

Myself:

shaping a
more hopeful
narrative



From evidence to impact:
The Good Childhood Report 2025 policy
recommendations for **local government**

**The
Children's
Society**

Myself

Young people report growing pressure about how they look, their identity and where they fit in. The Good Childhood Report 2025 shows that for girls, appearance is the area of life they are least happy with.

But this is not a 'girls' issue': young people of all genders describe the impact of perceived standards and expectations have on their self-esteem. **Over time, this constant chipping away of self-esteem and sense of identity leaves too many young people second-guessing themselves.**

What the Good Childhood Report says

- Over one in seven 10 to 15-year-olds were unhappy with their appearance.
- This number was even higher for girls, at one in five.
- Young people said it is 'fairly common' to be bullied for the way they look, alongside discriminatory bullying (e.g. race, sexual orientation, SEND).
- Young people felt social media can amplify discrimination and that online bullying is harder to challenge or escape than in-school bullying. However, young people spoke with nuance about social media, recognising the benefits it brings such as connecting with their chosen community and keeping in contact with parents.
- Even when they report bullying, young people said it often feels like nothing changes.
- Young people overwhelmingly felt that what they are exposed to can shape how they see themselves, with appearance often linked to unrealistic beauty standards.

What young people say

Young people described a growing pressure to fit in, including repeated examples shared about how some young people may be unkind to others due to fear of being targeted themselves, or to increase their own sense of belonging.

"Unkind relationships between many students, students feel peer pressure to fit in which leads to large friendship groups who make fun of others."

Young person

Young people also explained that the way that they feel about themselves has an impact on their relationships with other young people. For example, they spoke about how the rise of misogyny and specifically incel content for boys, and content about beauty standards for girls, could affect their self-esteem and have an impact on how young people behave towards each other.

Bullying came up repeatedly, including how bullying has changed due to social media, which can give it extra momentum and make it harder to escape. A particular frustration was what happens after they report it: some felt there are few consequences and that the cycle continues.

"In my experience there's such a high volume of bullying and there aren't enough staff to deal with it ... Bullies have no consequence, so you don't break the cycle."

Young person

It should be noted that young people also spoke about the positive aspects of social media, including a sense of chosen community, connection and support, and the ability to keep in touch with their parents and carers.

What professionals say

Professionals recognised the same mix of pressures but described the way the system struggles to respond when harm moves between school, home, and online spaces. Parents often look to schools for help, but schools cannot always act on incidents outside school hours; parents, meanwhile, can struggle when it spills beyond the home.

The result is that some young people fall into the gap and do not get the support they need. They also stressed that this sits within a wider loss of community infrastructure that would normally catch problems earlier and reduce isolation.

Finally, professionals argued that wellbeing and social education are being missed as protective factors: without stronger physical, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, young people

are often left to make sense of harmful content and social pressure alone.

Recommendations

Develop a local anti-bullying strategy

In 2026, bullying no longer stops at school. Yet responses remain outdated and fragmented, often only addressing issues in isolation. A strategy led by the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) can ensure joined up action and accountability.

- **How:** use the LSCP’s convening role to agree an anti-bullying plan with named leads, shared outcomes and clear responsibilities, including how partners can respond when bullying is online or takes place outside school.
- **What can councillors do?** Press partners, including academies, to commit to shared outcomes and make sure children see change when they report bullying. Use scrutiny to monitor delivery and accountability.

Adopt a restorative approach to bullying

Punitive responses can push children out of education and entrench cycles of harm. Where appropriate, restorative approaches help young people resolve conflict and can prevent exclusion. It can also ensure young people who are being bullied see action being taken.

- **How:** support schools and youth services to use restorative practice for bullying and peer conflict, alongside clear safeguarding thresholds and responses for serious harm. Link this into local education partnership arrangements so referrals are simple and access is consistent.
- **What can councillors do?** Champion restorative practice and make the case that prevention saves money, improves outcomes and reduces exclusions. Seek regular updates on outcomes through briefings or scrutiny, where appropriate.

Commission body image and self-esteem programmes

Low self-esteem is a driver of poor mental health, particularly for girls and LGBTQ+ young people. Early intervention builds resilience and confidence.

- **How:** take a Public Health approach by building body image and self-esteem into local needs assessment and prevention planning. Ensure early support, linked to PHSE education and digital resilience, is available through schools and youth settings.
- **What can councillors do?** Push for self-esteem and body image to be reflected in the JSNA and local prevention priorities. Ask how young people have shaped what is commissioned and delivered.

What works?

The **Lifting Limits** programme equips professionals with the skills and resources to help children recognise and challenge gender bias. It delivers innovative, school-based interventions that promote gender equality, linking directly to the national curriculum.

Designed by educators for educators, it supports a whole-school approach to tackling gender-based attitudes, behaviours, and harms.

This kind of evidence-based, preventative work shows how early intervention can shift culture and improve outcomes.

Why this matters

Bullying and low self-esteem shape childhood. They influence whether young people trust that they will be protected and safe.

When young people feel judged or excluded, the impact shows up quickly in anxiety, low mood and poor self-esteem. It impacts identity and belonging and young people start to second-guess themselves, withdraw, or change who they are to avoid being singled out.

The internet has changed the way bullying happens – but very little has changed in the way we respond. Strong leadership at a local level means action can be taken in a joined-up way to reduce harm and strengthen protection. Done well, it is not just about reducing incidents, but making communities places where young people feel safe, valued and able to thrive.

Teenagers' needs are being ignored, with those who face abuse, exploitation or neglect only receiving help at crisis point.

We reach teenagers where they are to tackle the struggles they face today, providing complete support that's specific to them, and challenging the government to deliver policies that will continue to protect them. Because a future of hope and happiness belongs to every young person.

Together, we can set a path to a good childhood.



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Report 2025 publications.**

For further information or advice on how to implement these actions in your council, please contact **Regional Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Georgia Power**, at Email: **georgia.power@childrenssociety.org.uk**.

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