

Banning piercings for under 18s may be medically a good idea, but it takes away choice and self-esteem

February 2 2018, by Michael Richards



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It is now an offence for under-18s in Wales to get [any intimate piercings](#) – meaning tongue, genitals and nipples. One of the [main arguments for this ban](#) is that young people under 18 are still physically developing and that these kinds of piercings can stifle that development and lead to

infection.

It's a fair point – but this also feels like a frustrating barrier for young people who want control over their own bodies – and the reaction from young people in Wales has been mixed. Some think their peers rush into getting a [piercing](#) too quickly, while others say it should be about [what makes you happy](#).

When teenagers hit 16, they can ([among other things](#)) consent to medical and surgical procedures, drink alcohol, have sex, and join the armed forces. So it's hard to see what the problem is with a little stud, bar or hoop when they are legally grown up enough to do all these other things. If young people can do all this before they reach 18 years old, surely they can alter or enhance their [body](#) in any way they like?

The ban, particularly for 16 and 17-year olds, may feel like nothing more than just another barrier to those who want to, and feel ready to, take responsibility for their own bodies.

Teenagers are going to rebel, experiment and [try new things](#). In the USA, more young people over 18 [than ever before](#) are getting piercings as well as tattoos. In the UK there has been [a similar boom](#) in young people getting piercings over the past 20 years – and having piercings has become a rite of passage for many. Something to get excited about – no different from a first alcoholic drink, or finally being able to call themselves an "adult" when they reach 18.

The problem is that there can be serious health effects when getting a piercing. Even non-intimate ear piercings [can result in keloid scars](#), while piercings on all parts of the body, can give rise to [serious infections and even disfigurement](#). Researchers have found that young people who get piercings are likely to experience swelling, infection and bleeding, particularly in intimate areas of the body. In [a 2008 study](#) of

piercings in England – which has been [cited by the Welsh government](#) – 28% of people who had body piercings experienced complications, while 13% had serious problems. In addition, one in 100 piercings among 16 to 24-year-olds saw them being admitted to hospital.

Risky business

The health risks of getting an intimate piercing appear to be high. So when the medical perspective on piercing is considered, there appears to be complete justification for the ban. There is also the issue of children being placed in potentially vulnerable situations to consider. Giving [evidence to the Welsh government](#), the Chartered Institute for Environmental Health said, "If you go to a doctor for an intimate examination, you're entitled to have a chaperone there, and the doctor, or whoever is involved, will have had a criminal record check at some point. "

We have practitioners who have had no checks at all around sexual offences that they may have carried out, or assaults that they may have carried out. But people are putting themselves, and children are putting themselves, in an extremely vulnerable position.

Another valid point – there are child protection issues at play here. But surely that is the case for any adult who may get an intimate piercing too?

For many people, making choices over their own body is empowering, makes them feel good and helps them to feel that they look good, which lifts self-esteem, positivity and confidence. This is so important for [young people](#) today, with so many experiencing negativity about their bodies, having [suicidal thoughts and urges towards self-harm](#).

Young people are always striving for control over their own minds and

bodies – so being able to feel good about themselves is likely to overwhelm any common sense relating to the health risks that come with piercings. If a young person who can legally do many things wants to feel good about themselves by having a piercing, is it really so bad? This is about about choice – and the ban takes away choice for people who feel happy to have piercings on their body.

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