A healthy influence? Children's exposure to appearance-changing products online

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza

For the past five years as Children's Commissioner, I have been speaking to children about the online world and its influence on childhood. It became clear to me very early on in the role that children today do not distinguish between 'being online' and 'being offline' in the way that adults do, or even in the way that previous generations of children did. The two worlds exist simultaneously, through smartphones.

The debate around what children are seeing via these powerful little devices has never been louder. School leaders have told me of their deep concerns for children's online safety – despite most of them already restricting or banning phones at school. Parents talk to me about feeling overwhelmed by the risks of being online, compounded with the inevitability of their child needing access to a phone.

Children speak to me frankly about the dark things they are witnessing: girls avoiding even being online for fear of having someone fake a naked image of them, large numbers seeing pornography online by age 11, or teenagers being so resigned to bad things happening to them online that they don't tell their parents.

It is within this context of heightened awareness and political debate that this report lands, one which adds another dark angle to the commentary: the extent to which influences from the online world are affecting children's thoughts and feelings about themselves.

This report seeks to quantify children's exposure to products that are designed to change their appearance, from weight-loss injections to creams that claim to lighten skin colour to Botox and muscle-boosters. Children tell me – and they have told tech companies directly in my presence – that they have been targeted by advertising for the kind of products tech companies would insist were blocked from their social media feeds, or even those that should by law be banned from being shown to them.

The findings in this report are deeply concerning, not just the kind of products being promoted to children but the way in which advertising content preys on their fragile sense of self-esteem. As one 17-year-old told my team: *"This [product] will fix your eyelashes, this will fix your lips, this will fix your nose, this will fix your hair, this will fix your nails…"*

Is it any surprise that, in my *Big Ambition* survey in 2024, only 40% of girls and 60% of boys told me they were happy with how they looked?

Shortly before Christmas last year, the Australian government made the bold and ambitious step of introducing a ban on access to nine major social media sites for children under 16. The world was watching closely: now the UK government in Westminster has opened the door towards a similar ban, through a consultation that will address some of the crucial questions about how to enforce a similar policy when social media is already so intrinsic to children's lives.

This report, and the voices of the young people within, adds real value to that debate. It illustrates the limitations of any kind of 'ban': 41% of children told me they have seen advertising for prescription-only weight loss drugs like Ozempic or Mounjaro, despite advertising of these kinds of products being illegal in the UK.

It is not enough to simply want to ban something. Introducing a ban is not an immediate guarantee that children are safer. In many ways, deciding to impose a ban is the easy bit. The hard work is making sure a ban is workable, well-understood, easily enforced and has teeth. When companies are found to be breaking the rules, sanctions must be significant enough to create a genuine disincentive.

I believe we are a long way off that yet.

Furthermore, the views of older children represented in this report prove that removing access to social media for under 16s only addresses one part of the problem. It means that we cannot take our foot off

the gas when it comes to creating an online world that is safer by design, where children of every age are protected from harm by default, not by chance.

The Online Safety Act must continue to evolve in strength and scope, even as the conversation turns to a ban on social media. Both are urgent – we cannot afford one without the other. In the words of one of my 17-year-old Youth Ambassadors, articulating why she believes a ban on social media is necessary: *"Parents can teach children and restrict things, but they can't teach them not to see their body image in a different way. They can tell them, but it might not get across."*

Childhood is short and precious, and too many children are growing up with skewed, unhappy beliefs about themselves. We have the opportunity to stop this, to create a generation of children who are allowed to just be children, without the shame, anxiety, or even confusion created by content they stumble across online.

Content warning

This report is not intended to be read by children. It makes reference to potentially dangerous products and discusses upsetting themes.

If you are affected by the themes covered in this report, the following organisations can provide you with expert information, advice and support:

Shout provides 24/7 urgent mental health support: giveusashout.org, text SHOUT to 85258

You can also contact your local NHS for health advice, including mental health advice. Call 111 for 24/7 advice, visit https://www.nhs.uk/ for more information and https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/ for an urgent mental health helpline.

Executive Summary

Children are being regularly exposed to products that claim to make changes to their bodies and appearance online. The type of products children told us they saw included skincare, hair products and supplements, which in themselves are not always suitable for children to use. They also included dieting products, and more dangerous products, like prescription only weight loss drugs and skin lightening products. Seeing these products alone, without buying them, is putting pressure on children who told us in our survey and focus groups that the focus social media content puts on appearance feels relentless.

Of children that responded to our survey, **78% reported that being exposed to appearance-changing products online had a negative impact on self-esteem**.

The office found that a substantial proportion of children were seeing the following products online:

- 41% of children have seen prescription-only weight loss drugs online (despite an advertising ban on these drugs).[1]
- Black (46%) and Asian (35%) children are more likely than white children (24%) to see products that claim to lighten skin online, and are more likely to use these products, despite ingredients in some of these products being toxic and the some of the products being illegal to sell.
- Boys (43%) were more likely than girls (32%) to see supplements for muscle building.

In focus groups, children spoke about how these products often appeared on social media, and in particular short form content. Some of this content is organic, user generated content but children also described seeing a high level of advertisements, including influencer marketing that promoted a wide range of products that claim to make changes about your appearance. They explained how some of the advertisements they saw seemed illegitimate, or deceptive, but also that they regularly felt tempted to buy products.

When asking children what they bought or tried, the office found that:

- Some children (8%) had bought or tried non-prescription pills that claim to help people lose weight. These products are often age restricted to over 18s.
- Black children were substantially more likely than white children to have bought or tried meals, snacks or drinks for weight loss (35% vs. 20%), and exercise and diet plans (37% vs. 18%) that claim to help people lose weight

This points to a level of harm that children are now at risk of engaging in, and harm that children told us they want to see reduced. That is why this office is recommending that regulations are put in place, and properly enforced to better protect children online. This includes:

1. Calling for the government to improve regulation and enforcement of the online sale of age-restricted items.

2. Calling for Ofcom to amend the Children's Code of Practice to protect children from body stigma content.

3. Calling for government to restrict all advertising to children on social media.

4. Calling for further age restrictions on what children can see and do online.

It is clear that many parts of the online world are not built with children's best interests at their core. What content, and which parts, of the online world are safe for children is now a permanent challenge for policy makers and regulators. This report adds to the growing evidence that further age restrictions are needed on parts of the internet that cause harm to children.

Introduction

This report explores how children's exposure to products that focus on appearance, and products that are illegal to advertise, and illegal to buy, is putting them at serious risk of harm and negatively impacting how children see themselves.

1. What are children seeing online?

"It's like, you don't want this, this will fix that, and you don't want to have weird eyebrows, so this will fix that, and this will fix your eyelashes, this will fix your lips, and this will fix your nose, and this will fix your hair, and this will fix your nails, and this will fix that." – Girl, 17

The young people spoken to for this report described seeing a stream of social media and advertising content focused on bodies and looks. This section of the report describes the products children who responded to the office's survey reported seeing online.

While content that exploits negative body image is not new, this level of exposure and the incentives for companies and advertisers to promote this content to children means it is more important than ever to ensure products, advertising, and the time children spent online are safe.

1.1 Products that claim to promote weight loss

Substantial proportions of children are seeing products online that are centred on dieting and weight loss. The office found that over half of children, 54%, had seen 'exercise or diet plans aimed at helping people lose weight when online, and 52%, had seen meals, snacks and drinks online that make claims that they help people lose weight'. The office asked whether respondents had ever seen these products online, 'such as on adverts or social media' so children may have noticed an advert, seen a product in social media content.

Exposure to these products was slightly more common among girls. The office found that one third, 34%, of children had seen non-prescription pills that claim to help people lose weight– girls (37%) were more likely to have seen these pills than boys (32%).

The office was told about an online culture fixated on girls' bodies. Girls and young women said that they frequently came across commentary on social media that was prescriptive about the type of body girls and women should have.

"I think there's a lot of focus on women's bodies and girls' bodies." - Girl, 16.

"It's like if you're too skinny, you get called anorexic. If you're too fat, you'll get called obese. If you're too like muscly, you'll get called manly. It's like you can't really win as a girl." - Girl, 17.

Young people told us that the focus on making bodies smaller online was a continuation of pressures girls and women feel to conform to certain body standards. What they had experienced while spending time on social media, however, felt particularly potent.

"It's always been there [focus on bodies], but it's getting more severe… more aggressive" – Young woman, 18.

In addition to more traditional diet and weight loss products, the office found that children were being exposed to products with more extreme effects. **Two fifths, 41%, of children had seen prescription only weight loss drugs (like Ozempic, Mounjaro, Wegovy)' when they were online**. **Girls (45%) were more likely than boys (37%) to see weight loss injections.** This is despite a ban on adverts for these prescription-only weight loss drugs in England.[2]

Prescription-only weight loss drugs have been available on the NHS in England (subject to strict criteria) since mid-2025, and are available privately (also subject to strict criteria).[3] They have a clear purpose in medicine for certain individuals, including adults and children.[4]

Despite this, young people told the office about the prevalence of weight loss injections online. Children spoke about seeing social media users discuss taking injections, or illegitimate adverts describing them as a way to rapidly lose weight. This was something which young people commented on, often aware that it was not being presented or used in a health context.

"I've seen people on TikTok, you know, like Ozempic. I've seen teenagers using it to lose weight, but teenagers using Ozempic, it's so wrong because obviously they're taking injections for the rest of their life. [...] saying, oh, it's so good and stuff, but they don't actually know the side effects to it" - Girl, 16.

Since their invention, these weight loss drugs have been subject to controversy, including their apparent easy access through online pharmacies and frequent online scams.[5] Reporting has shown there are shortcomings in how online pharmacies verify individuals' age and BMI, and in how well this is regulated.[6] Eating disorder charity Beat has issued a warning about the easy, illegitimate access to prescription-only weight loss drugs through online pharmacies and the likely vulnerability to this of people who have eating disorders.[7]

The illegitimate easy access to the drugs was something young people are all too aware of.

"You can just like buy it [weight loss injections], but you can, you have to do Zoom calls. But how do you know that you're on Zoom with someone who's buying it for somebody else?" - Girl, 17.

One young woman falsely believed that the drugs were available in pharmacies without a prescription, illustrating the perception that access to them was easy and widespread:

"You can just buy it from like Boots." – Young woman, 18.

Children's, and in particular girls', relentless exposure to products that claim to help people lose weight, amid a damaging culture focused on the appearance of women's and girls' bodies, is clear. The fact that some of the products children are seeing are prescription only drugs, prescribed only under strict criteria, is alarming.

1.2 Products and substances that claim to support muscle growth

The office also found that children are seeing products online that claim to help with muscle growth, and that boys were more likely than girls to have come across these products online.

The office found that over a third of children, 37%, had seen supplements for muscle building and half of children, 50%, had seen protein powders online. Supplements include pills and gummies containing vitamins and minerals and are a growing, billion-pound market. However, misinformation is rife and the

regulatory landscape is complicated.[8] Creatine (creatine monohydrate), for example, is a supplement that can improve exercise performance but has known health risks in higher doses.[9] There is little research on the safety and efficacy of creatine for under 18s.[10] It is a popular supplement and something that young people told us they enjoyed taking alongside their exercise routine,

"I love creatine. I'm not going to lie. I have creatine almost every day." - Girl, 17.

Creatine is often marketed in bold, brightly coloured packaging and comes in 'gummy' form – appealing to younger audiences.

Figure 1 - Vow Nutrition creatine chews, [Holland and Barret](), 'Millions' flavoured creatine gummies from Applied Nutrition Creatine Gummies, [The Supplement Store]()

Products that claim to have a muscle growing effect are more popular among boys. The office found that boys (43%) were more likely than girls (32%) to report seeing supplements for muscle building. Boys (56%) were also more likely than girls (44%) to have seen protein powders when online.

Taking an interest in nutrition and exercise can be positive for many teenagers. However, research has also shown that viewing muscle building supplements on social media is linked with muscle dysmorphia.[11]

Boys are subject to messaging about body standards online. In a Movember survey, two thirds of young men regularly engage with 'masculinity influencers', and over a third of men report acting on their advice.[12] 'Looksmaxxing', muscle growth and fitness are a focus of many of these influencers, whose content can promote extreme physiques and risky routines, often linked to steroid use and supplement consumption.[13]

Links have also been found between the use of legal muscle building and performance enhancing drugs and subsequent steroid use.[14] Reports have shown social media promoting and normalising steroids, leading to a rise in their use among men and boys.[15] The proliferation of steroids online was reflected in the office's findings that **almost one quarter of children, 24%, had seen drugs, like steroids, that people use to build muscle online**. **Boys (27%) were more like to have seen these drugs than girls (20%).**

As one young person explained about the influencers they follow online:

"They're a set of twins who take steroids and they make it seem like taking steroids is very cool. […] And a lot of like the influencers that I watch, they take like creatine, which is a supplement that can make your muscles look bigger and then also protein powders, they, like, advertise. […] A lot of them have their codes with […] protein brands and you get like 10% off from it." - Girl, 16.

Steroids are a Class C drug that can lead to infertility, increased risk of prostate cancer, heart attacks and strokes.[16] The sale of steroids is facilitated by social media, partly made appealing by influencers who refer viewers onto third party websites, but also because of the opportunities made available to suppliers able to sell directly on apps with encryption and private messaging.[17][18]

The normalisation and promotion of not just supplements, but illegal performance enhancing drugs, to children is a clear sign that things need to change.

1.3 'Beauty' products and procedures

Beauty products are commonly seen by children online. These products can range from skincare and make up, to products and procedures with potentially dangerous consequences, such as 'skin lightening' products and procedures like fillers and Botox.

Due to the widespread presence of beauty products across all forms of media and all types of retailers, the impact of social media and online advertising on children's engagement with the beauty industry could be argued as inevitable. Yet online, the extent and reach of these products is reflected in the large percentage of children being exposed to these products and the age at which they are exposed.

This is evident in the rising interest among girls in skincare and teeth whitening products developed for adults. The Office also found that two thirds, 66%, of children had seen teeth whitening products when online.

Research has shown growing concern about ageing among some very young girls – stemming from the popularity of 'get ready with me' and product review videos on platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts.[19] In focus groups, young people spoke about the popularity of skincare products. One girl told us beauty products were mainly marketed to girls, and illustrated the point by speaking about a younger relative of hers.

"She's got a 3 grand Sephora cart, £3,000 worth of stuff that she wants. Bear in mind, she's stunning as it is, but she wants to get glycolic acid, which will destroy her skin if she uses it before, like, the age of 18. She wants hyaluronic acid, which, again, will mess up her skin. She just wants loads of skincare that she's seen that she's not actually informed about" - Girl, 17.

Reports of increasing numbers of children presenting with reactions to skincare products is a sign of how online trends are impacting children as young as 11.[20] Skincare brands' use of bright bold colours usually associated with children's toys and games has been suggested as a cause for some of its appeal online, and a particular craze in 2024.[21]

The office found a disturbing pattern in the types of products children were exposed to dependent on their ethnicity and gender. While sometimes categorised and sold as beauty products, creams that claim to lighten people's skin can be especially dangerous and use toxic ingredients, as well as impacting on children's self-esteem. Over a quarter, 27%, of children had seen these kinds of creams online.

Black (46%) and Asian (35%) children were more likely to have seen products that claim to have a skin lightening effect than white children (24%). Girls (31%) were more likely to have seen these products online than boys (23%).

Products claiming to lighten skin can contain harmful and toxic ingredients, such as hydroquinone, mercury and steroids, and are banned from being sold in the UK and EU.[22] This can result in a wide range of serious and potentially fatal health problems.[23]

Drivers behind the promotion and demand for skin lightening products are complex – a huge factor is colourism, a system of inequality that gives special advantages to lighter skinned individuals, with varied and historic significance across the world.[24] The promotion and use of skin lightening products effect not just girls' and women's physical health, but also have a detrimental effect on their self-esteem as a result of beauty standards based around skin colour.[25]

It is clear that children are being exposed to drastic appearance changing products when online. The majority of girls (56%) asked reported they had seen cosmetic procedures. Advertisements for cosmetic procedures cannot appear in non-broadcast media 'directed at under 18s', or where under 18s make up over 25% of the audience.[26] It is also illegal to administer Botox or filler to someone under 18, and the government is proposing to introduce a licencing scheme that would prohibit practitioners from performing cosmetic procedures on children.[27] Despite a strict regulatory environment, children are being exposed to messaging about cosmetic procedures. Over two fifths, 43%, had seen these procedures when online.

In our focus groups with young people, the office was told about the experience of consuming beauty content online as an unending cycle of flaws being exposed by social media users and influencers, followed by products that provide a 'fix'.

"it's like, you don't want this, this will fix that, and you don't want to have weird eyebrows, so this will fix that, and this will fix your eyelashes, this will fix your lips, and this will fix your nose, and this will fix your hair, and this will fix your nails, and this will fix that, and this will fix that." - Girl, 17.

2. Why is this exposure to products happening?

[showing Tik Tok] "Ok, so you can, see if it's an ad. Yeah, most of them pretty much are ads..." – Girl, 16

Young people spoke to us about the frequency of advertisements they saw online, as well as the commonality of appearance-based products in the social media feeds – painting a picture of an online world priming children and young people to focus on the way that they look.

2.1 How these products appear online

In our focus groups, young people spoke to us about how they saw these products when they were online.

2.1.1 Lifestyle and routine-based content

Young people described where and how products focused on changing appearance would cross their screens. Short-form content posted by content creators, with a range of followings, were cited as the most likely format they would see these types of products,

"I think TikTok, I see a lot of these like get ready with me videos where like people are just using like excessive like beauty products. Those come up on my feed a lot." - Girl, 16.

Beauty products are likely to appear in 'get ready with me' videos and product reviews.

"TikTok, I definitely see a lot for skin care and makeup, especially because they've got like TikTok Shop I see a lot of people advertising with the Tik Tok shop with the videos." - Girl, 17.

Lifestyle content posted by creators is often a place where young people would see these types of products,

"I would probably say maybe TikTok, where I see most of the adverts because of the whole like it being like a short form, you just keep on scrolling. So I just tend to see people like doing their skin care routines

and or like people like maybe like making food all these with all these different protein powders." – Girl, 17.

Young people told us that they also saw organic content including these products, as well as ads.

"YouTube, but most of it's coming from creators, not from YouTube ads themselves. And even if you're not interested in that kind of content, it just pops up on your homepage. Or if you're scrolling shorts." – Young woman, 18.

2.1.2 Advertising - Small-scale content creators

As well as seeing adverts posted by content creators with large followings ("influencers"), young people explained that they would frequently see labelled advertisements from creators with small followings that they had not seen before.

"It literally could be anyone [...] people just buy stuff and then review it on TikTok and then that's how they get the money so it could be anybody that can do it" - Girl, 16.

2.1.3 Advertising – Gaming

Image-based self improvement has permeated online games used by children. Research conducted by Revealing Reality has shown children feel pressure to make sure their avatars online look good – and beauty brands and fashion designers are capitalising on this by sponsoring games.[28] E.l.f Beauty, for example, recently launched a 'Glow Up!' gaming experience within the online game platform popular with children, Roblox, where players select themes, use virtual cosmetics and make looks which they can use to compete against and engage with other avatars in community 'livestreaming'.[29] This is part of a bigger move brands are making on Roblox and other online games – with Roblox now allowing the sale of physical products in virtual shops.[30]

Figure 2 - *E.l.f's Glow Up* game on Roblox

2.1.4 Advertising – Artificial Intelligence

Some of the advertisements that young people described seeing were made by AI, which the young people the office spoke to were wary of.

"A lot of the ads I see nowadays aren't even real. They're AI generated, and obviously AI is not good right now, and I can kind of spot things, but some people might not be able to and it's going to get better in the future, so there needs to be a crackdown on ads that are simply not real." – Young woman, 18.

Young people referred to advertisements for prescription-only weight loss drugs believed to be created by the pharmacist and chain retailer, Boots, which was recently reported to be a widespread scam on Tik Tok and created using AI.[31]

2.1.5 Dominance of advertising

The level of advertising children are seeing when online was made apparent in our focus groups, with young people telling us that the majority of the short-form content they viewed was labelled as adverts.

[showing Tik Tok]"Ok, so you can, see if it's an ad. Yeah, most of them pretty much are ads - Girl, 16.

Published by both large and often small-scale content creators, and when on Tik Tok, with links to Tik Tok Shop or Amazon Storefronts – the advertisements were described as constant, and tempting.

"about 75 [% are ads] for me. Yeah, I'll literally click the yellow basket here" - Girl, 17.

"It's just easier as well. You only have to press a few buttons for your transaction to go through anything. And then they just deliver it to your house. You don't have to leave your house or anything." – Young man, 18.

Combined with the lifestyle content oriented around the type of products people use throughout their day to sustain whatever look or lifestyle is being exhibited, the exposure to products focused on appearance is constant.

2.2 What children think of online advertising

In focus groups, young people told us that they were sceptical about the level of online advertising they saw.

"It feels like it's just free for all on the Internet. And like anyone can advertise anything and that's really damaging" – Young man, 18.

This was linked to the misleading nature of some of the adverts they saw online, and a disparity between the type of advertisements they would see in person or broadcast media and what was permissible online.

"Why aren't they required to meet like the same standard of advertising and products that companies that advertise on TV have to meet?" – Young man, 18.

"I think you just need to make sure that the things that you're seeing are legitimate. Like the adverts you see on TV [...] I think you probably need something like an online advert ruling and so like official brands with proper products can apply for it and then you know that what you're watching is real and it's not fake and it's not dangerous." - Girl, 17.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and CAP Code states that advertisements must not target or appeal to under-18s if they promote products such as alcohol, cosmetic interventions, gambling,

dieting or weight loss, and most recently foods high in fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS). The code also stipulates that advertisers cannot imply that being underweight is desirable to vulnerable groups, including children or otherwise content that could exploit children's credulity or encourage risk-taking behaviour.[32] These rules are consistent across both the online and offline world.

The prevalence of advertising online (research shows almost four fifths of advertising spend is online) may indicate why this is a more difficult space to regulate.[33] However, the ASA's remit only covers advertising. This means that social media users and content creators can show or discuss products if they are not advertisements.

3. What are children buying?

"I think if I had the money, I'd buy everything that I see. Literally, I think if I had like £100, I would buy everything that I'm seeing on social media." – Girl, 16

3.1 What children are trying and buying after seeing products online

When the office asked children about products that are legal to buy, a notable minority of children reported that they had bought or tried products that are marketed as helping people to lose weight.

Overall, one in five children, 21%, had bought or tried meals, snacks or drinks that claim to help people lose weight. The same proportion, 20%, had bought or tried exercise and diet plans that claim to help people lose weight.

The office found that Black children were substantially more likely than white children to have bought or tried meals, snacks or drinks for weight loss (35% vs. 20%), and exercise and diet plans (37% vs. 18%) that claim to help people lose weight, demonstrating a highly worrying difference in how children are treating their bodies depending on their ethnic background.

Boys and girls were about equally likely to have bought or tried meals, snacks and drinks that claim to have properties that help you lose weight (20% vs. 22%), or to have bought or tried exercise and diet plans (21% vs 19%).

In focus groups, young people told us that they were drawn to products sold online because of their affordability. Some young people were happy with their purchases:

"I feel like eyelashes are better to order online because I wanted to get some individual eyelashes, £25 … You can get them for £5 on Amazon." - Girl, 16.

However young people were also dubious of some of the products that claim to change people's appearance – noting that there were products that people could sell online that would require a licence for practitioners to use in a beauty salon.

Although there are no age restrictions in law for products like hair dyes and body wax, in person retailers chose to restrict hair dye to over 16s and hair and beauty salons restrict their use of wax and hair dye on under 16s. For example, manufacturers and industry professionals have made clear that permanent hair dye should not be used on under 16s.[34] Young people were therefore sceptical about products being sold online by individuals and brands online which they believed caused cause damage to people's bodies.

"Mainly waxing products. Like professional hair dyes. I feel like if you've got to have a licence to get paid to use it, you should not be allowed to just buy it without being screened. Yeah, because when you go to a shop, you get ID'd. But then if you buy it online, you don't." - Girl, 16.

Young people told us about the consequences of buying products online which they believed would be safe and helpful to use. When trying to grow their eyelashes, one young person explained that they bought a product after being convinced about a product's efficacy online – viewing influencers on Tik Tok making positive claims and showing fake before and after results. Unfortunately, their eye became infected as a result.

"I saw this video on TikTok saying this [...] would grow your lashes back in two weeks [...]it showed all these fake photos and it didn't tell me any of the side effects. And then I got an eye infection and a stye because it didn't show all the proper ingredients on the list. And then I searched it up and it had, ... I don't know what it's called. It's this chemical. It's like a hormone chemical [...] I had to go on antibiotics. [...]. I did loads of research before I bought it [...], all these influencers were saying that it grew their lashes back" - Girl, 16.

Children are also buying products that they are advised to not consume. Some children (8%) had bought or tried non-prescription pills that claim to help people lose weight. Boys and girls were equally likely to have bought or tried these kinds of pills. This is despite the fact that these pills are regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency and retailers are expected to follow guidance to not sell these non-prescription pills to under 18s, although not banned for children by law.[35] It is unclear how, or if at all, age restrictions are being enforced online.

4. Perceived impact on children's self-esteem

4.1 How being exposed to appearance-changing products affects children's self-esteem

The potential physical harms from use or consumption of the products shown on children's screens range from reactions to inappropriate skincare products to higher risks of organ failure, cancer and heart attacks when using products that claim to lighten skin or illegal steroid use.

Children who both do and do not try these products that they are seeing online, are likely to experience a different type of harm. **Children overwhelmingly (78%) agreed that seeing products online that are meant to change your appearance is bad for young people's self-esteem.**

Answers varied by gender and ethnic group. Girls (82%) were more likely than boys (74%) to agree that exposure to these products online negatively affected self-esteem. Black children (42%) were more likely to strongly agree than white children (28%) that self-esteem was negatively impacted by exposure to these products online.

4.2 What children think of the effects on self-esteem

The office asked children between 13 and 17 if they agreed, disagreed or didn't know if 'seeing products online that are meant to change your appearance is bad for young people's self-esteem'. Children overwhelmingly agreed with this statement and gave us clear understanding of why they felt this way.

4.2.1 Children who said that seeing products online has a negative effect on children's self-esteem

The 78% of children who agreed or strongly agreed that products that focused on changing appearance had a negative impact on young people's self-esteem were given the option to explain why they felt this way. Children explained that that viewing unrealistic body standards being presented alongside the use or marketing of products was putting undue pressure on them.

"Because everyone is born different and there's a hundred different factors involved in making you, you. Seeing unrealistic images can make people think there is something wrong with them when there isn't." - Survey response.

Young people told us they saw adverts for products that claim to help people lose weight (which cannot be advertised to children according to advertising codes), and these adverts created feelings of shame.

"I am larger than all my friends and seeing ads for things to make girls get thinner makes me feel very ashamed of my body when I shouldn't be. There are girls at my school and some boys who call me fat as if it was a bad thing and that makes me very angry" - Survey response.

They described how this was a part of a wider image-based culture online that they were unhappy with.

"I am still growing and changing and my appearance will change, I want to feel good about myself and I don't need online toxicity" - Survey response.

Young people raised the issue of the health effects of the products, as well as the impact of seeing them on self-esteem.

"Because I feel we should have prescription of whatever products we use from experts and not just abuse any product we are exposed to online without clear directives on how it works" - Survey response.

They repeated feeling that the bodies and faces they were being shown to aspire to were setting impossible standards.

"It makes young people compare themselves with standards that I would say is impossible, fake or filtered. It brings constant pressure to try and fix something, whether its teeth, weight, or skin, which makes me feel like I am not good enough the way I am" - Survey response.

"It's always making us feel bad for how we look, everyone wants perfection but it just isn't right." - Survey response

The ubiquity of appearance-related products in online spaces is seen as part of the reason seeing them has a negative impact on self-esteem.

"Because that's all I see online it is everywhere" - Survey response.

4.2.2 Children who did not think that seeing products online affected children's self-esteem

A small minority of children (6%) disagreed that seeing products online affected children's self-esteem. For these respondents, they emphasised children's agency.

"My body is my decision always" - Survey response.

"I think we should be able to decide how we look" - Survey response.

Some children described how learning about fitness, wellness and beauty was something that they or their peers might want to do. Understanding what products could help children develop fitness, or express themselves with beauty products was helpful and should be available to them.

"Some people need help in diets, style and fitness and these products can help if they don't have the knowledge on where to start." - Survey response.

5. What needs to change

Children need to be better protected online. This report has set out the consequences felt by children when they are exposed to products that focus on making changes to their appearance. Most pronounced in our findings is the negative impact on children's self-esteem. This adds to the evidence of the catalogue of harms children now face on the internet.[36]

The exposure to these kinds of products, from supplements that aim to 'enhance' muscle, to toxic products that claim to lighten skin, shows how children are, on social media feeds, and in advertisements, being harmed because these online platforms are not built with children's best interests at their core. This points to the need for regulations to better serve children when they are online.

This report is being published at a time when the government is considering improving the protection of children when they are online including restricting their access to social media.

When working towards any restrictions to children's access to the online world, there are three changes that need to be made to protect children against the known harm they are exposed to by online advertising in the short and long term.

5.1 Improve regulation and enforcement of the online sale of age-restricted items

There is a gap in how retailers are regulated in their sale of age-restricted products online. While Ofcom regulates online service providers' implementation of age assurance for specific designated content, this content does not include the sale of certain age-restricted items, for example, laxatives and non-prescription diet pills. [37] Local Trading Standards offices and law enforcement regulate retailers' compliance with age-restricted sales, however, they are local authority based and have little opportunity to oversee online sales.

Councils must be properly resourced to ensure age-restrictions on the sale of certain items can be properly enforced online.

5.2 Ofcom must amend the Children's Code of Practice to protect children from body stigma content

Ofcom's power as regulator needs to be used to implement the Online Safety Act to its full potential.

Ofcom must amend its Protection of Children Code of Practice to require regulated online services to put in place proactive measures to prevent all content that is harmful to children including Non-Designated Content relating to body stigma from being served to children.

Ofcom identified advertising-based business models as a risk factor for children encountering body stigma content, a content type that was named as Non Designated Content in the Children's Register of Risks.[38] This means that body stigma content is a named type of harmful online content, and it is defined in Ofcom's register to include "body shame content, content promoting body ideals and body-checking content. Body stigma content is linked to a number of physical and psychological harms, primarily related to body dissatisfaction. These include low self-esteem, psychological distress and disordered eating behaviours. This is particularly the case when viewed in high volumes".

Despite naming advertising-based business models as a risk of harm, Ofcom did not include a single safety measure in its corresponding Code of Practice, which means technology companies need take no action against the risk of children being served body stigma content through advertising to be considered compliant with their duties under the Online Safety Act. [39]

5.3 Children should not be advertised to on social media

The Children's Commissioner does not think it is appropriate for children to be advertised to on social media. This report has shown that children are seeing adverts and content that negatively impacts their self-esteem. Due to the nature of social media business models, advertising on social media presents a risk to children – as highlighted by Ofcom's own assessments.[40]

To accomplish this, the government should amend the Online Safety Act in two ways so that no child can be targeted by advertisements on social media. The CAP codes already stipulate the range of products that are illegal to advertise to children, and how advertisements cannot exploit children's vulnerability in any way.[41] There is only a narrow range within which businesses and influencers can

operate as marketers of products to children online, and our evidence demonstrates that even within this narrow range, children are still being harmed. Advertisements offer no benefits for children, and need to be removed from children's experience online.

The government must amend the Online Safety Act in these two ways:

1. Insert an **overarching duty of care**: this will require social media platforms to take a whole-platform approach to risk assessment and mitigation. Ofcom should then ensure, when regulating the provision, that advertisements are no longer shown to child accounts in line with the platforms' duty of care towards those child users.

2. **Insert a definition for safety by design:** this will require Ofcom to produce a "safety by design" code of practice that will underpin all codes of practice in the regulatory regime. The code should address harms to children caused by addictive or compulsive design, including the advertisement-based business models which require addictive or compulsive design choices in order to retain user attention on advertisements.

5.4 The Children's Commissioner recommends further age restrictions on what children can see and do online

This report adds to the growing evidence of the level of harm children are now exposed to online. With that evidence, it is clear that policy makers and regulators need to be able to protect children from some parts of the online world, whether that is from harmful content – like pornography, or harmful services – and advertising based social media.

Regulators need the confidence to protect children from those harms, and the government must be bold in giving them powers to do that. This means that existing powers to limit what content children can see – such as pornography – must be built on and used to their full potential.

The government should consider every mechanism available to protect children from harmful services including restricting children's access to social media platforms that are designed in a way that will always prioritise profits over children's best interests.

Crucially, as the government does that, it should look at what protections will be both effective and able to adapt to the changing nature of online interactions and experiences. This means ensuring that every player in the online ecosystem fulfils their responsibility towards children. This includes internet service providers (ISPs), the providers of operating systems (OS), and app stores which could be required to conduct age verification in additional to individual websites.

Similarly, it is the nature of social media websites, not the specific providers that should be the target of any regulation. For example, children should be protected from the harms of addictive features, unmoderated content, and social interactions that cannot be supervised. Any restrictions should be implemented in a way they can be updated to respond to the evolving nature of the harms children face online.

It is essential, when considering bringing in additional restrictions on what parts of the online world children can access, that the government assesses the risk of children migrating to smaller, riskier platforms that may not be complying with their legal duties. We must not allow restrictions to be designed in a way that would allow children to scatter to unknown parts of the online world where they will face equal if not more risks of harm. This is also a significant safeguarding concern.

Age restrictions on what children can see and do online are now a permanent public policy challenge. The goal should be a system that is responsive to emerging technologies and supports children's best interests.

Methodology

This report is based on representative national polling of 13- to 17-year-olds in England, and focus groups with 18 young people aged 16 to 18 in October and November 2025.

Survey

The team commissioned a survey of young people aged 13 to 17 in England in December 2025.

The nationally representative survey population consisted of:

- 2,000 respondents aged 13 to 17.

- 983 respondents (49%) were female, 1,014 (51%) were male.

- 133 respondents (7%) were Asian or Asian British, 149 (7%) were Black of Black British and 1,623 (81%) were White.

Questions were developed after completing a scoping survey of the Children's Commissioner's office's Youth Voice Forum in October 2025.

This online survey was commissioned by the Children's Commissioner's office and conducted by market research company OnePoll, in accordance with the Market Research Society's code of conduct. Data was collected between 10 and 18 December 2025. All participants are double-opted in to take part in research and are paid an amount depending on the length and complexity of the survey. This survey was overseen and edited by the OnePoll research team. OnePoll are MRS Company Partners, corporate membership of ESOMAR and Members of the British Polling Council.

Focus groups

The Children's Commissioner's office led two focus groups in October and November 2025. One was online involving young people from across England and one was in a college in the North of England. The office spoke to 13 girls and 5 boys aged 16 to 18. The groups were facilitated by Children's Commissioner's office staff members, and were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The questions

prepared for the focus groups covered what products young people saw online, what they thought of them, how they saw them, what effect they had and what, if anything, they wanted to change.

Notes and transcripts from these discussions were reviewed and analysed to identify common themes, and to bring out illustrative anonymised quotes used throughout this report. Some quotes have been lightly edited to remove duplication or improve clarity.

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