WHY ARE OUR YOUNG GIRLS SO UNHAPPY?

As a shocking new report reveals girls' happiness levels are at an all-time low, Fabulous investigates the pressures today's young women are under – and what we can all do about it…

BY SARAH WHITELEY

Holding her daughter in her arms, Sharon* felt her little girl's body shake with sobs.

"When I look in the mirror, all I see is a fat tummy," Millie*, 11, cried. "I don't look like the girls on YouTube, my face isn't like theirs."

It's a heartbreaking scene, but one that Sharon says happens frequently in her home, as her pre-teen daughter grapples with her self-esteem.

"It breaks my heart," Sharon, 47, says. "Having a daughter, I always knew we would face body issues, but I had no idea it would start so early."

According to Sharon, although Millie was always a "bit of a worrier", her daughter's mood changed dramatically when she was given her first mobile phone at age 10. "We wanted to wait until she was 11 and at secondary school, but by 10 most of her classmates had phones and we didn't want her to feel left out," explains Sharon.

Despite limiting her to WhatsApp and YouTube, and setting up time restraints, Sharon immediately noticed Millie become grumpier and short-tempered. Then came concerns about her appearance.

"About once or twice a month, she'll burst into tears and tell me she isn't happy with how she looks. I've explained to her about how photos online are filtered and edited, but it doesn't seem to sink in," says Sharon.

'The world is having a stronger impact on girls at a younger age'

Millie is one of thousands of young girls in the UK who are struggling. The annual Girlguiding *Girls' Attitudes Survey*, released earlier this year, showed happiness levels have been in decline since 2009, and are at an all-time low. The report polled 2,000 girls between the ages of seven and 21. The number of those who said they were "very happy" has dropped from 40% in 2009 to 17% – and worryingly, among girls between seven and 10, it has dropped from 57% to 28%.

At the same time, the number of girls aged between seven and 21 and who feel generally worried or anxious has increased from 78% in 2016 to 89%, and the number of girls who are happy with how they look has dropped from 72% to 59%.

Many girls also said they don't feel safe, at school or online. It's unsurprising when you consider that the number of girls and young women who've received sexist comments online more than doubled between 2013 and 2018, and that the number of females between 11 and 21 who've experienced threatening or upsetting behaviour online has risen from 65% in 2018 to 81%.

"We were really disheartened by these findings, but not surprised," says Ellan Day, a Girlguiding advocate. "With access to the internet and social media, the world is a far bigger place than it was and it is having a stronger impact on girls at a younger age."

This is exactly why the organisation is calling on decision-makers of all levels to ensure girls and young women feel happy, comfortable and safe.

"We welcome the new Online Safety Act that has recently become law," says Ellan. "But at the same time, we'd like to see social media platforms take more responsibility and Ofcom enforce the codes and guidance that they develop."

For mums like Sharon, knowing how to parent through these ever-changing times is extremely challenging.

Ellan Day is a Girlguiding advocate

"I let her have access to WhatsApp, as this is how children at school communicate," says Sharon. "But she's now in a WhatsApp group with her whole year, as well as a separate class group. It's no wonder she is exhausted, keeping up with numerous conversations. We've had discussions about what to post and how to respond. I monitor her conversations twice a week and have had to take her phone off her before for joining in teasing classmates."

'The TikToks she was viewing were inappropriate and sexualised'

And it isn't just people Millie knows who are affecting her. With access to YouTube, the year-seven student now follows teen influencers, who share their elaborate skincare routines.

"Now, Millie prefers to go to a big Superdrug when we go shopping, rather than a toy store," Sharon says. "It's scary how many beauty brands she knows."

At the age of 11, Millie is experimenting with make-up and becoming more aware of the clothes she is wearing.

"Thankfully, her attempts at putting on blusher and lipstick still look more like face paint – but I am no longer allowed to buy her clothes. Clothes shopping can cause upset, because she is sometimes a size or two bigger than her age range. It's devastating to see her break down.

"And I worry about the long-term impact of being exposed to this content from such a young age, and how this will shape her as an adult. In the past, girls ➔

have been shielded from these things until they were older – and it wasn't such a pervasive influence, either."

Sarah*, 50, is another mum who's becoming increasingly worried about her young daughter. "My nine year old, Emma*, got her first phone this summer," she says. "She's allowed to walk home alone from school next year and we wanted her to become phone-savvy in case she ran into any difficulties."

Yet, almost immediately, Sarah and her husband Andy* had to add controls. "We let her have TikTok, because she goes to dance classes and wanted to see new routines – but the ones she was viewing were inappropriate and sexualised."

Emma has access to WhatsApp, YouTube and Snapchat and, like Millie, she has become more aware of her body since viewing other girls online, worrying that she is too thin and her legs are too skinny. Her use of social media has also led to her questioning her friendships.

"If she messages them and they don't reply immediately, she gets anxious and upset. She worries they aren't speaking to her any more. I'll tell her that they're probably just eating dinner, but at such a young age, she doesn't understand.

Some people may say to just take her phone away, but it isn't that simple. This is how all her friends communicate."

Alicia Eaton, a psychotherapist based in London's Harley Street and specialising in children's emotional wellbeing, agrees social media has contributed to the declining levels of happiness in girls. "It has exposed them to a constant stream of curated – often idealised – versions of people's lives, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy."

She also says that, with people now being able to "like" comments or respond to them individually in groups, children are forced to confront – on a superficial level – the strength and numbers of their friendships on a daily basis.

Alicia also believes other factors are contributing to this trend, including society's tendency to over-reward children and the pressures on girls to be successful.

"Children now get so many stickers and certificates in a misguided attempt to encourage them, so they notice their absence and feel like they're not good enough if they don't get one. They are also encouraged more and more to follow their dreams and find their perfect job, which can be a great weight on them.

"We live in a 24-hour news society, too,

Alicia Eaton is a child psychotherapist

and we can't shield our children from all the information, most of which is about disaster and doom and gloom. I'm seeing more and more children with eco anxiety – the world can seem a threatening place."

This is an issue mum-of-two Rachel*, 40, is facing with her 12-year-old daughter Alice*. "She has climate anxiety – and I'm sure she's not alone," Rachel explains. "Children are far more aware about the dangers of climate change than ever."

Although it is a topic that Rachel and her husband Lewis* have talked to their children about, she believes that it is teachers who are pushing the subject as a real climate catastrophe.

"Alice will often say: 'The planet is dying'. Or she'll ask me why humans are such parasites. She talks a lot about animal welfare and species becoming extinct."

While Rachel herself feels positive that global warming will be addressed, her

daughter is unable to share her optimism. "I get a real sense of hopelessness from her. She'll tell me the planet is burning and she thinks the whole world is doomed."

'It's important for children to be able to be themselves'

Kim McCabe, founder of Rites For Girls CIC, which helps girls learn how to take charge of their emotional, social and mental wellbeing, isn't surprised to hear about the results of the Girlguiding survey. It's something she sees every day.

"There should be a point when phones are turned off to have some screen-free time," Kim says. "But this has to apply to everyone in the family, including adults. Parents are children's greatest influence, and it is not about what we say, it's about what we do. Like with road safety and holding a child's hand when they first cross a street, we have to instruct our children on social media safety. It can be a wonderful thing, full of inspiring, healthy messages, but only if children know where to look."

And when it comes to helping make our girls feel better, Kim believes we need to start with simple things. "First, they need

Kim McCabe supports girls' wellbeing

to know that they are loved. For some children, this can mean parents showing them physical affection, while for others, it can mean giving them your undivided attention while they tell you about their day. Set up monthly dates with your kids, to spend one-on-one time together."

Then, like everyone else, happiness for children comes from doing things they like, whether that's swimming, drawing or simply playing with friends. "We need to make sure that girls have the opportunity to spend time doing things they enjoy."

Finally, Kim advises, it is about ensuring children have spaces where they have the freedom to be themselves, where they aren't having to try to keep up or fit in.

"It is so important for our children to be able to be who they are. So let them be boisterous, active, slow or dreamy. It is through these things that they can express themselves freely and be happy."

That is exactly what Sharon is doing – giving her daughter Millie the space to express her worries and concerns. She says: "I hope that by listening to Millie when she does get upset, and her knowing she has someone in her corner, we will get through this together and hopefully be stronger." **F**

● For support, visit Ritesforgirls.com.