be recognised that before any efforts can be made to support media literacy, **there should be some agreement on the nature and significance of the issue to be addressed.** Efforts will, inevitably, be hampered by any ambivalence or, even, cynicism about overly negative messaging about influencer culture that may have developed among girls (i). **Pushing back against any dismissive attitudes or trivialisation may be helped by conceiving of the opportunities and risks of influencer culture as oftentimes co-occurring and interdependent, as well as existing along a continuum rather than as a binary of 'benefit' or 'harm'.**

Harnessing youth-led approaches whereby **young people, as peers, can co-identify the benefits and trade-offs of influencer culture may help encourage girls that it is not necessary to say that influencer culture is either all one big problem or not a problem at all; instead, there can be elements of both, but unpacking that with peers may be more effective than being told that by adults (ii).** Likewise, peer support networks are important because some of **the challenges pertaining to influencer culture may relate to how girls treat each other within their peer networks and the online and offline dynamics that may unfold for them.** Hence, girls need to be encouraged and enabled to support one another as part of a collective orientation to addressing the challenges of influencer culture.

Adults need to communicate in an open and balanced way and give space to girls to work out the challenges they face together and how they can support each other with some of the policing and judgment that can arise in their peer contexts in relation to social media and influencer culture (iii). It is important that **adults, particularly parents, try to emotionally self-regulate in order not to overburden the girl or young woman** with emotion and instead try to encourage critical reflection and problem solving.

Girls in Years 9 and 10 (age 13 – 15)

The workshop discussions with this age group indicated a similar level of ambivalence with **influencer culture being something they can 'take or leave'.** They wanted time spent online to be beneficial to them. Yet, there was some **concern about entrenched patterns of social scrutiny, judgment and policing that participants felt negatively affect girls and young women.** This was particularly notable regarding expectations for appearance and for achieving a (heterosexual) relationship. Some of the girls in these group had **internalised these norms and expectations** more than others.

The girls were mindful that **influencers portray an idealised and curated version of their appearance and lifestyle online, however, they were critically conscious about how such content is not 'real' but also how it may imply insecurity among those posting the content** (as well as engendering it in their followers). These girls seemed more conscious of and willing to talk about this than did the girls in year 7 and 8. **They remained a little pessimistic and cynical about adult engagement but seemed to want to share their views and were more open to nuanced thinking about influencer culture.** Hence, it seems important to encourage nuanced, rather than 'black-and-white', thinking about the risks and opportunities of influencer culture.

R1: *It's crazy because if you had enough money, you could literally change everything about you. She claims that her body is 'I work out'. First of all, you work out five days a week, but your schedule is so busy that ... your schedule is not busy so you can attend five parties in a day. Tell me how that makes sense? She's like, no, no surgery on my waist and my bum. Girl, you're known for your butt, just admit and we all move on.*

R2: *It doesn't matter if somebody has plastic surgery, especially if they're famous.*

R1: *And the lie about it. Like Madison Beer, Madison Beer said that she didn't get her nose done.*

R2: *Uh.*

R1: *No, shh. But she has a prefect button nose. That seems a bit suspicious to me.*

I2: *Why might they lie about having plastic surgery?*

R1: *Because they're insecure too.*

R2: *They want to look naturally perfect. I don't know, they probably live up to these expectations; it's a cycle.*

(Workshop 3, Years 9-10)

There was extensive 'self-responsibilisation' among the girls for the challenges that influencer culture may present. The **girls felt personally responsible for self-monitoring and ensuring that they are engaging with influencer culture to 'have fun' and to otherwise restrict or stop their engagement with the content.** In this regard, they were somewhat similar to the year 7 and 8 girls. They felt that their online lives should be about 'enjoyment' and that they were responsible for identifying when the enjoyment stops, in much the same way as the year 7 and 8 girls said they just take or leave the content depending on what they are enjoying. Yet, some of the older girls felt that **it can be difficult, and they must 'remind themselves' of why they want to be online and that they are in control:**

"I feel like sometimes I still have to remind myself that I'm just on the internet for my enjoyment and not for any other purposes. I'm just there to learn and to have fun. I've got to remind myself sometimes am I actually enjoying this because I don't have to. It's like it's up to me, you've got to take control of your own online experience." (Workshop 3, Years 9-10)

There was some awareness of the tricks and tactics used by influencers and companies seeking to build and monetise their social media followings which may compromise the ability to make conscious and self-directed choices.

"They're just trying to make money off of you, trying to get you to watch more and want to know more." (Workshop 3, Years 9-10)

Moreover, it was apparent that girls, in general, may be having different experiences with influencer culture, with **some potentially feeling more pressure and negative emotions regarding the appearance- and lifestyle-related content they see online than others.** These differential effects seemed related to the position of different girls in the peer group. The **social policing that unfolds through influencer culture may be intensified by this age**, with the standards and expectations apparent in influencer culture (and elsewhere in media) being perpetuated in the way that peers relate and speak to one another in their online and offline contexts.

These girls were **averse to being lectured to by adults and preferred engaging with peers and wanted to develop and maintain their independence.** Peers were, therefore, both a source of problems (e.g., policing and judgment) and a source of support, as seen with the year 7 and 8 group. There was some concern among the girls **that teachers have little to offer in terms of relevant and helpful advice. Willingness to go to parents for help and information seemed shaped by family-related factors**, with the girls differing in how strict and lenient their parents are and those with stricter parents (including those who engage in

more monitoring and restrictive behaviours) being more reluctant to speak openly and honestly with their parents.

The key takeaways for this age group include recognising that: (i) **the risks and opportunities of influencer culture pertained to their offline lives and realities particularly in terms of peer relations and dynamics;** (ii) **girls want to be agentic and exercise self-governance online, not just be controlled or dictated to by adults;** (iii) **any agency or self-governance should be supported alongside development of critical awareness of the wider commercial and social imperatives that shape influencer culture and its affects.**

While applicable to all age groups, it was particularly evident with this age group that influencer culture online is related to and impacting their offline lives and realities (i), so it cannot be dealt with as a distinct issue. Instead, **girls need to be supported to identify and address the ways that the standards and ideals presented in influencer culture feed down into their expectations of themselves and others** and may lead to forms of social scrutiny, judgment and policing that can be detrimental to some girls and young women.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise this age group's pursuit of agency and self-governance as legitimate and to co-identify problems and solutions, not just dictate them (ii). The girls also seemed to **appreciate the opportunity to just air their perspectives and to hear about what the others think, which itself is an important skill and awareness-raising process**, and which, in turn, may help them in their wider lives.

While validating their pursuit of agency, it is also to support them to recognise the constraints upon them that exist due to wider commercial and social imperatives and norms that shape the content and social media logics that they are going to have to navigate (iii). There was evident critical consciousness around some of this, to some extent, which can be supported by safe adults in their lives.

Summary and Conclusion

It is perhaps to be expected that **the youngest age group was most receptive to speaking with us as adults about their perspectives and experiences.** They were content with seeking and receiving support from adults and wanted to talk about what they think and are learning about influencer culture. Most notably, they were aware that **not everything they see online is 'real' but were sometimes struggling to figure out what is 'real' and 'fake'** and, regardless, felt that the content can create pressures and expectations to look a certain way, which **may negatively impact them emotionally.**

Based on our sample of girls and young women, it appeared that **with age, they become somewhat more ambivalent and possibly cynical, whereby an overly individualistic approach to picking and choosing what they engage with and simply consuming online content to 'have fun' becomes a common-sense solution to the issues presented by influencer culture.**

Yet, they were concerned about peer dynamics **whereby peers may police and judge one another and there was some indication that these processes reflect and occur through influencer culture online.** There was also some concern about the internalisation of the standards set by influencers and what this may mean for self-esteem and self-acceptance. There was a **preference for speaking to peers over adults**, who were deemed to misunderstand and, potentially, overreact. Peers, therefore, were a source of both judgment and support, so they hold power to either positively or negatively affect the ways that influencer culture unfolds for girls and young women in their wider lives.

There was some **critical consciousness among older girls about the nature and effect of influencer culture** although this was more apparent among the oldest group than the Year 7 and 8 group. These findings may just be happenstance due to the individuals who chose to participate in each group or may be indicative of age-related differences. Either way, it was apparent that it may be most effective to **'start early' and engage with girls on this topic when they are most receptive** (in this case, in year 5 and 6). Intervening with adolescent girls may require further work to address any ambivalence about influencer culture (notably, any dismissal or trivialisation of the problems they pose as avoidable through individual choices) and cynicism about adult intervention that may exist.

Part 2



Implications of the findings for engaging and intervening with girls and young women about influencer culture

Before offering tangible ideas and suggestions for engaging and intervening with girls and young women about influencer culture in part 3, the second part of the guidance identifies broad implications regarding the challenges and obstacles to doing so. It outlines the principles that should be followed to ensure that any efforts resonate with girls and young women and effectively enable and empower them to identify any problems and to develop solutions and willingness to report their experiences, as necessary, to safe adults in their lives.

Barriers to supporting girls and young women

Across the three age groups, we identified several barriers to supporting girls:

First, **girls are frustrated when their feelings and experiences are trivialised if they choose to share something or talk about something affecting them.** They want adults to *first listen* to their experiences and feelings and *then talk* it through with them.

"They pretty much just always say it's hormones or my phone. It really annoys me." (Workshop 2 Years 7-8)

"They'll be like, 'Oh, you're growing up. Almost everyone goes through it.' They're acting like they went through it when you might be going through something bad. You want them to be there for you, but they'll be like, 'Oh, everyone goes through it. You'll get better.'" (Workshop 2 Years 7-8)

Second, girls feel that it is unhelpful or irrelevant when adults attempt to link the situation they have explained back to when the adult was younger, as it is a different context and time period.

Third, girls are worried that if they do share their feelings, adults may overreact, their phones may be confiscated, or they will be banned from certain apps. Alternatively, they lack faith that safe adults will do anything at all (because of above-mentioned possibility that adults may dismiss the issue). These concerns make them less likely to engage with adults.

"I don't really tell my parents because otherwise, they worry too much." (Workshop 2 Year 7-8)

"School tries, and they say they will help with that but then, they literally do nothing." (Workshop 2 Years 7-8)

"I try to ask my mum for help. I don't really want to tell my dad, but she was like, 'Oh, don't be silly. You look beautiful.' But it doesn't really do anything to help. I know they're trying but it doesn't really change anything for me." (Workshop 2 Years 5-6)

"I think something where instead of just saying straight away, 'Oh my God, you're beautiful the way you are.' I think that's a nice thing to say but I think parents, or the adult should say, 'Okay, talk to me about it. What was the sad part about it?'" (Workshop 2 Years 5-6)

The **barriers to engaging with adults relate to concerns about adults and young people having divergent perspectives and the gaps in perspective being difficult to bridge.** These divergences may be overstated (by both young people and adults) but can feel, and may become, very real due to assumptions that each side holds about the other and the style of engagement and communication that can take place.

Overcoming this barrier is, therefore, about **identifying and addressing pre conceptions and being mindful about the engagement and communication styles** that are likely to be most effective.

"Because they're not in your shoes. Once you're in our point of view, then you'll actually know but they're just doing it off of what you're telling them. They don't actually know what's really happening, how you really feel, everything that's happening." (Workshop 2 Years 7-8)

There may also be **specific barriers with teacher-delivered interventions, namely related to the hierarchical authority structure** that exists, or at least that some girls and young women perceive to exist, within school contexts. This is a barrier that affects schools-based educational interventions on a variety of topics across the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum.

"It's different with teachers because they're in a higher role above you, it's like a hierarchy. They have more say than you do, they're more important than you are, you've got to treat them with more respect than they treat you with. It's like a different situation, that power and balance." (Workshop 3, Years 9-10)

As girls and young women enter adolescence, they may begin to **'pull away' from adult influence and, in turn, become more oriented to peers and others (including influencers online)**. This is a normative and healthy process but requires careful attention to not alienating girls and young women by problematising what they are doing or the spaces and people online who they may be drawn to. At the same time, there may be an **increasing normalisation of influencer culture among adolescent girls and young women and a corresponding lack of critical awareness, or at least fatalism, about some of the dynamics of influencer culture and the problems and challenges** that may arise. The role of adults is to help raise awareness about and critical engagement with the features and dimensions of influencer culture (and the wider effects it may have) among girls and young women.

It was also apparent from the workshops that **girls and young women may not always proactively seek out information or support, especially when they do not identify their social media diets or experiences as a problem**. Hence, any resources designed for them to use independently themselves need to be easy to find and promoted to girls and young women. Such **independent resources are important because it was clear that girls and young women want to be supported to exercise agency and self-governance and do not want things always done to or for them by adults**.

Finally, a barrier relates to framing the issue in terms of 'influencer culture' itself. **The challenges that emerge for girls and young women relate to how the standards and expectations present in influencer culture also exist in other forms of media and play out in their peer cultures and friendships both online and offline**. This means that just talking about influencer culture as a distinct and disconnected topic without examining how it relates to other media and other online and offline contexts will not fully address the problems that arise and will not fully equip girls and young women with the knowledge and outlooks that they need to navigate influencer culture – and its wider effects – safely and responsibly.

On a more positive note, a participant said that **while it may feel easier to speak to peers about topics like social media and influencer culture because of the shared perspective, the trouble with this is that it is difficult to solve problems or move forward because peers may lack alternative insights that can help with problem solving**. Hence, girls and young women may be open to adult intervention and want reliable and helpful support and information, but the approach must be considered carefully to ensure it feels relevant to and resonates with girls and young women.

"It's just like you, kind of, all know the same things so the conversation doesn't often go to a solution or what we should do about that. It more goes around this is my experience, and that's nice to know that people's experiences are different, it's not all the same, it can be really good, it can be really bad. It's nice to have that big point of view or whatever. It just sometimes doesn't go anywhere." (Workshop 3, Years 9-10)

Principles for intervening with girls and young women about influencer culture

When planning to intervene and during any intervention or conversation, try to remember:

- To take a person-centred approach – **what is that individual girl/young woman thinking or feeling? They may have insights or opinions that you may not have considered or anticipated.** Learn from each other through ‘reverse mentoring’ whereby adults are open to what girls and young women bring to the table and may learn more about them but also ourselves.
- Listening to girls and young women is also a **good way of role-modelling listening and perspective-taking skills**, which can help them develop and apply these skills themselves in their lives, including with peers who may be struggling with influencer culture. It also gives them an **opportunity to reflect on themselves and can develop their self-knowledge and emotional literacy.**
- **Adults themselves may have their own problems with social media and devices.** It is therefore important to recognise the scope and limits of managing your feed and your intentions when using your device. What impact is it having on you? Are you always aware of the impact? **You may not be the ‘impartial expert’ who can solve the problems for girls and young women, but you can be part of a collaborative discussion** about what is happening and how best to solve the problems you may all be facing even if in different ways and with different effects.
- The **‘effects’ of influencer culture may vary along a continuum** (i.e., diet-related content could exacerbate or trigger an eating disorder in the extreme but can also have other harmful impacts on body image and self-esteem). Girls and young **women may also be affected by other people’s consumption of social media content**, including their peers of the same or other genders. Hence, an individual girl may say that she does not engage with a particular aspect of influencer culture but that does not mean that she is not affected by what other people are saying and doing especially given the links between influencer culture and peer culture.
- The **nature of influencer culture may be more complex than binary attributions of ‘fake’ or ‘real’** to particular influencers or pieces of content. Content may be edited and curated in ways that entail **different degrees of realness or fakeness** and misdirection or misrepresentation can be as powerful as (even more so than) an obviously edited image. There is also a **difference between intention and impact of influencers’ content** – an influencer may not intend to have a harmful impact on their followers but they may do so anyway and so it is important to **disentangle what is being shared and with what effect.**
- **Rule-setting and problem-solving must be devised with an eye to supporting agency and self-governance.** Adults will not always be present when young people face challenges and may have different ideas about the challenges to young people. Hence, **adults and girls need to co-identify problems and develop solutions that girls can act upon themselves.**
- **Adult-delivered messages can be misinterpreted or may have unintended consequences.** What adults think they are saying and conveying may not be how it sounds to girls, potentially due to other contextual influences and messages that girls are exposed to. For example, telling girls not to wear certain things or not to position their bodies in particular ways (e.g., taking up too much space) may not be intended as sexist but may be interpreted as such especially as girls enter adolescence and experience increasing unwanted attention and objectification/sexualisation of their bodies.
- **Girls and young women may feel very vulnerable when opening up about their feelings or experiences, including any insecurities or isolation that they may be feeling or experiencing.** Be patient and supportive of them as they do so and reassure them that they are safe and not being judged. While it is important to recognise the existence of social judgment in the world, it is also vital not to recreate this and to **create judgment-free spaces** that offer some respite against this. Girls need these spaces, but they are also helpful in encouraging and inspiring them to likewise try to

avoid judgment themselves in their lives and toward other girls and can, therefore, help in tackling the social scrutiny and policing that can take place in peer culture.

- **Anti-school/teacher attitudes may be present** among some girls and young women and careful thought needs to be given as to what a safe intervention in school would look like for these girls and who it may need to come from, including the role of pastoral staff, tutors, nurses, counsellors, and so on. **Try to co-identify with girls the safe spaces and people as well as what active and participatory teaching and learning methods would look like for them.**
- The role of adults is to give girls and young women a space to share what they think is happening and is important but then to help them think and reflect. **There is a fine line between judgment and prompting new and different ways of thinking.**
- There is a difference between **immediate safeguarding (e.g., if a girl says something that indicates that she or another young person is at risk) versus longer-term preparation for life.** In the latter case, adults need to be patient and accept that trust and dialogue is built carefully and over time. Key questions for adults to ask themselves after an interaction or intervention include:
 - (i) **Is it now more or less likely that this girl or these girls will continue to speak to me and engage with me on this topic and, if need be, tell me about anything harmful they are seeing or experiencing?**
 - (ii) **Have I encouraged this girl or these girls to reflect and think critically about the topic, including regarding the situation for herself personally but also how she is relating to and treating other people in her life?**

Recommendations for intervening to educate and support girls and young women

We recommend the following approaches and techniques should be considered by adults when seeking to intervene to educate and support girls and young women regarding influencer culture and their social media diets.

Parents and carers :

- Try to **engage in dialogue** with your daughter/s rather than just monitoring or restricting what they can access and do online.
- Prioritise engaging in **open communication and collaborative problem-solving** with your daughter/s alongside any rule-setting and monitoring and restriction. **Just because you monitor or restrict does not mean that they may not access the content elsewhere or even circumvent your attempts at monitoring or restricting their devices.** These technological measures also do not address the wider emotional or social dimensions to the challenges posed by influencer culture. Therefore, **open communication and collaborative problem-solving and rule-setting should occur instead of or alongside any monitoring and restriction.**
- Try to **work collectively and as a community with other parents.** Some parents may be more 'switched on' than others and these parents can play a role in educating and supporting other parents who may lack the knowledge, time or skills required. It can be helpful for parents to compare notes with other parents in terms of what they and their children are experiencing around life online. However, please be mindful of oversharing personal situations and respecting your child's privacy.
- Try to avoid judging and critiquing one another. Instead, be **empowered to work as a team and recognise that your children are part of a peer culture and have responsibilities to treat each other ethically.**



Teachers and other professionals:

- Try to adopt a **pedagogical method that involves collaborative and participatory approaches** to discussing the nature, opportunities and challenges of influencer culture in a nuanced and holistic way. The 'dos and don'ts' of pedagogy can be found at the end of this section.
- Focus on enabling **independent self-governance and decision-making**, not just lecturing to girls and young women about the problems as you see them.
- When designing curriculum delivery, consider the need to **make space for girls and young women to discuss in single-gender groups the topic of influencer culture and the pressures and expectations that may arise** (as well as for trans- and non-binary young people who may be feeling these pressures too notwithstanding their gender identity). Boys and young men, particularly in schools, seem to increasingly become part of the appearance-related social policing that negatively affects some girls and young women, and so **educational interventions should first enable girls to reflect on this in a safe space while then potentially bringing all young people together to learn from each other.**

Everyone:

- Recognise the intersection between different media technologies. **Social media is a key part of young people's media diets, but television, films and other media formats are also contributing** (and may themselves have unrealistic and edited content similar to social media).
- **Avoid nostalgia about your own childhood and acknowledge the ways that media has always and will continue to shape how people learn, develop, understand themselves, and participate in society and in their relationships.** Identify the ways that the challenges they may be experiencing are often long-standing (e.g., regarding appearance) but do so to validate their perspectives, not to take over the conversation or trivialise the issue.
- It is important to **avoid overgeneralising or making assumptions about the problems girls and young women face without asking and listening to them.** Likewise, it is important not to attribute all of society's contemporary ills to the supposed nefarious nature of social media and instead to take a balanced approach.
- **Girls and young women need to have their agency and self-governance supported through approaches that raise their awareness and help them to identify problems and solutions.** If they hold fatalistic or dismissive attitudes, it is important to help them **think about influencer culture beyond a binary of 'good' or 'bad' and instead to take a nuanced approach and look at the different ways that influencer culture may affect them and other girls and young women.**
- It is important to **talk about the underlying commercial and social imperatives that are affecting what girls and young women see online.** This can help in raising their awareness about how they are being influenced including in ways that are designed to operate subconsciously. **Girls and young women are not to blame for any lack of awareness but once they start to develop their awareness, they will find it easier to spot as they continue to participate in social media spaces.**
- As well as critical media literacy and online safety, **interventions must address the ways that influencer culture has, or may be becoming, embedded in wider peer cultures.** This includes the standards for appearance that may be being scrutinised and policed in the peer group (by all young people). Hence, the effects may unfold differently for different girls based on factors like status and inclusion within the peer group.
- Interventions should also acknowledge **the positives and exciting potential of online spaces.** Forward-feeding enthusiasm from adults to children and young people can help enable them to harness the benefits of being online and to explore their curiosity with a positive mindset.

Below you'll find some quick and easy takeaways about what you can do that may work better than some examples of commonly found practice in schools, the home and elsewhere:

Instead of this... 	Do this: 
<p>Assume that monitoring or restricting their devices means you have nothing to worry about [this is relevant for parents but also teachers who may recommend monitoring and restricting in the home]</p>	<p>Think about what you'd do with any information that worries you.</p> <p>Consider other ways that girls may access or consume worrying content online – what conversations do you need to have to build resilience and develop ongoing dialogue and help-seeking as needed?</p> <p>Engage in collaborative rule-setting and explain any reasoning for rules and boundaries.</p>
<p>Think that the girl/young woman is resilient and has 'nothing to worry about' when it comes to influencer culture, nor that she is too young or too old to be influenced.</p>	<p>Recognise that girls and young women can be affected in ways that span a continuum to serious—less serious and the effects may be fluid and dynamic in that they may evolve and exist at different moments and in different ways.</p> <p>Recognise that your daughter is part of a wider peer collective – she has responsibilities toward others in terms of how she treats them and may also be negatively affected by the content that peers are consuming. Focus on what your daughter needs to be resilient and responsible in these wider contexts.</p>
<p>Overdetermine the role of influencer culture in their lives and take a pessimistic and negative view on what they are seeing online.</p>	<p>Recognise influencer culture and social media as part of a broader media and social/public landscape where plenty of examples of issues and problems can be found across different domains of life.</p> <p>Identify the positive and negative dimensions to influencer culture and the reasons why people may be drawn to the content, either for positive reasons or notwithstanding the negative reasons.</p>
<p>Frame problems in terms of 'addiction', 'hormones', attention-seeking, celebrity obsession, appearance preoccupation etc.</p>	<p>Rather than delegitimising or oversimplifying girls, girlhood and social media diets, try to legitimise and validate girls and young women and focus on empowering and uplifting girls not trivialising their perspectives and experiences.</p>

Shaming girls and young women – including influencers – for their bodies and appearances.	Promote diversity and body and appearance acceptance and recognise the ways that bodies and appearances are policed and judged and the pressures that puts on girls and young women.
Only complimenting girls through commenting on their appearance or how ‘nice’ they are (or any other gender-specific construct about what is expected or desirable).	While telling them they are beautiful may not resolve their insecurities, in the current climate, girls may still need some reassurance from others about their appearance to build self-esteem and self-acceptance. However, talk also about meaning and significance of beauty and other idealised constructs, and the pressures and expectations placed upon girls and young women to adhere to feminine standards of ‘niceness’ and associated constructs like passivity, self-sacrifice, etc.
Blaming girls and young women for consuming influencer culture to negative effects and for any ongoing consumption despite negative effect.	Support girls and young women to recognise the ways that individuals and companies use social media to draw them in and seek to influence them. Develop critical awareness so that they can spot and resist these tactics.
Removing a girl’s device when she reports a negative or harmful experience online.	Talk collaboratively with the girl about the problem and what she would like to do next and co-identify a solution that would help to keep her safe and well without disconnecting her entirely from her device.
Not allowing a girl to have access to a device at all to ‘prevent’ them from a negative or harmful experience online.	Acknowledge that we continue to live in a mediated and online world, and the girl will need to build not only mediated and online skills for her future, but also for her resilience. Rather than banning her from having a phone or other device, co-identify healthy boundaries you are both happy with to build her confidence and resilience.
Censoring, silencing, or punishing girls for saying or doing something inappropriate or potentially harmful.	Set ground rules that it is unacceptable to directly harm (either verbally, physically or relationally) another individual or group of individuals (online or offline) but make space for girls to express views or perspectives that may be worrying or troubling. Rather than shutting these views and perspectives down, talk about why they may be held, the potential problems with them and other ways of thinking or expressing oneself.



Warning girls to restrict what they say and do online because they may do something they regret and experience reputational damage or punishment down the line.

Encourage girls to reflect on their choices and conduct online and to be mindful about behaving ethically and responsibly, including toward others, because this is the *right* thing to do and not just to avoid getting into trouble personally.



Summary and Conclusion

The main principle to follow pertains to how addressing influencer culture cannot be *done to* girls and young women but must be part of a partnership approach that supports their agency and self-governance. **Girls and young women need space to articulate their perspectives on the issues and to work through any ambivalence or fatalism that they may be feeling.** They do not need to be generalised about or blamed and certainly do not need any sexist trivialisation of girlhood as a time of girls being obsessed with celebrities and how they look and prone to being cruel to each other. Sometimes this may be the case, but this is a systemic societal problem that should be dealt with through inspiring and empowering messaging and approaches, not through stigma and blame.

Adults do not need to be the experts of influencer culture but should be open to learning from girls and young women about what is going on and the effects it may be having. In that regard, **it does not really matter if the specifics of social media and influencer culture continue to evolve – the principles of open dialogue and collaborative exchange of ideas and problem-solving will continue to apply.** Girls and young women may feel more comfortable doing this with their peers and space should be made for them to do so, but they will also benefit from the input of non-judgmental and open-minded adults.

These adults should encourage them to **situate influencer culture and its effects within a wider media, social and public landscape.** This landscape is historical as well as current and, in this regard, adults may have reflective insights to offer. **Adults should avoid nostalgia or making it overly about them but should share their perspectives to validate girls and young women and to reassure girls and young women that it is a safe space where they will not be judged.**

Sometimes, adults may need to step in to set boundaries and, moreover, to safeguard a girl or young woman at risk of immediate harm. This may entail going against their wishes, like breaking confidentiality to report an online abuse. Statutory processes may then take over. The NSPCC has a reporting tool for those with online safety concerns:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-reporting/>

At other times, there may not be an immediate risk of harm but girls may share difficulties they are experiencing. In these situations, it is important to **take a collaborative approach whereby any rules or actions are discussed with the affected girl or young woman.** This will help engender a sense of legitimacy to the process, in turn improving engagement, and will support the development of agency and self-governance, whereby action is taken *with* girls and young women.

Part 3



Ideas and suggestions for addressing ‘influencer culture’ with girls and young women.

This final part of the guidance is designed for key actors to have some tangible ideas and suggestions for how best to address influencer culture with girls and young women.

The recommendations have been designed for girls and young women themselves, parents and families, and educators and other professionals. The recommendations are cross-cutting across key actor groups and have been written to be accessible to different readers.

Many of the recommendations are presented as general ideas and suggestions that could work with different girls and young women depending upon needs, outlooks, maturity level, and any other relevant factors. By virtue of the design of the study that underpinned this guidance, some of the recommendations relate specifically to the age cohorts included in the sample and that is made clear throughout as applicable.

The recommendations are not presented as complete lesson plans, which may something that schools are interested in. The aim of this guidance is to offer ideas and suggestions that can be adapted and applied within different contexts, depending upon what is identified as needed and feasible within different contexts and time frames. The guidance is not intended to be prescriptive but as a resource that can help in the design and delivery of interventions.

What is ‘influencer culture’?

In the workshops, it seemed to be quite ‘taken for granted’ as to what an influencer is, what they do and where they are found. **Before even beginning with any of the deeper discussions and reflections that need to occur around influencer culture, we need to start with identifying what we think an influencer is and thinking critically about the ideas about and sources of ‘influence’ in contemporary life.**

Discussions could be organised around the following:

- What does it mean to be an influencer?
 - What does an influencer do?
 - What effect do they have?
 - Why do they do it?
 - Why are people *influenced* by influencers?
- Who is an influencer?
 - Celebrities?
 - Reality stars?
 - ‘Normal’ people?
 - Fellow peers?
 - Anyone else?

- How, if at all, does *who* the influencer is shape the type of content they share and the effect they have on people?
- Where are they found? How do people find out about an influencer?
- But... are we only influenced by those who we formally identify as 'influencers'?
- What else influences us?
 - Any other type of people?
 - Anything else? (i.e., not just content shared online)
 - Anywhere else? (i.e., not just on social media)
- Using our Glossary at the end of this toolkit to create discussion activities. As, whilst young people may be familiar with terms such as 'algorithm' or 'paid partnership', they may not see their connection with marketing and what this means for audiences.
 - Can you tell me what you understand about these terms?
 - Are there any new terms you think are relevant but are not on the list?
 - Can you match some of these terms to the definitions?
 - Do you think you could improve these definitions?

Thinking laterally and critically about what is meant by influencers and influencer culture can be helpful for several reasons:

- **It enables a balanced approach to the conversation by acknowledging that 'influence' is ingrained into humanity and social life** – it is not something that has just emerged with social media.
- **It pushes back against normalisation and fatalism** by bringing the idea of influence into consciousness as a psychological and social phenomenon.
- **It stimulates thinking about the role that online influencers play in the 'ecosystem' of social life.**

Developing this understanding of influencers will be a helpful – even vital – foundation for what follows.

Identifying and becoming aware of the structures and systems that shape influencer culture online.

Broadening focus from what is found in influencer culture to **why it may be found and the commercial and social imperatives that are behind influencer culture** can help to depersonalise the topic and challenge self-blame and the idea that girls and young women, as individuals, are responsible for tackling it all alone.

The younger girls liked the idea of **interactive 'games' to help them identify what may be 'real' or 'fake' online** e.g., looking at different examples of influencer content and whether and what types of editing or curation may be applicable to the content.

Such tasks could be used with any age group – girls could be asked **to identify pieces of content that resonate with them and can then critically assess the content**. Important is not just identifying whether and in what ways content may be edited or curated but also to ask:

- *Why* might this content be edited or curated? Who gains from that? Why might influencers want to put out edited or curated content? What may they be trying to achieve (or may the company behind them be trying to achieve):
 - To make money?

- o To deal with any insecurities they may be feeling?
- o To build their followers?
- o To gain your 'attention'? (Your views, likes, comments and shares all accrue financial and other benefits within the social media attention economy).
- What effect may this have on people that view the content?
 - o What may they be learning about what is aspirational?
 - o What may they come to expect from themselves and others?
 - o How may they treat themselves and others as a result?
- What does edited and curated content tell us about what is aspirational in our culture?
 - o E.g., regarding what people should look like, what their lifestyles should be like, the choices they should make, etc.?
 - o Can we find these standards and ideals anywhere else? What about other forms of media?
 - o How does it relate to what we hear and see from parents, friends, school, etc.?
- How can we push back against narrow and restrictive ideals that may be hard to achieve?
 - o Is it enough to just say it's 'fake' or do we need to celebrate diversity?
 - o Are there examples of diversity or pushing back against the conventions of influencer culture that we can find?

"If you're filming a TikTok, you can see if they've used a filter because it says that you've used a filter but there is this thing where you can't see if you've done it, where you go on it and you soften your face or add depth to your face." (Workshop 2 Years 7-8)

The girls felt that it could be helpful to **show videos that demystify influencer culture** (e.g., that show what goes on 'behind the scenes', how filters work, etc.). They want to discuss the types of questions above with each other and to start with talking in small groups of friends and move on to full class discussions.

"I feel like posters and all that stuff around everywhere would be really helpful, as people might not really know that this is actually real life, how people put filters on, their makeup" (Workshop 2 Years 5-6)

Asking the types of questions above entails **going beyond the technical ability to identify content as edited or curated but to look at why that may be the case, the effect it has and the social change that may be required to develop more diverse standards** and, in turn, to support self-acceptance and acceptance and tolerance of difference in others. It can also help in **recognising the agency that individuals have in terms of whether they translate societal standards into their expectations and treatment of themselves and others.**

It can also help in recognising **constraints on agency, however, with a helpful activity being to identify the ways that awareness may not always correspond with choices or behaviour.**

Making active choices and exercising self-governance online

The younger girls wanted something **tangible to help them identify and reflect upon the choices they make online and how their online experiences and choices are making them feel.** They mentioned a diary format (template included in Appendix I) comprised of:

- A daily 'check-in' with questions: how do you feel? How much time did you spend on social media? How did you feel about what you saw and did?
- How much time did you spend today thinking about influencers and the ways they make you feel about how you should look and act and what you should be like?
- What would you like tomorrow to be like? Is there anything you'd change about today or do differently tomorrow? What worked well today and what would you like to continue tomorrow?

For all girls, **making active choices and exercising self-governance was framed in terms of 'habits'** whereby they are encouraged to recognise their habits and break unhealthy habits, as well as build new healthy habits:

- What are my 'online habits'?
- On paper, do they look and sound 'healthy'?
- What is 'good' about my habits? What may be less good?
- Is there anything I can change?
- How would I go about that?
- What's my vision for being online and what do I want my habits to be?
- What would I recommend to someone else?

Underpinning this exercise is to **become intentional rather than passive** with one's online engagements, asking questions like:

- What do I want?
- What am I trying to achieve?
- What does the above mean in terms of my use of social media?
- How else could I achieve those things instead of or as well as using my device?

The transition period from Year 6 (primary school) to Year 7 (secondary school) is often when young people get their first mobile phone – there is an opportunity here to embed intentionality and address relationships between people and their devices.

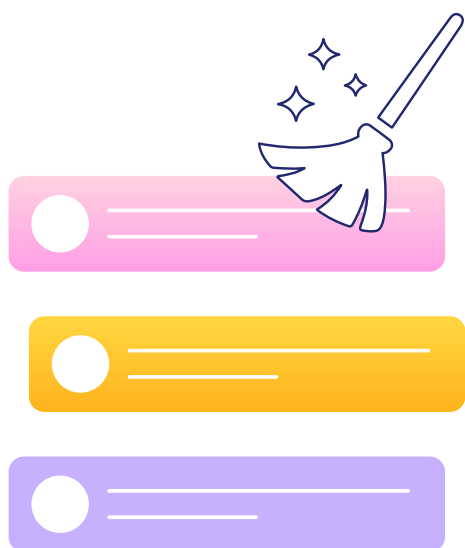
While a diary may not work with older girls and young women, the different parts of the template in Appendix I could be helpful to use as activities. For example, all girls could be asked to:

- List all the strategies that you can think of to make sure that what you see and do online makes you feel positive and happy, which can help you to:
 - Only engage with content that uplifts you and ignore content that brings you down ('beat the algorithm').
 - Recognise when you are starting to become drained or unhappy, or are engaging in mindless scrolling that is of no benefit. Look out for this and try then to disengage from the platform or device.
 - Remind yourself of the importance of other pursuits and that anything you see online is only a partial, and oftentimes, misleading depiction of reality.
 - Remember: if you're not paying for it, you are the product. Everything you are being shown is there to influence you in some way, possibly to buy something but also just to keep clicking and engaging with the content.

Yet, in recognition of the constraints on agency that exist due to the structures of social media and the commercial imperatives that shape influencer culture, discussions can broaden focus to critically examining why individuals may find it difficult to make different choices:

- Do we always do what is 'good' for us?
- Do we ever sometimes keep doing things after it feels good and, potentially, when it involves harm to ourselves or others?
- Why might we do that?
- Is it possible to know that something isn't real or achievable but to desire it anyway and to enjoy engaging with it?
- What do we need to put in place to manage our boundaries given that a lot of the dynamics of social media make it very difficult to do this?
- Where can I go for help if I'm finding it difficult?

The purpose of a diary or template exercise is not for adults to monitor or check it but to empower girls and young women to seek help if they identify any concerns or difficulties.



Clean up your feed!!

Girls and young women can have some influence over what comes up on their feed through disrupting the algorithm.

Alongside some other factors (like your gender, age, location, etc.), your algorithm is shaped by your previous engagement – so if you view, like, comment on or share particular pieces of content, you will be shown more of that kind of content in the future.

So, if you don't like it, don't engage with it!

Although remember, it is not entirely within your control, and you may still find that things pop up that you don't like or aren't interested in. But it's still worth trying to exercise some control!

Monitoring and restricting devices

It is likely that schools will have mobile phone (and other device) policies designed to manage the institutional environment, facilitate learning and keep pupils safe. It is important for schools to recognise that such policies will not fully address any issues arising from social media, influencer culture and other matters, hence the need for schools to play a role in also educating girls and young women in line with the suggestions in this guidance.

In the home, parents and families have more flexibility around how devices are managed and have the scope to take a more person-centred approach. As a first step, it is vital to recognise that **monitoring and/or restricting device use will not alone mean that there will not be any problems** (see part 2). There may also be **counterproductive effects given the evidence that an overly restrictive approach can lead to young people hiding things from their parents and can hinder open dialogue**, including if and when things go wrong, or a young person becomes unsafe. Instead:

- Set any boundaries and rules **collaboratively and communicate** about *why* they are important.

- Reassure the girl or young woman that they are **safe to report any issues** they may experience and that they will be supported rather than punished and that any action taken will be done with their knowledge and, ideally, with their agreement.
- Find out about what they doing and experiencing irrespective of any rules or boundaries, and **talk to them about the topics** outlined in this guidance that connect to influencer culture.
- Apps and platforms have age restrictions, but these are about the ability to consent to data processing. Inform the girl or young woman about these restrictions but set your own rules and **give them the skills they need to navigate the spaces**, e.g., what to do if they see something that troubles them and where to go for help.

Remember: rules are not a substitute for conversation and ongoing dialogue!

But – dialogue is *developed* over time and will not necessarily be achieved in the first conversation.

Building self-esteem and self-worth

"I have this thing where like sometimes when I'm feeling down I kind of look at myself in the mirror and I say the things that I like about myself, like, 'Oh, your eyes are looking sparkly today.' And even if you don't mean it, saying it to yourself really makes a big difference."
(Workshop 1 Years 5-6)

Given that influencer culture seems to be having – oftentimes pernicious – effects on how girls feel about themselves and their expectations of themselves and others, it is important to think about self-esteem and self-worth.

The emphasis on how girls look, in particular, is deeply embedded in our culture and so it is important to go beyond just reassuring girls that they are beautiful as they are, to getting them to think about what else is important both for them personally and in their friendships.

This may be difficult for parents, who may wish to speak positively about their daughter's appearance, especially if their daughter expresses negative sentiments about themselves. **Consider talking about their appearance as one of many positive things about them but also disentangling appearance from the love you have for them and their self-worth.** E.g., 'you are beautiful to me because I love you and that makes you beautiful inside and outside, but that's not why I love you – I love you because you're my daughter and I want to support you to become and be the best person you can be beyond what you look like'. These conversations can involve explicitly raising and challenging gender stereotypes.

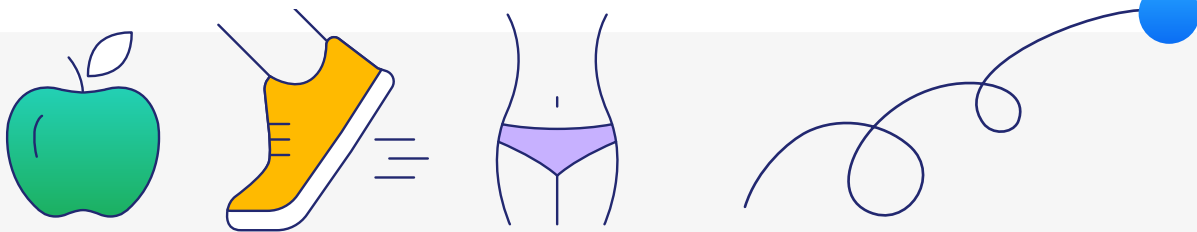
Activities can explore:

- What are the norms and expectations that exist around how girls are meant to look, act and behave? What traits and characteristics are girls *meant* to have as ideal standards?
- Where do the pressures and expectations come from?
- How do the pressures and expectations make people feel?
- How do the pressures and expectations make people treat themselves and each other?

Girls could be encouraged to think about:

- What is my 'inner voice' like? Is it kind, supportive, accepting? Or can it be cruel and judgmental?
- Does my inner voice sound like a friend or a good person? Is this how people should speak to themselves or others?
- How does the inner voice make me feel – is it building me up or tearing me down?

- What can I say to counter the inner voice? Are there affirmations or positive statements that challenge a negative inner voice?
- What can I actively do to make affirmations a reality? For example, if I want to focus on what my body can do rather than what it looks like, what should I go and do right now?



Critical thinking stimulus: Healthy eating, exercise and weight

In western society, we (at least currently) tend to celebrate thinness and when people lose weight, e.g., through dieting or lots of exercise, we compliment them and imply that they've achieved something good. Interestingly, some people suffering from eating disorders or disordered eating that involve a lot of focus on restricting what they eat and over-exercising, are, at least initially, sometimes complimented for how their body looks by people around them. There are even examples of doctors encouraging such individuals (before they realise that they have a problem), because of how ingrained thinness and weight loss is in our culture. Of course, we also see underweight models in fashion shows and advertising and many models talk about how common eating disorders are within the industry.

Some individuals suffering with these disorders say that one of the factors that makes full recovery difficult is how much our culture celebrates thinness. *What would you say in response? Should we carry on pursuing thinness no matter what, even if it makes us ill? Or – do we push back on the idea and say that if society celebrates this, then that's a cultural problem that we should never try to pursue through unhealthy eating or exercise behaviours?*

[To note: eating disorders and disordered eating are, of course, much more complicated than just cultural messaging about eating and bodies. Furthermore, not all thin people are underweight or engaging in unhealthy behaviours). The point of this exercise is to identify and explore the way that we can feel compelled to live up to social standards, even if it means we have to become

For the younger girls, the diary (see Appendix I) may help in developing self-esteem and self-worth. For example, there could be a section for noting down good things about yourself, with questions such as: what did you do today to make you proud? What made you feel good, lighter, or content? The girls also wanted the diary to include 'facts' about how girls feel about themselves, what their bodies are like, etc. in general to help them feel less alone. This could be done as a classroom research activity where girls research how girls their age feel about their self-esteem, body image, beauty standards, friendships and other things they feel is relevant to them.

For parents and other caregivers in particular, **there may come a time when adolescent girls start to become interested in appearance-related matters** like make-up, dieting, hair removal, and so on. Such matters may come from influencer culture, wider media cultures and/or be emerging in their peer cultures. It can be tricky to navigate, but **try not just dismiss or trivialise it, or respond just with simplistic rule-setting** e.g., 'you're not shaving your legs, you're too young, end of story', which is likely to be unhelpful, with **not reinforcing the oftentimes oppressive social standards that girls sometimes feel pressure to live up to.**

Instead, explore **how exploration and experimentation could happen in a healthy and positive way**; co-identify what that may look like for the individual girl while gently pushing back on the idea that appearance should be of significant concern.

Pushing back can include questioning the culture, perhaps through **researching and discussing historical and cultural constructions of beauty and 'calling out' the impacts of social beauty standards**, for example on the time and money that girls and women end up spending on their appearance. Keep talking about it while also reflecting **critically on what you yourself may be modelling and doing regarding how you talk about and treat your appearance**. Parents and young people are part of the same culture – neither should blame themselves but can tackle the shame and acknowledge the effects it has.

Finally, it is also important that whatever messages you give out regarding choices around beauty and appearance, **keep reinforcing the point that it is up to everyone to make their own choices and no one should be judged and shamed for how they look**. This will help encourage girls and young women to treat each other well and to seek help, rather than blame themselves, if they are judged and shamed by others.

Developing healthy and ethical friendships and peer cultures

Given the relationship between influencer culture and the pressures and expectations that exist (and are policed) within peer culture, it is vital to **make links between online and offline contexts and, in turn, encourage girls to develop positive and healthy peer cultures based on tolerance and acceptance**.

For the younger girls, the diary (Appendix I) could again be helpful. Suggestions included to have 'tear-off' sections to compliment their peers to boost the confidence of others. The sections may not even need to be given to peers but could be used to help girls think about what they value in others.

In general, girls can be encouraged to think about what 'diversity', 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' would look like. For example:

- Are all girls the same? Do they all look, act and behave in the same way? Would we want them to?
- What are the benefits – to individuals, groups and society – of people feeling able to be different?
- How can we encourage acceptance of difference – in ourselves and each other?
- Why might it be difficult to acceptance difference? Why might we judge and shame ourselves and each other?
- Can we be friends with people who are different? What's good about being friends with people who are different to us? But also, what may be good about being friends with similar and like-minded people?

A lot of this is about encouraging girls and young women to treat each other well, starting with treating themselves well. But – what about if they encounter judgment and shame from others? At that point, the following steps may help:

- Is *whatever they are saying* actually my problem? Or does it just show that they are being judgmental, when I'm not actually doing anything that causes any harm and/or how I look doesn't actually affect them or anyone else in any way?
- If so, why might someone be judgmental? It's probably more about them and the pressures and insecurities that they feel, rather than anything to do with me.
- But how does it make me feel? Do I need to find somewhere to just relax and take my mind off it, perhaps through doing something else I enjoy? Would it help to offload and talk to someone (a friend, parent, teacher?) who will listen to me and help to build me back up?
- Has this tipped the line into bullying or cruelty and actually I need to go and find some proper help from a trusted adult who can potentially step in? If that feels scary, then I need to tell the adult that and hopefully they will follow the steps outlined below regarding responding to disclosures and active listening.

The most important part of this approach is **recognising the paradoxical effects of peer culture, whereby peers may feel most likeminded and trustworthy and be a source of support and enjoyment while also potentially be the source of social scrutiny, judgment and shame.** Focusing on peer culture is about enabling and empowering girls and young women to play a positive role in their peer groups.

‘Teachable moments’

Adult engagement with girls and young women can be helped by using ‘teachable moments.’ These may be local or national situations or events that occur that raise a noteworthy issue and offer an opportunity to reflect, think critically and develop important skills and outlooks that can help in navigating influencer culture and its wider effects. Teachable moments can help in thinking about the significance of the issue but can also help with ‘distancing’ – **rather than talking about the girl or young woman personally, she can distance herself and talk about her views and perspectives through commenting on the broader situation, an object, piece of media (e.g. an advert) or event under discussion.**

Teachable moments can be raised by parents in informal conversations (e.g., ‘I heard this today in the news, what do you think about that?’) or by teachers and others in formal classroom settings whereby girls are asked to comment on particular statements or stories.

Questions to explore:

- Why do you think this situation/event may have happened?
- Does this trend or event make sense to you? Is it something that you see happening around you?
- Why might a particular event or trend be happening? What might be the causes of it?
- How can the issues be addressed? What may be helpful or what may need to happen? Who can play a role in that?

Using teachable moments can **help bring issues to life and can also help in raising critical awareness and developing critical thinking skills, as well as in co-identifying problems and solutions.** Girls and young women could be asked to bring their own ‘real life’ examples of issues that they think are important, for example within educational interventions.

It is important to make the discussion about girls and young women generally – once that dialogue has developed, the **conversations can start to explore whether the individual girl or young woman has thought about it and where they stand personally.** But don’t go in with direct questioning immediately!

Examples of ‘teachable moments’:

- Trends in mental health and wellbeing among girls and young women.
- Changes and developments in social attitudes towards and about girls and young women.
- Influencers posting stories and content pushing back against editing and curating content and ‘calling out’ the culture.
- Body positivity and body acceptance movements and the dynamics of acceptance and shaming that unfold.

Ask girls and young women about examples they can find and what they think about these issues.

Reaching out for help

Girls and young women need to learn to identify when they can deal with problems themselves and when they need further help. Interventions could help them, first, recognise when they need extra help and second, what that help may look like. For example:

- When do I know that I'm feeling good and content and may not have anything to worry about for now with what I'm seeing or doing online?
- What thoughts, feelings or experiences may indicate that I need to stop watching a particular bit of content or content from a particular influencer? How can I do that? When may I need to block or unfollow? Do I need to search out a different type of content or influencer that may make me feel better?
- What thoughts, feelings or experiences may indicate that I need to take a break from a platform or my device? What should I go and do instead? When might I be ready to go back to the platform or device? It can be difficult – try to find alternative activities that may be useful or distracting to engage in when feeling like this.
- When might I not be sure what to do and may need to find some further information or speak to someone?
 - Online sources of information and support – what's reliable and helpful?
 - When may a friend be good to talk to?
 - Could a sibling, if applicable, have anything useful to suggest?
 - When might I need to speak to a parent or another trusted adult?
 - What is it that I need to ask for from that person?

The focus should be on trying to identify what needs to be done before problems or challenges become too serious or overwhelming – what are the subtle and initial signs that action may need to be taken?

The younger girls wanted links to helpful organisations and 'tear-off' slips to give to adults when they need help to be included in the diary (Appendix I).

Remember: it is likely to be the case that **certain types of individuals may be trusted more for a given issue and that when communicating with adults, there may be particular relatives or teachers (or other individuals) who feel easier to speak to than others.** It's important for adults in general to try to build dialogue with girls and young women but also to recognise and understand the likelihood that there may still be preferences for who they feel comfortable speaking with.

Dealing with 'disclosures'

Adults – including parents, teachers and others – may sometimes be told about specific problems or concerns affecting a girl or young woman (either directly from the affected person or through a third-party). **Practitioners and professionals often address such matters as disclosures potentially requiring a safeguarding response, while parents are likely to also be concerned but from a more informal safety and wellbeing perspective.** Regardless, it is important to take a moment to orient to active listening and to validate the decision that the young person has made to share whatever is happening. It can be helpful to ask:

- Would you like me to listen?
- Would you like me to offer advice?
- Would you like me to step in and help?

Doing this will help in ensuring that the girl or young woman engages with the process and the conversation. It will also **help in enabling them to reflect upon what they need and what they want from the process**. It will be dynamic – perhaps the first time, they just wanted to be listened to and then the next time, they may be receptive to some advice. The adult can also **identify any repeated or ongoing concerns**; for example, perhaps a girl or young woman has raised an issue several times but says they just wanted to be listened to.

The adult may want to say: ‘okay, but **you do seem to be troubled by this and I wonder whether it would be helpful to think about any advice or problem-solving that may need to happen?**’

Alternatively, the adult may judge the situation to be more serious than does the young person. In this case, it may be helpful to say: ‘**I am very open to listening to you about what’s going on, but we may then need to decide what to do about it, but don’t worry, we’ll figure that out together once you’ve told me fully what’s happening.**’

Sometimes, essential next steps may involve actions that the young person is worried about or would rather not happen but are nevertheless vital to ensure that they or another young person are safe. In these instances, it is important to recognise any concerns and **to be honest about what may happen, but then to collaboratively identify and put in place the required support**.

Honesty is better for perceptions of legitimacy than pretending – or hoping – that everything will be fine.

Active listening and learning

Whether being told about a specific issue or experience or seeking to engage in proactive discussion about a topic, it is important to understand what is meant by active listening and learning.

No one – young or adult – wants to just be lectured to and told what to do. It is unsurprising that doing so tends not to have any impact on the person on the receiving end. Instead, it is important to ensure that **the person feels heard and understood and that they are part of co-identifying problems, solutions and ways forward**. They are then more likely to ‘buy in’ to whatever is discussed and decided, because it is based on their perspectives and resonates with whatever it is that they are experiencing or thinking.

Active listening involves truly understanding – or at least seeking to understand – what someone is saying and what is going on for them. Rather than projecting our own ideas and assumptions, we ask questions and are genuinely motivated and curious. We’re open to thinking differently and to hearing things and understanding them in a way we may not have anticipated or previously considered.

To ensure that someone feels heard, we must:

- Be **fully engaged** and not distracted with anything else (if it’s not the right time, be honest and schedule a better time when you can truly listen)
- Have **open and direct eye contact and body language** (although try not to be too intimidating or intense about it!)

To ensure we fully listen and understand, it can help to:

- Be aware of the person’s non-verbal and behavioural cues.
- Ask open questioning and engage in gentle probing.
- Listen **before** responding.
- Summarise and repeat back what has been heard and check understanding.

Active listening can result in the person being more receptive to anything you may wish to say in response – but, it is important not to be judgmental or dismissive. Language such as the following may help:

- Thank you for sharing that with me. I can imagine it was difficult to open up, but you’ve done the right thing.

- I think I am understanding what you're saying. Am I right in thinking... [summarise what they've said].
- Is there anything else I need to know or that you'd like to say for now?
- Would you like me to share my thoughts about what you've said? [if they say no, that they just appreciate the opportunity to have had you listen for now, then say thank you, but then review the previous section for how you may wish to manage the situation moving forward – it may be the case that you will need to take action anyway but if so, explain that you understand that they just wanted to talk but that you do need to think about next steps because of the nature of the issue].

Remember: **active listening will aid the conversation, benefit the relationship and increase the changes of ongoing dialogue.** It is also a way to role-model active listening as a skill and to help the individual develop self-knowledge and skills in self-reflection.

Active learning – be it in the classroom or anywhere else – involves girls and young women taking an active role in identifying issues and developing solutions. It shifts focus from the educator being the 'expert' to the educator guiding girls and young women to think holistically and critically about the topic.

It does not mean that the girls and young women get to dictate or fully define what is and isn't important. There may be things that are so taken –for granted or normalised that they don't see it as a problem or may be fatalistic about it.

Skilled educators can help push back against fatalism and normalisation, but it won't be done through one-directional lectures or other teaching methods. Instead, it needs to be **rooted within open and collaborative dialogue.** As with active listening, girls and young women may be more receptive to *suggestions* (rather than dictats or mandates), if they feel they have had an opportunity to share what they think first.

Guidance for educators on active learning can be found [here](#).

Peer delivery and ambassadorship

The younger girls, in particular, felt quite inspired about the awareness raising that took place over the course of the workshops. They wanted to **engage other girls in the process and felt that they could convey what they had learnt themselves to other girls, including younger girls.** The older age groups did not feel as inclined to do so, yet all girls felt that peers can be involved in interventions and can be effective messengers.

As a result, **peer involvement can take various forms** and can be collaboratively devised depending on what is deemed likely to be effective:

- In the classroom:
 - Girls bringing ideas and raising topics of importance themselves (not just being told what they are).
 - Girls identifying what the challenges and problems are.
 - Girls identifying potential solutions.
 - Girls identifying where and to whom they feel they can go for support.
 - Girls researching facts and figures about how girls their age feel about themselves in relation to self-esteem, body image, friendships, relationships, beauty standards and being online.

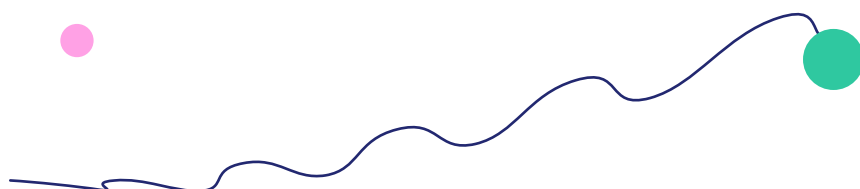
- Beyond the classroom:
 - Girls working with similar or younger aged peers to identify the issues and offer guidance including through an 'ambassador programme'.
 - Girls developing materials and resources that can be used educationally and/or shared in the school.
 - 'Worry boxes' to be placed in classrooms and elsewhere for girls to anonymously share what is affecting them and submissions to be used in open discussion forums. **There needs to be a specific person to monitor and follow up submissions so that they do not go left or unused, which would be demoralising.**

Conclusion

Addressing influencer culture with girls and young women requires an integrated approach that encompasses:

- Definitions, meanings and nature of 'influencers' and influencer culture.
- The ecosystem of social and psychological influence within the lives of girls and young women (and where online influencers fit in).
- The co-existing opportunities and risks of influencer culture that unfold across a continuum and that transcend online and offline contexts across the ecosystem of social and psychological influence.
- The scope for agency and self-governance within a social media landscape heavily structured and shaped by commercial imperatives that are, either incidentally or by design, not always supportive of agency and self-governance.
- The ways that the ideas and aspirations present within influencer culture reflect and reinforce longstanding systemic societal norms and meanings that need to be critically analysed, not just in terms of how 'real' they are but also in terms of how restrictive they can be upon girls and young women.
- The role of girls and young women in contributing to positive and healthy peer cultures that avoid the social judgment, scrutiny and policing that can make the pressures of 'influencer culture' feel very real and oppressive to girls and young women as they develop and grow through adolescence and into adulthood.
- The balance between protection and participation rights, and the need to both safeguard girls and young women but also give them space to actively contribute to co-identifying problems and solutions and develop the skills and outlooks they need to navigate influencer culture and to treat themselves and one another with tolerance and dignity.

The suggestions outlined in this section have been developed to help structure activities and discussions that adults may wish to have with girls and young women to stimulate their thinking, awareness, critical engagement and skill development. The suggestions can also be used by girls and young women by themselves (and/or with friends) for personal reflection. Further resources can be found on the next page.



Further resources

Videos

[Dove | Reverse Selfie | Have #TheSelfieTalk](#)
[Toxic Influence: A Dove Film | Dove Self-Esteem Project](#)
[The Hairy History of Pubic Hair](#)
[5 Videos That Get Teens Thinking Critically About Media](#)
[Control the Scroll: Managing Social Media and Mental Health](#)

Websites and Information Packs

[The Dove Self Esteem Project](#)
[Your Best Friend](#)
[Girls Friendly Society Activities For All Ages](#)
[For Teachers: UK Feminista Online Influencers and Misogyny](#)

From Our Advisory Board

[Fumble: 10 Affirmations For Achieving a Positive Mind](#)
[Fumble: What Is Low Self-Esteem?](#)
[Fumble: Top Tips For Building Good Self-Esteem](#)
[Fumble Talks: Tips for dealing with social media's pressures on our mental health](#)
[Fumble Talks: How to talk to your parents about life online](#)
[Fumble Talks: How do you know you can trust someone online?](#)
[Life Lessons: 10 Steps to Tackle Misogyny and Sexual Harassment](#)
[Outspoken Sex Ed: Tips by Age](#)
[Outspoken Sex Ed: Body Image Video with Natasha Devon about Social Media](#)
[Lifting Limits Resources on Gender Equality](#)
[Digital Awareness Resources for Online Wellbeing](#)

Further Reading

[UK Government \(2022\) Influencer Culture Lights, Camera, Inaction?](#)
[Ofcom \(2023\) Teens on screens: Life online for children and young adults revealed](#)
[Dove Self Esteem Project: How to help young people build resilience and confidence online](#)

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For more resources, please visit:

<https://influencercultures.wixsite.com/influencerculture>

Glossary

We are aware that the language around media as media technologies continue to develop is in a state of constant flux. However, understanding the different terms used within influencer culture can be used in activities for girls and young women, but also be helpful for those who do not feel as familiar with influencer culture.

Influencer: A person whose platform (whether it be online or in person, but it is often online) has the ability to influence the audience who engage with it. This may be through photos, videos, or sharing links. For example, their content creation can influence audiences to buy products.

Kidinfluencer: A young person under the age of 18 creating young-person centred content on their social media channels.

YouTuber: A person who has a YouTube channel and is regularly creating and uploading content for their followers.

Paid partnership: A business relationship between the influencer and a company/organisation. For example, an influencer mentioning a brand or product and being compensated for that mention. This could be through money or products for example. Influencers will use #PaidPartnership for transparency.

Algorithm: For social media, algorithms are a set of mathematical processes that will rank content on a social media platform for a social media user. Each person's algorithm will be different, as it is based on their likes and engagement with media, and then content will be displayed based on that behaviour. Algorithms consider factors like engagement metrics, user behaviour and relevance matching to prioritise content for users. For influencers, understanding and effectively engaging with these algorithms is part of how they attempt to reach a wider audience and in turn expand their influence.

Audience: People who, individually or collectively, view content. The term audience continually changes as media technologies develop. In relation to social media, it is people who view content - whether that be on a 'For You' Page or in their own social media feed of people they follow.

Brand mention: When a brand is mentioned by a person online. This can be positive or negative. This may often be through influencer created content, comments on a post or online reviews on blogs on YouTube Channels for example.

Brand event: An event hosted by a brand to market a particular product or experience. These events will invite influencers to come and document the event for their followers to create 'hype' around the product or experience. For example, a cosmetics company may launch a new make up product through an event, where influencers are invited to try the product and share it with their followers.

Blogger: A person who has an online blog that they create content for. If this is written content, they will be referred to as a blogger. If it is video content (such as on YouTube) it will be referred to as a vlog, and the person would be a vlogger.

Reach: The number of users who see a piece of content, e.g. an Instagram post.

Like: A way for audiences to show they 'like' content on social media. This can be shown through clicking a 'Like' or a 'Heart' button depending on the platform.

Filter: An effect that can be applied to images of videos before uploading them onto social media. Some may just change the colour of the image or video, or may add some graphics, others may change the shape of someone's facial features.

Content: A post, video, story, or text that is created by an individual, company or organisation to upload on a social media platform.

Hashtag: Used on social media sites to tag posts on a specific topic that makes the most easily searchable. For example, posting a picture of a dog on Instagram and using the hashtag #dogsofinstagram so that the picture shows up when the hashtag is searched.

Impressions: The number of times content has been seen by users, whether that is in their feed, or through a search. This includes multiple views from users.

Instameet: A gathering of Instagram users, often organised by a community or group, where participants meet in person to take photos and videos, share tips and network. It's an opportunity for like-minded individuals to connect and engage in creative content production.

Stories: A feature on various social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook) that allows users to share photos, videos, and text content in a temporary format. These posts disappear after a set period (usually 24 hours), providing a more casual and ephemeral way of sharing content.

Macro-influencer: A social media influencer with a large following, typically in the hundreds of thousands to millions. They have significant reach and can impact a wide audience with their content. Brands often collaborate with macro-influencers for marketing campaigns.

Micro-influencer: An influencer with a smaller, more niche following, typically in the range of a few thousand to tens of thousands. They may have a highly engaged and loyal audience within a specific interest or community. Micro-influencers are valued for their authentic connection with their followers.

Sentiment: The overall emotional tone or attitude expressed by an influencer or their followers towards a particular topic, brand or situation. It can range from positive, neutral, to negative.

Follower: A user on a social media platform who subscribes to another user's content feed, allowing them to see updates and posts from that user in their own feed.

Social media: Online platforms and websites that allow users to create, share, and interact with content in a social and interactive manner. This includes platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, among many others.

Tag: To mention or label a specific user in a post or comment. This is usually done by using the '@' symbol followed by the username (e.g., @username).

Target audience: The specific demographic or group of people that a content creator or brand aims to reach with their content or marketing efforts. It's the group of individuals who are most likely to be interested in and engaged with the content.

Transparency: The practice of being open and honest with one's audience, particularly in disclosing sponsored content, partnerships, or any form of compensation received for promoting a product or service.

Viral marketing: Creating content that spreads rapidly and extensively among online users. It often leverages social networks and word-of-mouth to increase brand awareness or promote a specific message.

Cancelled: A situation where an individual, often a public figure or influencer, faces severe backlash and public disapproval, typically due to controversial actions or statements.

Collab: Short for collaboration, it refers to when two or more content creators work together on a project, video, or post, combining their audiences and creative efforts.

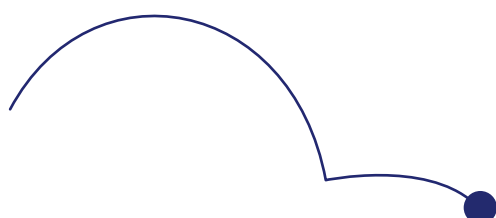
Diss track: A type of song or music video created to criticise, insult or "diss" another person, often in a competitive or confrontational manner. In influencer culture, diss tracks may be created to address conflicts or rivalries between influencers.

Dying: A trend, meme, or content style that is losing popularity or becoming less relevant among the audience.

Get ready with me (GRWM): A type of video content where an influencer shares their process of preparing for a specific event or day, typically including makeup application, hairstyling and outfit selection.

Hate follow: The act of following and engaging with a social media account, not out of genuine interest or admiration, but rather to monitor, criticise or express dislike for the content or the individual.








Receipts: Evidence or proof, often in the form of screenshots, messages or other documentation, that is presented to support or validate a claim or statement made by an influencer or their followers.



Appendix I: Diary template


This template can be used in full or in part, as deemed appropriate and helpful.

Today's date <input type="text" value="___/___/___"/>	
What about today has made you feel proud or happy?	1. <input type="text"/> 2. <input type="text"/> 3. <input type="text"/>
What are three things that you like about yourself?	1. <input type="text"/> 2. <input type="text"/> 3. <input type="text"/>

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Please tick the relevant selection below	
How, overall, would you say that today has gone?	<div> <input type="radio"/>  <input type="radio"/>  <input type="radio"/>  <input type="radio"/>  </div> <div> <input type="radio"/>  <input type="radio"/>  <input type="radio"/>  </div>
How much time would you say that you'd spent on social media?	<div> <input type="radio"/> None <input type="radio"/> 3 - 6 hours </div> <div> <input type="radio"/> Under 1 hr <input type="radio"/> 6 - 8 hours </div> <div> <input type="radio"/> 1 - 3 hours <input type="radio"/> Over 8 hours </div>
How do you feel about the amount of time you spent on social media?	<input type="radio"/> Too much time <input type="radio"/> About right <input type="radio"/> Not enough time

Continued on
next page



 Please tick the relevant selection below	
Did you see any content on social media shared by influencers?	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Can't remember
If yes, how did it make you feel on a scale of 1 - 10? 1 = awful 10 = really good <i>[5 = neither good or bad, or a bit good and a bit bad]</i>	<div> <input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5 </div> <div> <input type="radio"/> 6 <input type="radio"/> 7 <input type="radio"/> 8 <input type="radio"/> 9 <input type="radio"/> 10 </div>

Did you make any decisions about what you looked at and did on social media? If so, what were those decisions?	
Is there anything you've learned or thought about today that you didn't know or haven't thought about before?	
Is there anything you'd like to change for tomorrow, or to do differently tomorrow? If so, what?	

Tear off slips:

I'd like to give you a compliment!

I really like the following about you:

I am really glad to have you in my life!

I think I need some help...

I am worried about the following:

Can you help me?

I'd like to give you a compliment!

I really like the following about you:

I am really glad to have you in my life!

I think I need some help...

I am worried about the following:

Can you help me?

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