

# Think of the children!: Relationships between nudity-related experiences in childhood, body image, self-esteem and adjustment

Keon West 

Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths,  
University of London, London, UK

## Correspondence

Keon West, Department of Psychology,  
Goldsmiths, University of London,  
London, UK.

Email: [keon.west@gold.ac.uk](mailto:keon.west@gold.ac.uk)

## Funding information

British Naturism

## Abstract

There are widespread, strongly held beliefs that naturism has a negative impact on children. However, naturist groups advocate for including children and prior research has not clearly investigated how naturism affects children. Two pre-registered, cross-sectional studies ( $N_1 = 411$ ,  $N_2 = 250$ ) investigated how nudity-related experiences in childhood predicted overall adjustment. In Study 1, adults reported their recalled experiences of nudity in childhood as well as their current levels of body appreciation, self-esteem and overall adjustment. In Study 2, mothers reported on their children's current experiences of nudity and the children themselves reported on their current levels of body appreciation, self-esteem and overall adjustment. Results for both studies were similar (though in Study 2, some associations only approached statistical significance): Experiences of naturism were associated with positive, not negative outcomes. These findings suggest that, despite the concerns some people express, naturism does not generally lead to negative outcomes for children.

## KEYWORDS

adjustment, body image, childhood, naturism, nudism, self-esteem

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Author. *Children & Society* published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

## INTRODUCTION

In May 2022, in Colwick Woods, England, a man was regularly spotted walking his dog (Kershaw & Adkin, 2022). Many other people who walked through the woods confirmed that the man was not approaching them or behaving in a dangerous or threatening way. As one individual put it, 'He just walks around - he walks his dog' (p. 1). Nonetheless, many of the people who spotted him were deeply troubled by his behaviour. This is because he was naked.

In particular, many comments reflected a concern about the negative impact his nudity would have on children who were in the park: for example, 'It doesn't really bother me but there's just a lot of kids', 'There's lots of children about. ... It just seems wrong', 'He will come out in the afternoon when the kids come out from school, you've got children at the park', 'It's just not appropriate with kids around' (Kershaw & Adkin, 2022, p. 1). Interestingly, though none of the comments specified exactly what the negative impact on children would be, the belief in some negative impact was nonetheless shared by many users of the park.

This is not a localised perception. In 2022, Cadiz—a seaside town in Spain—legally permitted nude sunbathing on all its beaches (Marshall & Murray, 2022). Much of the backlash to this decision concerned the potential that naturists might 'wander into areas where there are children' (p. 2), particularly young children. Similarly, in 2023, a hurricane destroyed the signage that separated the nude and clothed portions of a beach in Florida, leaving some clothed beachgoers concerned about 'nudists walking all the way through and in front of kids' (Moran, 2023, p. 1). As was the case in Colwick Woods, there was a generalised concern about children being exposed to nakedness, but little clarity about what the negative effects on children would be.

This generalised anxiety about children and nakedness reflects an evolving societal understanding of the meaning of nudity itself and the relevance of that meaning for children. As Davis (1997) notes, behavioural customs and the architecture of homes have evolved to increase privacy and to keep children away from the exclusive (sometimes naked) spaces that parents occupy, such as bathrooms and bedrooms. While some social spaces continue to permit more communal forms of nudity for practical reasons (e.g. medical examinations and the bathing of children), contemporary Western society has generally moved towards more rigid separations of naked and non-naked spaces, with the implications that nudity is increasingly understood as fundamentally vulnerable and sexual (Cover, 2003). Indeed, examples of mothers being arrested for merely having naked images of their own children highlight the ways in which nudity is assumed to be sexual and (in the case of children) abusive, unless explicitly shown to be otherwise (Bowles et al., 1998). In that sense, this current research touches on an important theoretical question that has arisen in both popular media and scientific investigation: what does nudity mean? Is nudity good, bad or neutral, and who should have access to it?

That said, the anxiety about children and nakedness can take more extreme forms, and involve more specific concerns. British Naturism is the national representative group for naturism in the UK. British Naturism describes itself as a family-friendly organisation and states on its homepage that 'naturism is great for single people as well as families and children alike' (British Naturism, 2022). However, some groups consider the prospect of children attending naturist events to be dangerous or offensive. The Facebook page 'Protecting Children from British Naturism' was launched in March 2019, and now has over 1530 followers (Protecting Children from British Naturism, 2019). The movement's explicit purpose is 'to make all Naturist Events 18+, no children under 18 should be allowed to be naked with strangers'. The page lists many alleged examples of child abusers attending naturist events, as well as the names and contact details of some British Naturism staff. Going beyond online interactions, some groups have protested

outside British Naturism events (e.g., Waterwold in Stoke-on-Trent, in England), shouting abuse at the attendees, accusing them of paedophilia and sending them death threats (Parker, 2020; Wood, 2020).

Negative assumptions about the effects of naturism on children are even evident in scientific investigations and reflected in the popular press. For example, despite little theoretical justification or basis in prior empirical outcomes, early scientific studies hypothesised that exposure to nudity would have negative effects on children's psychological outcomes, including increases in criminal behaviour, poor relationships and higher levels of psychological distress (see, e.g., Lewis & Janda, 1988; Okami et al., 1998). In more recent years, newspaper stories have published multiple stories with headlines linking naturism to child abuse: for example 'Naturist Gary Savell convicted for child abuse' (Hunt, 2010) and 'Nudist monster who raped children and created sick child abuse videos jailed for 74 years'. Other stories highlight child abusers who use naturism as a cover for their activities, such as a priest who claimed over 3000 pornographic images of children on his computer were 'just images of naturism' (Farnworth, 2021), and a woman who used 'naturist websites' as a guise for distributing indecent photographs and videos of children ('Five guilty in 'nudist website' paedophile trial', 2011). It is clear that at least some members of the public hold very negative beliefs about naturism, particularly as it relates to children. However, what is less clear is the empirical evidence concerning naturism and its effects on children.

## Naturism and children

Naturism (or nudism) can be defined most simply as the practice of public or communal nudity (de Vries, 2018). In general, naturism combines the behaviour of being naked in the company of people other than one's intimate partner (Carr-Gomm, 2012; Deschenes, 2016), with the assumption that the activity does not have, or at least is not limited to, sexual connotations (Smith, 2007; Smith & King, 2009; West & Geering, 2018). Beyond this, there is no single, coherent philosophy of naturism, but rather, a large variety of divergent subgroups that vary between cultures, time periods and geographic locations (Booth, 1997; Monterrubio, 2019; Monterrubio & Valencia, 2019; Smith & King, 2009; West & Geering, 2018).

In particular, the potential sexuality of naturism is a matter of serious debate between and even within subgroups of naturists (Blum, 2014; British Naturism, 2022; Deschenes, 2016). Different groups' philosophies range from the strictly, explicitly asexual to the sexually experimental. Smith and King (2009, p. 445) note that 'social nudity and sexual feelings and behaviour are related in more complex and subtle ways than [any] of these current viewpoints capture' and suggest that 'one way forward is to manage naturist environments differently, so that the experience of social nudity as sometimes erotic is not stigmatised, pathologized or criminalised, whilst those who are experiencing social nudity as completely asexual do not feel exploited, harassed or abused'. As could be expected, the inherent sexual or non-sexual nature of naturism (and nudity more generally) plays a large role in arguments about the appropriateness of naturism for children (British Naturism, 2022; Deschenes, 2016; Protecting Children from British Naturism, 2019).

Philosophies aside, some empirical research seems, at least on the surface, to suggest a link between naturism and child sexual abuse. The COPINE Project (Combating Paedophile Information Networks in Europe) amassed a large database of child pornography material. Their analysis of that material found that nudist images (defined as 'pictures of naked or semi-naked children in appropriate nudist settings, and from legitimate sources', p. 101) was often found in the collections of child pornography consumers (Taylor et al., 2001). Similarly, Steel et al. (2021)

found that individuals convicted of having child sexual exploitation material were almost five times more likely than non-offenders to view naturist material.

However, these correlations fall short of evidence that naturism leads to or even encourages child sexual exploitation, or any other negative effect on children. For example, Steel et al. (2021) also found that child sexual exploitation material offenders were also more likely than non-offenders to view amateur pornography, lesbian pornography, Japanese pornography and several other types of sexual or pornographic material. In this context, the higher rates of consumption of naturist material seem to reflect a broader interest in nudity, pornography and sexuality, rather than any specific link to naturism. Other research suggests that the consumption of naturist material as a form of child pornography seems to be opportunistic. That is, the material may be consumed in a sexual manner despite being 'not necessarily of an indecent nature' due to not containing an obvious 'sexual element' (Kloess et al., 2021, p. 8). Quayle and Taylor (2002) interviewed 13 men convicted of downloading child pornography. They similarly found that, even though some images 'could be justified as art or naturist' they were nonetheless 'sexually arousing to the viewer' (p. 356), indicating a plausible disjunction between the intended purpose of the images and their use by the offender.

In any case, acknowledging the potential for abusers to misuse naturist material does not directly address the question of whether naturism is harmful, benign or even beneficial for children. Ignoring this question may lead us on one hand to overlook real dangers to children in a vulnerable (naturist) setting, or on the other hand, to unfairly stigmatise and restrict a generally benign or even beneficial social group (naturists).

Interestingly, prior research on the topic suggests that experiences of nudity in childhood might be associated with *positive*, rather than negative outcomes. Despite initially hypothesising that childhood exposure to nudity would be associated with negative outcomes, Lewis and Janda (1988) concluded that exposure to nudity is modestly, but 'positively related to indices of adjustment'. Story (1979) found no negative associations between nudism and outcomes for children, but rather found that children had more positive body concepts if they came from families that identified as social nudists. In a longitudinal study, Okami et al. (1998) expected to find harmful main effects of childhood experiences of nudity, but instead found that the marginally significant trends in the data 'indicated primarily beneficial correlates' of these activities. These studies suggest that, rather than protecting children, banning children from naturist activities may in fact deny them the potential benefits of exposure to non-sexual nudity.

While these initial studies are useful, they are now multiple decades old and have a number of shortcomings. For example, some of the older research relied on reports of family naturist *identity*, rather than naturist *behaviour* (Story, 1979). These constructs are not interchangeable. It is possible for someone to strongly identify as a naturist, but for their geographical, social or financial circumstances to prevent them from participating in naturist activities. Conversely, it is possible for individuals to frequently take part in communal nude activities, but to refrain from describing themselves as naturists (West & Geering, 2018). As such, if a study relies on measures of naturist identity, not behaviour, it is not clear whether the communal nudity itself, or some other aspect or correlate of naturist identity, is driving the observed effects.

Other early studies conflated nudity in the family with very different events, such as co-sleeping (Lewis & Janda, 1988) or accidentally observing their parents having sex—what the authors refer to as 'primal scenes' (Okami et al., 1998). This confounding of very divergent variables erodes any confidence that nudity itself was the primary driver of the observed effects. More recent relevant

research, such as a qualitative study by Allen et al. (2018), also follows this trend. Nudity is considered only in the context of sexuality (e.g., walking in on parents having sex), making it difficult to extrapolate the findings to nudity of a non-sexual (or not necessarily sexual) nature, such as would be the case in most naturist environments. More research is needed to determine whether and how childhood experiences of nudism or naturism relate to subsequent adjustment.

Interestingly, recent research with adult participants has found reliable associations between naturist activity and positive outcomes. This research has occurred in a variety of contexts including both indoor and outdoor naturist activities (West, 2018), events for experienced naturists and for those who had never tried naturism before (West, 2018, 2020), and events with different proportions of men and women (West, 2018, 2020, 2021). This research has also used a variety of designs including correlational studies (West, 2018), before-and-after studies (West, 2018, 2020), and randomised controlled trials in which participants were assigned to take part in either nude or clothed activities (West, 2021). Thus far, these studies have consistently found naturist activity predicted, preceded or caused increases in positive body image, self-esteem and life satisfaction (West, 2018, 2020, 2021). What remains to be seen is whether similar relationships between naturism and well-being would be found for children.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

Two pre-registered studies (see [https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=/9JR\\_C4G](https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=/9JR_C4G), & [https://aspredicted.org/3C7\\_HL5](https://aspredicted.org/3C7_HL5)) investigated the relationship between experiences of nudity in childhood and a number of psychological outcomes including body image, self-esteem and overall adjustment. Data for both studies can be downloaded at this publicly available link: [https://osf.io/qwym9/?view\\_only=3575363fcfaf454ca4562dd7950c1296](https://osf.io/qwym9/?view_only=3575363fcfaf454ca4562dd7950c1296). In Study 1, adults reported their remembered experiences of nudity in childhood as well as their current levels of body appreciation, self-esteem and adjustment. In Study 2, mothers reported on their children's current experiences of nudity and, in a separate section, the children reported on their current levels of body appreciation, self-esteem and adjustment. While we remained agnostic concerning the exact nature of the relationships between nudity and the psychological outcomes, the measures, participants and pre-planned analyses are all specified in the preregistrations. To determine the sample size necessary for both studies, we conducted a-priori power analyses with G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Assuming multiple regression analyses, a medium effect size, that is,  $f^2 = .15$ ,  $\alpha = .05$ ,  $\beta = .8$ , and three predictors of adjustment (nudity, body image and self-esteem), it was found that 77 participants would be sufficient for adequate power. Anticipating some attrition, and to ensure sufficient power for each study, we recruited significantly beyond the minimum required. Both studies obtained ethical approval from the relevant university ethics committee. In Study 1, all participants provided informed consent for themselves. In Study 2, mothers provided informed consent for themselves and their children.

## STUDY 1

The first study ( $N = 411$ ) asked adults to recall their experiences of nudity in childhood and to report on their current body appreciation, self-esteem and adjustment (anti-social behaviour, anger control problems, emotional distress and negative thoughts about the self) as adults.

## Methods

### Participants and recruitment

Using the online participant recruitment site *Prolific*, 411 White, British participants were recruited to take part in this research; 208 men (50.6%) and 203 women (49.4%), mean age = 29.76,  $SD = 10.23$ , min = 18, max = 60. Not all participants provided the information necessary to calculate their BMI. However, those that did had a mean height of 172.43 cm ( $SD = 10.31$ ), a mean weight of 77.48 kg ( $SD = 23.17$ ) and a mean BMI of 25.99 ( $SD = 7.53$ ). This was a cross-sectional design. Hence, all participants completed the same measures, though the order of presentation of the measures was randomised for each participant. The study also included filler items that measured discussion of controversial topics and styles of punishment they experienced during childhood. These filler items served to distract participants from the true hypotheses. After completion, participants were fully debriefed and reimbursed for their time at a rate of £7.50 per hour.

### Measures

To measure the frequency of nude activities during childhood, we used eight items derived from Smith and King (2009). Using a 6-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Less than Once a Month*, 3 = *Once a Month*, 4 = *Once Every 2 Weeks*, 5 = *Once a Week*, 6 = *More than Once a Week*), participants responded to the following questions about their own childhood: ‘How often did your family go to commercial naturist environments (naturist clubs, spas, swims, or leisure centres)?’, ‘How often did your family go nude at the beach (official or unofficial naturist beaches)?’, ‘How often were the children in the family allowed to go without clothes at home?’, ‘How often did the children in the family see the parents without clothes (e.g., when coming out of the shower)?’, ‘How often did your parents tell you to cover up or be more modest about your body?’ (reversed), ‘How often did your parents discourage nudity at home?’ (reversed), ‘How often did your parents communicate to you that nudity should be reserved for special circumstances?’ (reversed), and ‘How often did your parents allow you to be in circumstances where you might see someone else nude (e.g., artistic exhibitions, beaches, etc....)?’. This scale did not attain a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .56$ ). However, item deletion did not improve reliability or alter the pattern of results. Thus, as pre-registered, all eight items were retained. Higher values indicated more frequent childhood participation in nude activities.

Body appreciation was measured with the widely used, 10-item BAS-2; (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), which attained a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Example items include: ‘I feel good about my body’ and ‘I take a positive attitude towards my body’. Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Always*). Higher values indicated higher levels of body appreciation (i.e. more positive body image).

Self-esteem was measured with the widely used 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965, more recently used by Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2007; and by West, 2018). This scale also attained a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Example items include: ‘On the whole, I am satisfied with myself’. and ‘I feel that I have a number of good qualities’. Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Higher values indicated higher levels of self-esteem.

Positive adjustment was measured with the widely used 32-item Adjustment Screening Inventory (Reynolds, 2001), which attained a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .89$ ). On

a 3-point scale (1 = Never or almost never, 3 = Nearly all the time), participants indicated how often they felt a number of things, for example: 'I felt that everything was ok in my life' and 'I did something I knew was wrong' (reversed). Higher values indicated higher levels of positive adjustment. Though this inventory is generally used for younger participants, it was deemed ideal for use in this study in order that the results of both studies in this current manuscript could be easily comparable.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between all relevant variables can be seen in Table 1. It is noteworthy that experiences of nudity in childhood were positively correlated with body image, self-esteem and adjustment. Participant gender did not predict any of the outcome variables ( $.52 > \text{all } p\text{'s} > .29$ ). However, both age ( $r = -.18, p < .001$ ) and BMI ( $r = -.18, p < .001$ ) predicted body appreciation; thus, both were used as covariates in the analyses that follow.

As pre-registered ([https://aspredicted.org/9JR\\_C4G](https://aspredicted.org/9JR_C4G)), we investigated the relationships between nudity in childhood, adult body image, adult self-esteem and adult adjustment using PROCESS Macros, model 6, with 5000 bias-corrected bootstraps, 95% confidence intervals, all variables standardised prior to analyses and age and BMI included as covariates in the model. Participation in nude activities predicted more positive body image ( $b = 0.12, p = .01$ ) and higher levels of self-esteem ( $b = 0.08, p = .03$ ), but did not directly predict adjustment ( $b = 0.05, p = .20$ ). Body image predicted self-esteem ( $b = 0.67, p < .001$ ), but did not directly predict adjustment ( $b = 0.09, p = .08$ ), and self-esteem predicted adjustment ( $b = 0.58, p < .001$ ); see Figure 1. There were also significant indirect relationships between nudity and adjustment via self-esteem ( $b = 0.05$ ; 95% CI = 0.003, 0.093) and via body image and self-esteem ( $b = 0.05$ ; 95% CI = 0.008, 0.089).

In summary, childhood experiences of nudity were positively associated with body image, self-esteem and (indirectly) with adjustment in adulthood. There was no evidence of an association between nudity in childhood and negative outcomes.

## STUDY 2

The second study ( $N = 250$ ) aimed to replicate the findings of the first, but with a more ambitious design. Both studies had almost exactly the same design and measured the same variables.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations between nudity, body image, self-esteem and adjustment in study 1.

	Nudity	Body image	Self-esteem	Adjustment
Nudity				
Body image	0.14**			
Self-esteem	0.16***	0.65***		
Adjustment	0.13*	0.44***	0.65***	
	<b>M (SD)</b>			
	2.86 (0.64)	2.99 (0.91)	3.20 (0.82)	2.33 (0.28)

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

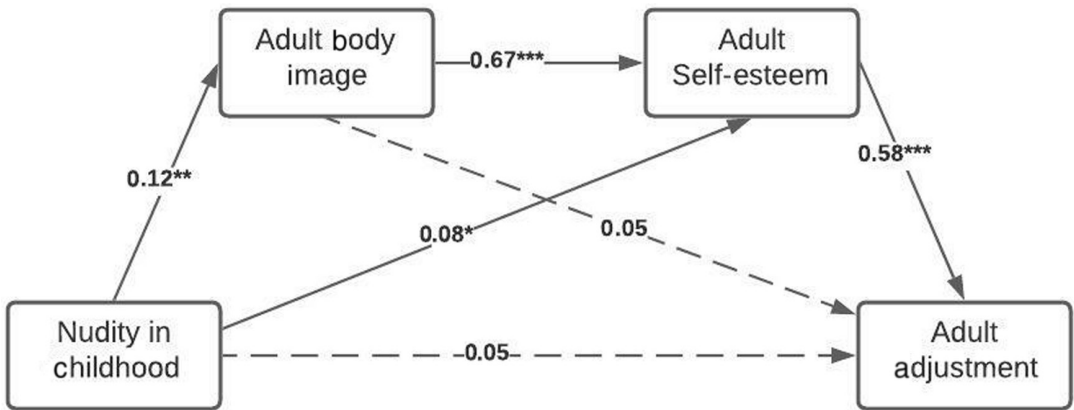


FIGURE 1 Relationship between childhood participation in nude activity and adult adjustment, mediated sequentially by adult body image and adult self-esteem (Study 1). \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

However, in Study 2, dyads of mothers and children were recruited as participants. The mothers completed the first part of the study in which they indicated the frequency with which their children took part in nudity-related activities. The children themselves completed the second part of the survey, in which they reported their own body appreciation, self-esteem and overall adjustment. This methodology complimented that of Study 1 in a number of ways. First, getting the mothers to complete the measures of nudity-related activities and the children to complete the measures of psychological outcomes reduced the likelihood of finding spurious correlations due to participants guessing the hypotheses or similarities in measurement of the different variables. Second, recruiting parents and children who completed measures about their current activities and psychological states may have produced more accurate information than asking adults to remember their experiences during childhood.

## Methods

### Participants and recruitment

Using the online participant recruitment site *Qualtrics*, 250 British dyads (i.e. 500 participants—250 mothers and 250 children) were recruited to take part in this research. The mothers all identified as women, mean age = 43.10,  $SD = 6.44$ , min = 30, max = 64. The children were 107 boys (42.8%), 117 girls (46.8%) and three who did not identify a gender (1.2%), mean age = 14.95,  $SD = 1.58$ , min = 7, max = 17. Not all participants provided the information necessary to calculate their BMI. However, those that did had a mean height of 154.48 cm ( $SD = 46.89$ ), a mean weight of 57.20 kg ( $SD = 33.34$ ) and a mean BMI of 22.96 ( $SD = 11.80$ ). As in Study 1, this was a cross-sectional design. Hence, all dyads completed the same measures, though the order of presentation of the measures was randomised for each dyad. Recruiters at *Qualtrics* verified that parents and children completed the correct sections of the survey. This study also included filler items that measured discussion of controversial topics and styles of punishment they experienced during childhood. These filler items served to distract participants from the true hypotheses. After completion participants were fully debriefed and reimbursed for their time at a rate of £7.50 per hour.



## Measures

We used the same items that were used in Study 1 to measure the frequency of nude activities during childhood. These were eight items derived from Smith and King (2009). Using a 6-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Less than Once a Month*, 3 = *Once a Month*, 4 = *Once Every 2 Weeks*, 5 = *Once a Week*, 6 = *More than Once a Week*), participants responded to the following questions about their own childhood: 'How often does your family go to commercial naturist environments (naturist clubs, spas, swims, or leisure centres)?', 'How often does your family go nude at the beach (official or unofficial naturist beaches)?', 'How often are the children in the family allowed to go without clothes at home?', 'How often do the children in the family see the parents without clothes (e.g., when coming out of the shower)?', 'How often do you tell your children to cover up or be more modest about their body?' (reversed), 'How often do you discourage nudity at home?' (reversed), 'How often do you communicate to your children that nudity should be reserved for special circumstances?' (reversed), and 'How often do you allow your children to be in circumstances where you might see someone else nude (e.g., artistic exhibitions, beaches, etc...)?'. As in Study 1, this scale did not attain a high level of reliability ( $\alpha = .31$ ). However, item deletion did not improve reliability or alter the pattern of results. Thus, as pre-registered, all eight items were retained. Higher values indicated more frequent childhood participation in nude activities.

As in Study 1, body appreciation was measured with the widely used, 10-item BAS-2; (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), which attained a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Self-esteem was measured with the widely used 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965, more recently used by Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2007; and by West, 2018). This scale also attained a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Positive adjustment was measured with the widely used 32-item Adjustment Screening Inventory (Reynolds, 2001), which attained a high level of reliability in this study ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

## Results

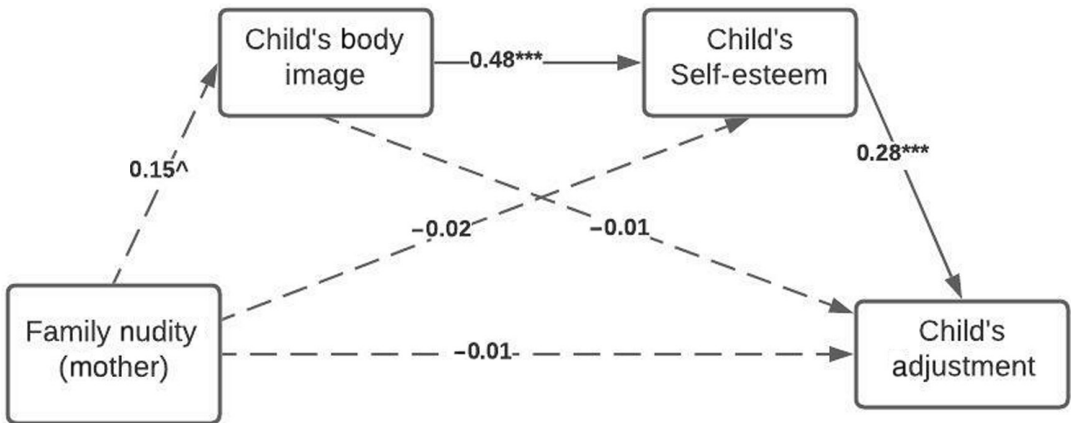
Descriptive statistics and correlations between all relevant variables can be seen in Table 2. In this study, the correlation between experiences of nudity in childhood and body image ( $r = .11$ ) was similar in size and direction to the correlation found in Study 1 ( $r = .14$ ). However, in this instance the correlation only approached significance ( $p = 0.08$ ). Also experiences of nudity did not predict body image or adjustment. Neither age nor BMI predicted any of the outcome measures ( $.52 > \text{all } p\text{'s} > .29$ ). However, gender predicted both self-esteem ( $r = -.18, p = .01$ ) and adjustment ( $r = -.14, p = .04$ ); thus, gender was as a covariate in the analyses that follow.

Though the correlation between nudity and body image did not quite reach significance, we nonetheless completed our pre-registered analyses ([https://aspredicted.org/3C7\\_HL5](https://aspredicted.org/3C7_HL5)). As in Study 1, we investigated the relationships between nudity in childhood, adult body image, adult self-esteem and adult adjustment using PROCESS Macros, model 6, with 5000 bias-corrected bootstraps, 95% confidence intervals and gender included a covariate in the model. Unsurprisingly, participation in nude activities did not significantly predict more positive body image ( $b = 0.15, p = .10$ ). Nudity-related experiences also did not predict self-esteem ( $b = -0.02, p = .77$ ) or adjustment ( $b = -0.01, p = .70$ ). Body image predicted self-esteem ( $b = 0.48, p < .001$ ), but did not directly predict adjustment ( $b = -0.01, p = .81$ ) and self-esteem predicted adjustment ( $b = 0.28, p < .001$ ); see Figure 2. There were also no significant *indirect* relationships between nudity and adjustment.

**TABLE 2** Descriptive statistics and correlations between nudity, body image, self-esteem and adjustment in study 2.

	Nudity	Body image	Self-esteem	Adjustment
Nudity				
Body image	0.11 <sup>^</sup>			
Self-esteem	0.08	0.58***		
Adjustment	0.02	0.36***	0.63***	
<b>M (SD)</b>				
	2.93 (.56)	3.36 (.81)	3.36 (.65)	2.47 (.29)

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; <sup>^</sup> $p = .10$ .



**FIGURE 2** Relationship between childhood participation in nude activity and adult adjustment, mediated sequentially by adult body image and adult self-esteem (Study 2). \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; <sup>^</sup> $p = .10$ .

## SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSES (NOT PRE-REGISTERED)

In Study 1, there was a statistically significant positive relationship between experiences of nudity in childhood and body image. In Study 2, this relationship was not statistically significant, despite being similar in size and direction. Though the former correlation was statistically significant and the latter was not, this alone is not sufficient to determine that the two relationships were statistically different from each other (particularly as the latter approached statistical significance). Thus, these supplementary analyses combined the data from both studies to formally test whether the relationship between nudity and body image differed between studies. This was done using PROCESS Macros, model 1, with 5000 bias-corrected bootstraps, 95% confidence intervals, nudity as the predictor, body image as the outcome variable and study as the moderator (i.e. Study 1 vs. Study 2). When data from both studies were considered together, nudity did predict more positive body image ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, study number did not moderate the relationship between nudity and body image ( $b = -0.04$ ,  $p = .74$ ), suggesting that the relationship did not significantly differ between studies (Figure 3).

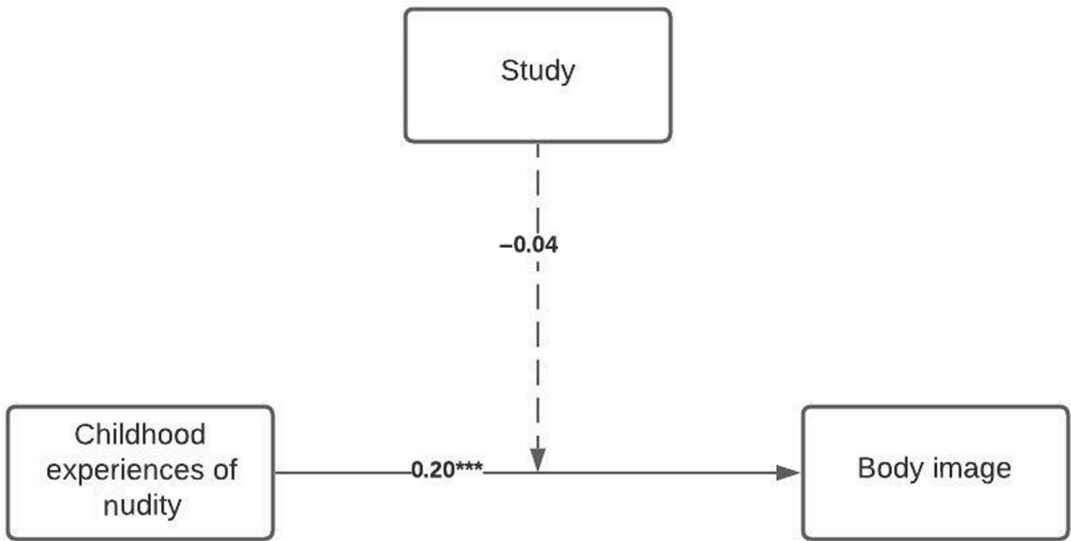


FIGURE 3 (Supplemental analyses). Relationship between childhood experiences of nudity and body image moderated by study (i.e., Study 1 vs. Study 2). \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

Across multiple societies, there is a concern that allowing children to take part in naturist activities, or even just allowing them to observe other people taking part in naturism, would be harmful for these children. This is often assumed to be the case even when it involves people taking part in non-sexual nudity in a public or supervised space, such as in a park (Kershaw & Adkin, 2022), on a legally permitted, public, nude beach (Marshall & Murray, 2022; Moran, 2023), or at events in which the children are supervised by their parents (Protecting Children from British Naturism, 2019). However, the specific nature of the assumed harm done to the children who participate in naturist activities is often left unclear. Furthermore, very little empirical research has attempted to investigate whether naturism generally has negative, benign or positive effects on children. This current research addressed that question. Two cross-sectional studies with complementary designs found either positive associations between naturist activity and adjustment, or marginally significant trends in the same direction. Below, these findings are discussed in terms of implications, study design, limitations and avenues for future research.

## Implications

As mentioned before, other research has found associations between naturism and positive outcomes such as body image, self-esteem and overall well-being. However, this prior research was either conducted exclusively with adults (West, 2018, 2020, 2021) or conducted multiple decades ago using somewhat limited methodology (Lewis & Janda, 1988; Okami et al., 1998; Story, 1979). Thus, this current research is a cautious, but meaningful, addition to that small body of prior work, and generally supports the hypothesis that naturism is predictive of *positive*, rather than negative, outcomes for children.

Of course, this research alone cannot be used to support the hypothesis that naturism *causes* positive outcomes for children. Such causal conclusions would require genuinely

experimental (not correlational) designs. Nonetheless, this is part of a body of research that undermines the suggestion that naturism causes *negative* outcomes. Over the last few decades, multiple studies (including this current research) have attempted to find negative associations between nudity and well-being in children and have failed to do so (Lewis & Janda, 1988; Okami et al., 1998; Oleinick et al., 1966). Philosophical concerns about proving a negative aside, at some point, it seems reasonable to conclude that no negative associations have been found because they may simply not be there. Indeed, given the (albeit small but) consistent and growing body of evidence that participation in naturism leads to *positive* outcomes, we should consider the potential harm caused by denying certain people (including younger people) access to these activities. Regardless of some individuals' emotional responses to or assumptions about the effects of naturism, it seems wiser to rely on an evidence-based strategy to determine whether naturism causes (or is associated with) negative, benign or positive outcomes for children.

This research does not investigate instances of abuse directly and does not imply that we should abandon all caution surrounding naturist activities with children or other vulnerable populations. There is a certain level of vulnerability inherent in nakedness, and some individuals may take advantage of naturist material or activities to engage in criminal sexual abuse (Hunt, 2010; Kloess et al., 2021; Steel et al., 2021), or attempt to hide their criminal behaviour by making appeals to naturism (Farnworth, 2021). It is beyond dispute that child sexual abuse and exploitation is 'particularly repellent and deserving of both proactive policing and, when detected, full and extensive investigation' (Taylor et al., 2001, p. 97). If naturism can be a conduit for, or a gateway to, the exploitation of children, these concerns should be taken seriously and addressed with appropriately strong protective measures.

However, none of these facts justify stigmatising an otherwise benign community or activity (Smith & King, 2009), or banning children from a community space or activity that may be neutral or even beneficial to the children themselves (Wood, 2020). For comparison, one can acknowledge that child sexual abuse occurs in church (Terry, 2008), or in school (Saewyc et al., 2003), without stigmatising these spaces or banning children from them. Rather, it could be argued that the potential benefits of going to a church or a school outweigh the relatively small risk of being abused in these spaces. Appropriate levels of vigilance and strict procedures should be put in place to minimise the actions of abusers and protect children. These can include rigorous background checks, reducing or eliminating higher-risk situations, and providing interventions that give children knowledge about sexual abuse concepts or increase their protective behaviours (Terry & Ackerman, 2008; Zwi et al., 2007). Such interventions have been shown to be effective and may even prevent sexual abuse beyond the environment in which they were initially applied (Gibson & Leitenberg, 2000). Even in the absence of historical instances of abuse, naturist groups may be motivated to adopt these protective procedures due to the *perception* of heightened risk. However, in light of findings that naturism is *not* associated with negative outcomes, and may indeed be associated with *positive* outcomes, calls to ban all children from naturist spaces (Protecting Children from British Naturism, 2019) are not in line with the available empirical evidence, and may be an instance of throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bathwater.

## Study design and limitations

These studies benefit from pre-registration, a-priori power analyses, reasonably large sample sizes and replication using very similar methodology. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge

their limitations. First, as both studies were cross-sectional, this research cannot be used to indicate that naturism causes positive outcomes. Future research using longitudinal, quasi-experimental or genuinely experimental designs could be used to establish whether naturism causes positive outcomes in children as it does in adults (West, 2021). Such research could also be used to increase our confidence that naturism does not lead to negative outcomes for children.

Another limitation of both studies is that the measure of naturist activity in childhood did not reach recommended levels of internal validity in either study and was substantially lower in Study 2. It is not clear why that was the case and any comment on the low internal reliability could only be speculative. Nonetheless, an obvious implication is that family participation in one kind of nude activity (e.g. nude beaches and nudity at home) is not correlated with other types of nude activity (e.g. naturist clubs). Future research could seek to develop more coherent measures of naturist activity. Alternatively, future research could acknowledge that these activities are not meaningfully related and investigate their correlates and effects separately.

Yet another limitation of this current research is the lack of significant association between nudity and body image in Study 2. Despite the marginally significant association between the two variables ( $p = .08$ ) and the supplementary analyses showing that the relationship was not significantly different from that found in Study 1, this null finding nonetheless weakens the hypothesised association between naturism and body image. It is possible that the null finding is due to other limitations of the study, such as the aforementioned low internal reliability of the measure of naturism. However, future research will be necessary to determine the reliability of the findings of Study 1 when different methodological approaches are used.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the geographical and cultural limitations of these findings. This research did go beyond the undergraduate student samples that are too often used in psychological research (Henrich et al., 2010; Sears, 1986), but nonetheless relied on entirely White, British samples. It is therefore not clear how well these findings generalise to different ethnicities or cultures, particularly as different cultures have strongly divergent responses to nudity (Monterrubio & Valencia, 2019; West & Geering, 2018). Future research could investigate cultural variables that might strengthen or undermine the association between nudity and positive outcomes, or even reverse the direction of that relationship.

## Conclusions

Protecting children is of utmost importance, and it is worthwhile to be aware of the dangers that could arise when children are vulnerable or around strangers. That said, these findings do not align with assertions that naturism is generally bad for children. Nor do they lend support to an understanding of nudity as something that is inherently private, adult, eroticised or anxiety-invoking. Rather, they align with prior research suggesting that naturism may have positive effects, even for this population. While this can be a highly emotional, even controversial issue, it seems prudent to gather and be guided by empirical evidence, rather than mere emotion, and to avoid unhelpful or inaccurate stigmatisation. The empirical evidence to date, including this current research, has failed to find negative effects or associations between naturism and outcomes for children. Following that evidence, calls to ban children from all naturist events seem premature or unhelpful.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was partially funded (£2700) by British Naturism.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data from both studies can be downloaded at any time from this publicly available link: [https://osf.io/qwym9/?view\\_only=3575363fcfaf454ca4562dd7950c1296](https://osf.io/qwym9/?view_only=3575363fcfaf454ca4562dd7950c1296).

## ORCID

Keon West  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9955-661X>

## REFERENCES

- Allen, K. R., Gary, E. A., Lavender-Stott, E. S., & Kaestle, C. E. (2018). "I walked in on them": Young adults' childhood perceptions of sex and nudity in family and public contexts. *Journal of Family Issues*, *39*(15), 3804–3831. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18793923>
- Ashburn-Nardo, L., Monteith, M. J., Arthur, S. A., & Bain, A. (2007). Race and the psychological health of African Americans. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *10*(4), 471–491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430207081536>
- Blum, J. (2014). *Learn about exhibitionism vs. nudism: The difference between exhibitionism and nudism* (pp. 1–14). Young Naturists and Nudists America. <http://youngnaturistsamerica.com/exhibitionists-exhibitionism-vs-nudism-nudists-and-voyeurs/>
- Booth, D. (1997). Nudes in the sand and perverts in the dunes. *Journal of Australian Studies*, *21*(53), 170–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443059709387326>
- Bowles, K., Hartley, J., & McKee, A. (1998). Introduction: Censorship and pornography. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *12*(1), 5–7.
- British Naturism. (2022). *British Naturism Homepage*. <https://www.bn.org.uk>
- Carr-Gomm, P. (2012). *A brief history of nakedness*. Reaktion Books.
- Cover, R. (2003). The naked subject: Nudity, context and sexualization in contemporary culture. *Body & Society*, *9*(3), 53–72.
- Davis, M. (1997). *Gangland: Cultural elites and the new Generationalism*. Allen and Unwin.
- de Vries, B. (2018). The right to be publicly naked: A Defence of nudism. *Res Publica*, *25*, 407–424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-018-09406-z>
- Deschenes, S. (2016). *The official INF-FNI definition of naturism*. <https://archive.org/details/OfficialINFFNIDefinitionOfNaturism/mode/2up>
- Farnworth, A. (2021). Accrington vicar, tom Donaghey, who had more than 3,000 child abuse images avoids jail. *Lancashire Telegraph*, 1–8. <https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/19548787.accrington-vicar-tom-donaghey-3-000-child-abuse-images-avoids-jail/>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Buchner, A., & Lang, A.-G. (2009). Statistical power analyses using G\*Power 3.1: Tests for correlation and regression analyses. *Behavior Research Methods*, *41*(4), 1149–1160. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BRM.41.4.1149>
- Five guilty in 'nudist website' paedophile trial. (2011, November 2). *Yorkshire Post*, 1–9.
- Gibson, L. E., & Leitenberg, H. (2000). Child sexual abuse prevention programs: Do they decrease the occurrence of child sexual abuse? *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *24*(9), 1115–1125. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(00\)00179-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(00)00179-4)
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *33*(2–3), 61–83. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>
- Hunt, K. (2010). Naturist Gary Savell convicted for child abuse. *Kent*. 1–5. <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/kent/news/naturist-gary-savell-convicted-f-a83981/>
- Kershaw, T., & Adkin, L. (2022). Naturist putting people off visiting popular woodland beauty spot. *Leicestershire Live*, 1–3.
- Kloess, J. A., Woodhams, J., & Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. E. (2021). The challenges of identifying and classifying child sexual exploitation material: Moving towards a more ecologically valid pilot study with digital forensics analysts. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *118*(June), 105166. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105166>
- Lewis, R. J., & Janda, L. H. (1988). The relationship between adult sexual adjustment and childhood experiences regarding exposure to nudity, sleeping in the parental bed, and parental attitudes toward sexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *17*(4), 349–362.

- Marshall, E., & Murray, G. (2022). Seaside town votes to allow nudists on EVERY beach - leaving locals furious. *The Mirror*, 1–5. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/seaside-town-votes-allow-nudists-26750690>
- Monterrubio, C. (2019). Hosts and guests' social representations of nudism: A mutual gaze approach. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 75, 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2018.12.011>
- Monterrubio, C., & Valencia, L. (2019). Negotiating stigmatisation of deviant behaviour: An exploration of locals' perceptions of nude tourists. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 17(6), 689–709. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2018.1511723>
- Moran, M. (2023, March 13). Beachgoer left “covering her eyes” after accidentally visiting nudist beach. *The Daily Star*, 1–5.
- Okami, P., Olmstead, R., Abramson, P. R., & Pendleton, L. (1998). Early childhood exposure to parental nudity and scenes of parental sexuality ('primal scenes'): An 18-year longitudinal study of outcome. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 27(4), 361–384.
- Oleinik, M. S., Bahn, A. K., Eisenberg, L., & Lilienfeld, A. M. (1966). Early socialization experiences and intrafamilial environment: A study of psychiatric outpatient and control group children. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 15(4), 344–353.
- Parker, H. (2020, September 27). Police called to Waterworld as protesters surround naturists' cars, hurl abuse and chant 'save our children'. *Stoke on Trent News*, 1–13. Retrieved from <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/naturist-swim-at-waterworld-protest-4553513>
- Protecting Children from British Naturism. (2019). *Protecting Children from British Naturism*. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from [https://www.facebook.com/protectingchildrenfrombritishnaturism/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/protectingchildrenfrombritishnaturism/about/?ref=page_internal)
- Quayle, E., & Taylor, M. (2002). Child pornography and the internet: Perpetuating a cycle of abuse. *Deviant Behavior*, 23(4), 331–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639620290086413>
- Reynolds, W. M. (2001). *Reynolds adolescent adjustment screening inventory: Professional manual*. Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.
- Saewyc, E. M., Pettingell, S., & Magee, L. L. (2003). The prevalence of sexual abuse among adolescents in school. *The Journal of School Nursing: The Official Publication of the National Association of School Nurses*, 19(5), 266–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10598405030190050401>
- Sears, D. O. (1986). College sophomores in the laboratory: Influences of a narrow data base on social psychology's view of human nature. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(3), 515–530. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.51.3.515>
- Smith, G. (2007). Nudity can be erotic and naturists should not have to deny it. *The Guardian*, 1–5. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jun/06/comment.comment>
- Smith, G., & King, M. (2009). Naturism and sexuality: Broadening our approach to sexual wellbeing. *Health and Place*, 15(2), 439–446. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2008.08.002>
- Steel, C. M. S., Newman, E., O'Rourke, S., & Quayle, E. (2021). Collecting and viewing behaviors of child sexual exploitation material offenders. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 118(January), 105133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105133>
- Story, M. D. (1979). Factors associated with more positive body self-concepts in preschool children. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 108(1), 49–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1979.9711960>
- Taylor, M., Holland, G., & Quayle, E. (2001). Typology of paedophile picture collections. *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*, 74(2), 97–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258x0107400202>
- Terry, K. J. (2008). Stained glass: The nature and scope of child sexual abuse in the catholic church. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35(5), 549–569. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854808314339>
- Terry, K. J., & Ackerman, A. (2008). Child sexual abuse in the catholic church: How situational crime prevention strategies can help create safe environments. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35(5), 643–657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854808314469>
- Tylka, T. L., & Wood-Barcalow, N. L. (2015). The body appreciation Scale-2: Item refinement and psychometric evaluation. *Body Image*, 12(1), 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2014.09.006>

- West, K. (2018). Naked and unashamed: Investigations and applications of the effects of naturist activities on body image, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 19(3), 677–697. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9846-1>
- West, K. (2020). A nudity-based intervention to improve body image, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. *International Journal of Happiness and Development*, 6, 162.
- West, K. (2021). I feel better naked: Communal naked activity increases body appreciation by reducing social physique anxiety. *Journal of Sex Research*, 58(8), 958–966. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2020.1764470>
- West, K., & Geering, P. (2018). *The Benefits of Nakedness*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csxh9l>
- Wood, V. (2020, September 28). Water park bans children from naturist event after protests. *The Independent*, 1–5. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/water-world-staffordshire-stoke-trent-british-naturist-children-b674629.html>
- Zwi, K., Woolfenden, S., Wheeler, D., O'Brien, T., Tait, P., & Williams, K. (2007). School-based education programmes for the prevention of child sexual abuse. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 3(1), 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2007.5>

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Keon West is a professor of Social Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**How to cite this article:** West, K. (2023). Think of the children!: Relationships between nudity-related experiences in childhood, body image, self-esteem and adjustment. *Children & Society*, 37, 1187–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12743>