



# BODY IMAGE AND SELF-EXPRESSION

## Activity Guide

This guide provides background information and prompts for further discussion around the *Bodies, Hearts, and Minds* toolkit activities ‘What Does a “Healthy Body” Look Like?’, ‘Prim ‘N Poppin’, ‘Models Depress Me’, ‘Stereotypes, Schools, and Hair’, ‘What Do Fashion and Beauty Mean to You?’, and ‘Make Your Own Health and Beauty Time Capsule’. It may be useful when running the activity with groups.

You can also find associated ‘Learning Objectives and Curriculum Links’ that can be used to support teaching on topics related to personal, social, health, and wellbeing education in England (5.1), Wales (5.2), Scotland (5.3), and Northern Ireland (5.4) on the [Body, Self, and Family website](#).

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## WHY ARE IDEAS ABOUT HEALTH AND BEAUTY IMPORTANT?

‘Health and beauty’ is a familiar phrase. ‘Health’ is a separate state to ‘beauty’ but in our minds they are often connected. Since the Victorian era, it has been common to associate physical qualities with moral qualities. In the nineteenth century, small waists were seen as signs of youth, purity, and innocence. To achieve the ideal feminine appearance, women wore corsets. There is a long history of people actively manipulating their appearance to display particular personality traits.

Over the twentieth century, different types of appearance were celebrated at different points. In the 1920s, as outdoor leisure pursuits became popular, it was fashionable for women to have slim, boyish silhouettes. In the 1930s, an ideal of Hollywood glamour saw the return of hourglass figures. In the 1960s, the slim androgynous look came round again, personified in models like Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton. In the 1980s, the keep-fit craze saw women and men pursuing toned and muscular bodies. The body types and appearances associated with particular ideals change – but the idea that there is some connection between the inner and outer self is very resilient.

These ideas are popularised in the media. In the twentieth century, millions of girls and women read magazines that shared the latest trends in fashion and beauty. These magazines contained contradictory messages. They made most of their profit from advertising selling readers products to achieve the perfect look. But they also included serious articles on topics like eating disorders, and problem pages where readers sought advice on body image.

Historically, beauty ideals have been heavily influenced by assumptions about gender, 'race', and sexuality. There has been more spotlight on women's than on men's appearance. Men's magazines did not become really popular until the twenty-first century. Men were not exposed to the same kind of pressure about how they should look as women. This has changed in recent years as shown by rising rates of eating disorders among boys and men.

Until recently, white models dominated mainstream media images of fashion and beauty in the UK. This helped to promote whiteness itself as the ideal beauty standard. As a result, features such as Afro hair were portrayed negatively – as a 'problem'. Fashion and beauty brands did not cater for all skin shades and tones. Schools enforced racist rules about appropriate hairstyles based on the idea that neat hair = straight, Caucasian hair. People of colour who did not see themselves represented in popular culture could struggle to achieve a positive self-image.

Rigid ideals of fashion and beauty can be oppressive. For much of the twentieth century, men were expected to dismiss fashion and beauty because these were trivial concerns. Men who did care about how they looked might be perceived as effeminate or queer. Likewise, women who did not conform to popular ideas about feminine appearance might be seen as gay.

People who did not fit dominant beauty ideals could take action by reacting against them. In the 1960s, the Afro became popular as a celebratory symbol of Black identity and power. Since at least the 1920s, LGBTQ+ people have played with forms of dress associated with different

genders to celebrate non-conforming sexualities. Nowadays, the body positivity movement rejects the automatic equation of slimness and beauty. Fashion and beauty can be liberatory tools for self-expression.



## ACTIVITY: WHAT DOES A “HEALTHY BODY” LOOK LIKE?

### Task 1

The activity asks participants to draw the first image that comes to mind when they think of a “healthy body”, and to consider what makes it look healthy.

This task works best if participants have limited time. The aim is to establish participants’ preconceptions about what “healthiness” looks like. This sets the scene for the more complex activities that follow.

**Group leaders:** Encourage participants to make a quick sketch rather than an elaborate drawing. Ask participants to explain or to reflect on what makes this body “healthy” with prompts like, ‘Why did you choose that body shape?’, ‘What is the person wearing?’, ‘Does their hair colour matter?’

### Task 2

This task asks participants to create a collage of ‘what a healthy body means to you’ using a platform of their choice. This is followed by discussion questions about making the collage, media images, and ideas of “healthiness”.

Creating a collage involves selection of images. Participants make active choices about what to include and exclude. This encourages further

reflection of their own ideas of “healthiness”. It also nudges them to think about what kinds of images are easily accessible.

**Group leaders:** Making a collage can be time-consuming. It speeds up the process when images are ready to hand. You could also ask participants to complete the task at home and to show others their collages at the next group meeting.

If participants use the images from the Body, Self, and Family website to make their collages, this introduces a historical element into the activity. These images are from women’s magazines published in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Young, slim, white, female bodies dominated the pages of these magazines. The images of non-white women are mostly taken from magazines from the late 1980s and 1990s aimed at Black women.

The discussion questions ask participants to explain their choice of images in the collage. They encourage participants to reflect on their own initial assumptions about “healthiness”, and whether these have changed while carrying out the activity, by comparing the drawing and collage.

The questions also prompt participants to think more deeply about media images of “health”, and especially what kinds of bodies and people are represented in the media. The final question stimulates participants to imagine a world where different kinds of bodies are represented in the world around us.

## 'TAKE HOME' CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ In the late twentieth century, the mainstream media presented young, slim, white bodies as aspirational
- ✚ The lack of representation of other kinds of bodies in the media perpetuated stereotypes about what “healthy bodies” looked like
- ✚ To understand how media representations are skewed, we need to look at what is missing as well as what is shown
- ✚ It is helpful to think about health in terms of behaviours like eating a balanced diet and exercising rather than focusing on appearance
- ✚ Healthy people can look many different ways – it is difficult to tell how healthy someone is by looking at them



## ACTIVITY: PRIM 'N POPPIN'

### Task 1

Through images and questions, this activity invites participants to reflect on the exclusionary nature of advertising images in the past and present.

This familiarises participants with older advertising formats. It encourages them to think about changing attitudes to beauty and body image. It also prompts more critical attitudes to advertising today.

**Group leaders:** The activity is short and straightforward. It allows space to open up more in-depth discussions of the role of advertising in promoting particular ideals, and the contradictory nature of much advertising. Ask questions like:

- ✚ Have you ever seen advertising images like this before?
- ✚ Is anything the same in these fake vintage advertisements to the advertisements you usually see? What is different?
- ✚ Why is Cory wearing make-up in the shower?
- ✚ Can make-up really provide confidence, fearlessness, and stability?

Participants might want to know more about the Prim 'N Poppin project. There is more information, including other images and short interviews with the models, on the [Prim 'N Poppin website](#).

The founders of the project, Julia Comita and Brenna Drury, explain that,



“We both are disturbed by the lack of diversity in global commercial advertising. These commercial images are seen by millions of beauty consumers, many of whom do not reflect traditional standards of beauty found in cosmetics advertising. Despite the recent evolution of the industry, trends in traditional beauty advertising largely promote a cis-gendered standard that glorifies youth and fair-skin. It is this preconceived ideal of beauty that Prim ‘n Poppin’ challenges.”

Comita and Drury ask, “What would society look like today if inclusivity was standard practice in advertising 30 years ago?” The Prim ‘n Poppin’ project highlights exclusion in the past and underlines the continuing lack of diversity in media images today.

### **‘TAKE HOME’ HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES**

- ✚ In the past and in the present, advertising sets narrow limits on who or what is considered beautiful
- ✚ The messages of advertising were and are often contradictory
- ✚ Because advertising is everywhere around us, it was and is difficult for people to avoid being influenced by these exclusionary beauty ideals



## ACTIVITY: 'MODELS DEPRESS ME'

### Task

This task asks participants to answer questions about a letter published on the problem page of teenage magazine *Just 17* in the 1990s. This includes considering what advice they would give this reader.

The task encourages participants to reflect in more depth on the relationship between beauty ideals and happiness. It helps participants to step outside their own lives, to empathise with the experiences of others, and to consider what makes good advice and how to communicate that advice.

**Group leaders:** The letter is more complex than it first seems. The reader is unhappy because she compares herself to the models in *Just 17*. But she does not write very much about appearance. Instead, she says her life is 'depressing and boring' because of schoolwork and lack of things to do.

Ask participants:

- ✚ Why does this reader connect beauty with happiness and excitement?
- ✚ Why do models' lives seem more exciting? How are models usually depicted?
- ✚ Why does the reader carry on buying the magazine if it makes her unhappy?

- + What “problem” does this reader want the agony aunt to solve?  
What “problem” should the advice target?

When participants have formulated their own advice, you can compare it to the response from agony aunt Anita Naik in *Just 17*:

Believe it or not, most of the girls on our fashion pages still have to go to school and do their homework. They also have to work very hard, watch their weight and make sure they get enough sleep to keep their skin clear and their hair healthy. Contrary to popular belief, they don’t party all night and jet around the world. And while I’m sure these girls are pretty happy, it’s part of their job to smile in the pictures. Bear this in mind the next time you start to feel depressed, and it’ll help you to see that modelling is just a job like everything else. A book I think you’ll find very useful is *How Do I Look?* by Jill Dawson (Virago Upstarts £4.99). It examines young women’s feelings towards their bodies and their lives.

Ask them whether they think this is good advice:

- + Does it get to the root of the problem?
- + Is it practical?
- + Is the reader likely to be happier if she follows it?

## 'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ Beauty has often been connected to other feelings and attributes that have nothing to do with appearance
- ✚ The media helped to reinforce these messages about beauty
- ✚ People exposed to these messages were influenced by them – including taking on their contradictions
- ✚ People sometimes compared themselves to images they saw in the media and had negative feelings about it



## ACTIVITY: STEREOTYPES, SCHOOLS, AND HAIR

### Task

This activity asks participants to read extracts from 1960s newspaper reports on school punishments for boys with long hair, and a report from 2020 about one school's abandonment of 'racist' appearance rules.

The activity helps participants to place schools' rules about hairstyles in a longer historical perspective, and to think about how such rules reflect prominent ideas about gender and "race". It also encourages them to consider the relationship between appearance and celebration of identity.

**Group leaders:** The activity prompts participants to consider who exercises authority over their own appearance. This may lead to frank criticism of specific institutions, particularly in some school settings.

Ask questions such as:

- ✚ Why do you think long hair was associated with girls?
- ✚ Are there similar attitudes to gender and hair now?
- ✚ How much power did teachers in the 1960s have over hairstyles?
- ✚ Did anyone support these teenagers in wearing their hair however they chose?
- ✚ Why did rules about hairstyles matter so much to pupils at Townley Grammar School?

## 'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ In the 1960s, new male hairstyles became popular
- ✚ These changes in male hairstyling were widely reported in the press
- ✚ Pupils, teachers, and parents often disagreed about appropriate male haircuts
- ✚ These disagreements, and the widespread press coverage, show that new male hairstyles were seen to threaten traditional views of masculinity
- ✚ Today there are similar disagreements about Eurocentric hair ideals and rules



## ACTIVITY: WHAT DO FASHION AND BEAUTY MEAN TO YOU?

### Task

The task requires participants to read seven short extracts from individuals describing their relationship to fashion and beauty. The extracts discuss experiences from the 1960s up to now. Discussion questions follow.

The activity prompts participants to consider how fashion, beauty, and style reflect stereotypes and social norms, but can also be used to express identity. It encourages participants to think about these issues in relation to their own style.

**Group leaders:** In the extracts, people discuss how their style choices reflected aspects of their identity including sexuality, gender, Blackness, and professionalism. These choices have a complicated relationship to stereotypes and social norms.

Some of the people describe deliberate rebellion against stereotypes. Some describe conforming to certain stereotypes or norms as giving them freedom to express their identities. People relate to fashion and beauty ideals in complex ways.

If time is limited, split participants into small groups and ask each group to discuss the questions in relation to one extract, then report back to the group.

Participants may ask about specific terms in the extracts:

- ✚ **Telephonist:** As a telephonist, Susan operated a telephone switchboard to pass calls through to different people or departments. Telephone switchboards are usually computerised now.
- ✚ **Afro comb:** The Afro comb (sometimes called a pick) is a large wide-toothed comb that can lift tightly curled hair up and out from the head without destroying the curl. The design was first patented in 1969. It became a symbol of the expression of Black identity in the 1970s.
- ✚ **Hair metal:** Hair metal is also called glam metal or pop metal. It is a pop-influenced subgenre of heavy metal. The style of hair metal is influenced by 1970s glam rock. It features long, backcombed hair, make-up, tight jeans, spandex, and headbands.
- ✚ **Oscar Wilde (1854-1900):** A poet and playwright known for his wit, flamboyant dress, and belief that art and beauty were more important than conventional morality. In 1895, Wilde was convicted of gross indecency because of his sexual activities with consenting adult men.
- ✚ **David Bowie (1947-2016):** One of the most influential musicians of the twentieth century, known for continual reinvention of his musical and visual style. His flamboyant and androgynous persona reflected his bisexuality and queering of gender norms.



## 'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ People make style choices in relation to existing social norms
- ✚ Specific norms or stereotypes change over time, but style choices always carry messages about how people want to be seen
- ✚ Stereotypes and norms can oppress people
- ✚ But people can also use certain stereotypes as camouflage or to express aspects of their identity
- ✚ Beauty ideals can oppress people, but style choices can liberate them



## ACTIVITY: MAKE YOUR OWN HEALTH & BEAUTY TIME CAPSULE

### Task

The activity asks participants to create a virtual time capsule on health and beauty, and to explain their choices. They can use any platform of their choice to do this. The activity includes prompts to help them choose items.

Questioning what items are essential, inaccessible, or undesirable prompts participants to think in more depth about the meaning and significance of everyday objects. The questions also encourage participants to reflect on how health and beauty items are gendered.

**Group leaders:** This is a fun and creative activity. It can be run in different ways. Participants could create a virtual time capsule and home and then discuss it with the group. In a large group setting, participants could each nominate one item for inclusion in a group time capsule.

If there is some continuity in group leaders, the virtual time capsules created by previous groups can be kept. Discussing the contents of previous virtual time capsules with new groups illustrates rapidly changing approaches to health and beauty.

This works as a standalone activity, but also follows on well from previous tasks on health and beauty. If groups have completed previous tasks, prompt them to make connections between earlier discussions of beauty ideals, stereotypes, and self-expression.

Ask participants to think about how many of their items might have been included in time capsules in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. What has changed in health and beauty ideals over time, and what has stayed the same?

### 'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ Ideals of health, beauty, and self-care depend on specific social and historical contexts
- ✚ These ideals are not fixed but change over time
- ✚ The health and beauty choices we see as “normal” now might seem strange and interesting to people in the future – just as we often have different opinions about the choices of people in the past

