

Positive Body Image for Kids. A Strengths-Based Curriculum for Children aged 7-11, by Ruth MacConville, London, Jessica Kingsley, 2017, 255pp., £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 84905 539 0; eISBN 978 1 78450 047 4

Not a day goes by without media attention being paid to the mental health of children and young people, very often including references to bullying, sex-abuse, self-harm, and anxiety induced by schooling. At the same time, there is concern internationally with childhood obesity and its long-term consequences in diabetes and other illnesses, and with the exploitation of those who model clothing and fashion accessories and those who buy them, through the depiction of bodily 'perfection'. Our children are growing up in a world where to be unhealthily thin or muscle-bound by obsessive body-building is presented as the ideal, and in which how we look can be shared with thousands of others at the press of a key on a smart phone.

Body image is a central element of our self-concept, and our self-esteem is much affected by the judgements we believe others are making of our bodies, so a proactive and developmental educational response to these issues, focusing on body-image, is surely needed. With all this in mind (and a background of research in pastoral care, PSHE and deliberate self-harm), I welcomed the chance to review Ruth MacConville's set of resources.

On first impressions, *Positive Body Image for Kids* ticks all of the boxes for deserving a positive review:

- there is a clear statement of aim : "to draw on [the author's] practical experience in schools as well as on recent research to provide an approach that will enable schools and parents to intervene before unhealthy attitudes have a chance to take hold" (p.7);
- the programme claims to have wide application: to be appropriate for 7-11 year-olds (although in one place (p.8), *five* is the lower threshold) in whole classes or small groups in mainstream schools and a range of special schools for children with learning and other disabilities, and is most effective when integrated into a whole-school approach to PSHE, safeguarding etc.;
- there are two chapters providing a rationale for the programme which includes definitions and research-backed explanations of *negative body-image*, *body dissatisfaction* and *body dysmorphic disorder* and their causes, and the central role of *resilience* and *resilience-building* (Chapter 1); and a careful cross-referencing of the programme components to the National Curriculum, the PSHE Association's Programme of Study, and the Ofsted Framework for inspecting Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development (Chapter 2);
- the theory underlying the approach - that of *positive psychology* - is made clear, and explained with support from relevant literature, as are the principles and techniques of *cognitive behaviour therapy* (CBT) and the currently fashionable exercises of *mindfulness*; there is lengthy, helpful guidance on the planning, structuring and delivery of the activities, and some pre-requisites for success - such as the creation of "a safe and secure learning environment" with ground rules, positive feedback and encouragement (Chapter 3) - are noted;
- a session for training staff who are to deliver the programme is provided, including slides and facilitator notes (Chapter 4);
- there is a workshop (with slides and facilitator's notes) which introduces and justifies the

programme to parents, encouraging their support for the programme in school and their adoption of its principles and values at home (Chapter 6);

- there are eight pages of recommended reading, organizations and websites where children and parents can learn more about body-image, mindfulness, health and well-being, and teachers and other professionals more about resilience, mindfulness, supporting different learning needs and positive psychology;
- pages for which photocopying is permitted are clearly indicated with a symbol, as are the slides which can be accessed for free on-line at the publisher's website (although for technical reasons they were not available when I tried to access them).

So what's not to like? Rather a lot, actually.

Once we focus on the materials for the sixteen, 45-minute sessions which comprise the programme itself, it becomes clear that there is relatively little here that focuses specifically on *body-image*. Indeed, if the materials were separated from the rest of the book and teachers were asked to come up with a title for the programme, I should be very surprised if many of them came up with one that had those words in it.

Even the first session - which begins with a focus on body-image - is devoted mainly to generating a set of class rules and 'how to be an amazing talk partner'. Other sessions focus on a wide range of aspects of personal and social development: resilience; recognizing our own strengths; the practice of mindfulness; healthy eating; identity; exercise and physical activity; the importance of play (having fun); raising awareness of the time kids spend at computers, watching TV or on their smart phones; the power of advertizing, including the 'ideal' bodies presented through 'photo-shopped models' (media literacy); two sessions on using CBT to counter unhelpful thoughts and generate functional responses; friendships; and role-models ('my hero'). Now of course, these are all important aspects of PSHE, and I would expect most if not all of these topics to be addressed in a good PSHE programme; in which case: what is it that the *Positive Body Image for Kids* programme would add, especially if (as the author suggests) it is properly integrated into a school's existing PSHE curriculum?

True: the body and body-image figure in a number of sessions. For example, in session 5: 'The Real You', there is a discussion of body-shape, skin colour, facial features etc, one worksheet on one's own bodily features, and another entitled: 'Celebrate all the things your body can do'. And many of the topics (such as healthy eating, getting enough of the right sorts of physical activity, resistance to appearance-focussed marketing etc) are clearly *of relevance* for developing a healthy body-image. But, while I concur with the idea which underpins the programme: that the most effective way to counter unhealthy body-image is to develop resilience, a capacity for self-reflection, and a resistance to social pressures which lead to body-dissatisfaction in the first place, these virtues are of importance *in their own right*, and, like the session on friendships, as relevant for issues such as child protection/safeguarding and sex & relationship education as they are for body-image

And there's the rub: *The Positive Body Image for Kids* programme falls between two stools: it purports to be a discrete programme with a specific focus, but is in many ways more like a collection of aspects of a much more general and comprehensive PSHE curriculum. It cannot (it seems to me) be both, and a number of problems follow. The generation of class rules presupposes either that there is something special about body-image that requires rules which other topics don't, or that such rule-generation and review would not be a part of the broader PSHE curriculum into which this programme is to fit. Similarly, without a significant distinction being made between the two programmes, why would there be a celebratory party at the end of this particular one (Session

16)? Perhaps the few sessions which are more specifically about the body could be integrated into an existing PSHE programme - and some that are less focused might be adopted for their general relevance to PSHE - but this negates the rationale for a programme which purports to be specifically about body-image, and leaves rather a lot of the content redundant.

The material for each session includes background notes for the teacher and statements of objectives and learning outcomes. The format is fairly standard, opening with a review of the 'take-away' activity from the previous session and a review of the class rules (is this really necessary in every session?). Much use is made of discussion with 'talk partners', whole-class discussion, questionnaires and worksheets of various kinds. The indication of approximate times for each activity may be helpful, but adds to my sense elsewhere that the programme is all rather prescriptive (e.g. 'Write the following sentence on the board...'), and there is a 'same-ness' to the shape of the sessions which, for younger or vulnerable children, may well provide some welcome security, but may be irritating for others. ("Oh no! Not reviewing the class rules *again!*")

There are some very good worksheets and activities to be found here, regardless of their relevance specifically to body image. For example, the take-away activities involving children monitoring aspects of their lives - such as the amount of time they spend in front of screens, schedules for things they (may) do instead, and a record of the various physical activities they do throughout the week - are commendable, not least because they put the child in control, and the opportunities for discussion built in to every session are essential. But there are some serious limitations. For instance, I cannot find anywhere where stories or poems are used as either a stimulus or an illustration of the concept, fact, skill, attitude or value that is being promoted. I fancy much more could have been made of Circle Time techniques (rather than plain discussion), and there is surely room, if only with the older children, for role-play. The children's creativity is not given much rein: where are the opportunities for them to write a story or a poem, or script a short play, for example? and with the exception of 'I-Spy' (p117), there's not much room for kids to *play*.

Some of the content seems to me to be simplistic, inadvisable or just plain wrong. For example, recognizing that for some children, family background is problematic and exempting them from drawing a family tree looks sensible (p.121), but how does that make them *feel* and what are they to do instead? And is the exercise essential in this context anyway? Other activities have something of a black-or-white/all-or-nothing complexion to them, which is at odds with the reality of life experiences that are complex and nuanced. For instance in 'What makes a good friend?' (Session 14), the 'right' and 'wrong' answers are listed at the end, yet for at least some of the characteristics of the relationship (e.g. 'John and his best friend always have fun together'), the answer 'it all depends' would be more appropriate; the author seems not to have considered the importance of what it is that John's 'best friend' may be getting him into! Nor is 'total trust' necessarily an indication of a good (as opposed to an unhealthily dependent) relationship. And when it comes to the sessions drawing on CBT, there are statements which are highly suspect. Is it really (always?) the case that '[s]omething happens, we think about it, and that triggers what we feel' (p197), the implication being that all we need to do is adjust our thinking? There is plenty of evidence that affect comes before thought, as in fight-or-flight situations. And what of the prescription: 'Catch a negative thought and change it into a (positive thought); think to yourself *everything is fine* and carry on as usual' (p.190)? While this may work for low-level anxiety, I don't think that will cut much ice with a child who has just lost a parent, or who is being systematically cyber-bullied.

So: I do not want to dissuade schools from adopting some of the materials in this book, and I am sure that many teachers will find the early chapters helpful and informative in regard to the importance of children's attitudes to, and feelings about their bodies, but they should do so with caution. They will need to be selective according to the age of the children to be taught, for not all would be suitable across the whole primary range. And they certainly should not see *Positive Body*

Image for Kids as an easy and convenient 'off-the-peg' solution to the question of how schools should approach this important and sensitive issue.

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