

Jane O'Byrne is Project Worker for Sex and Relationships Education in Primary Schools in South Derbyshire. E-mail: Jane.O'Byrne@AmberValley-PCT.nhs.uk

Jane O'Byrne

The Body Image Project

The project won the fpa's national Pamela Sheridan Award in 2005 and involved primary schools and parents in Derbyshire.

Sex and Relationships policy development in Derbyshire's primary schools included a reflection on media influences regarding body image and images of sexual behaviour and gender expectations. They were also concerned about 'sexualisation' of children's clothing. It was recognised that younger children were experiencing pressure to aspire to certain images of physical attractiveness. Concerns were also expressed as to the effects this could have on children's self esteem and relationships. The Body Image Project was developed to address some of these issues. The project used drama to explore children's attitudes to body image and addressed the underpinning issues of self-acceptance and self esteem.

Describe a cool person

Nine primary schools took part, located in areas of high teenage pregnancy, and the project was aimed at pupils in years 5 and 6. Their views and attitudes were gathered at the start of the project by an initial Draw and Write activity. Pupils were asked to 'Describe a cool person' and 'Describe how you feel about yourself'. The answers gave teachers an understanding of the children's attitudes and levels of self esteem. The data were used as a baseline that informed the work as the project progressed.

Schools attended a Teacher Training Day which provided an opportunity to share the ethos of the project. School Nurses also attended and this helped the teachers to recognise links with other health issues. For example, one of the factors that discourages young women to quit smoking is the belief that it helps them to stay slim. By trialling some of the drama exercises, teachers had a taste of what the children would experience in the workshops. A range of active learning methods were also explored that could be employed in the follow up lessons.

Drama workshops

The project began in each school with 2 drama workshops on consecutive weeks. These were delivered by a professional actress with considerable experience in arts and health work. Through the exercises the children reflected on the body, body

differences, feelings about those differences and changes that happen to our bodies as we grow. The workshops concluded with an exercise that encouraged pupils to give positive feedback to each other, not about physical appearance, but about the qualities they possess.

Drama proved to be an excellent inclusive tool for this work. A safe and positive working environment was established through the use of ground rules and giving children the confidence to express their views. They were able to bring their own ideas and experiences as a starting point to the work, which made the learning meaningful and relevant. For instance, some boys talked about changing their bodies through the use of steroids. Another child said that 'if you phone Childline you are gay'. The facilitator had thoughtfully anticipated the range of attitudes and values to be explored and was able to challenge children's views in a supportive way.

Active learning methods

After the workshops each teacher delivered 4 follow up lessons based on active learning methods. For instance, in each school the children started a new trend in the playground to explore how fashion and 'being cool' develops. In one school the children chose to wear their sweat shirts and cardigans back to front. In each school by the end of dinner time a large number of children from other classes had adopted the trend! Another lesson involved staging an Award Ceremony. In pairs the children had to write an Oscar winning accolade for their partner. This could be exaggerated but had to be based on some truth. They then practised accepting their awards with pride-appropriate body language and smiles.

In order to share their learning, and to involve others in re-enforcing the key messages, each class performed an assembly for the whole school, to which parents/carers were invited. The Barnardo's charity ran a workshop for parents/carers immediately after the assembly. Consultation prior to the meeting informed the content of the session. The session focused on helping parents/carers to develop techniques to support their

child's self-esteem. Parents evaluated the session as most useful in discussing with other parents, and realising 'how we as parents may be affecting how our children see themselves, and that we have to be more positive in our comments'. The impact of the project was evaluated by a final Draw and Write activity. This used a re-wording of the questions in the initial baseline activity.

Before and after

At the start of the project, initial views of a cool person centred around physical and lifestyle attributes such as 'fanciable', 'black hair, earrings, nice looking', 'puts others down to get friends'. They described themselves in terms of physical appearance and personality with a range of positive and negative comments 'I'm sulky, fatter than normal 10 year olds', 'I don't like my hands'. Comments at the end of the project indicated that pupils were generally more positive and less focused on physical appearance. For example, on being cool, 'We can all be cool, everyone gets frightened and embarrassed at times'. Comments generally demonstrated an increase in self esteem and willingness to recognise their own positive personal qualities. Following the workshop children also filled in a questionnaire asking what they had learnt. Typical answers included, 'I learnt that everyone wants to change at least one thing about themselves', 'it's ok to be different'. It became clear that the most effective aspects of the project were what I call 'magic moments'. Children felt safe enough to express their fears and worries about themselves. Perhaps for some it was the first time they had ever voiced them. By sharing these they realised they were not alone and that others felt insecure at times also. This allowed them to relax and accept their feelings. These moments of self-acceptance are crucial to emotional health.

Teachers also felt that they had gained a lot from the project, particularly in terms of learning about a range of techniques for PSHE. One teacher reported 'the children learned more about how to value and respect each other, and to recognise and celebrate the good things in life'. Next year we hope to offer the project to a larger number of schools and increase parental involvement.