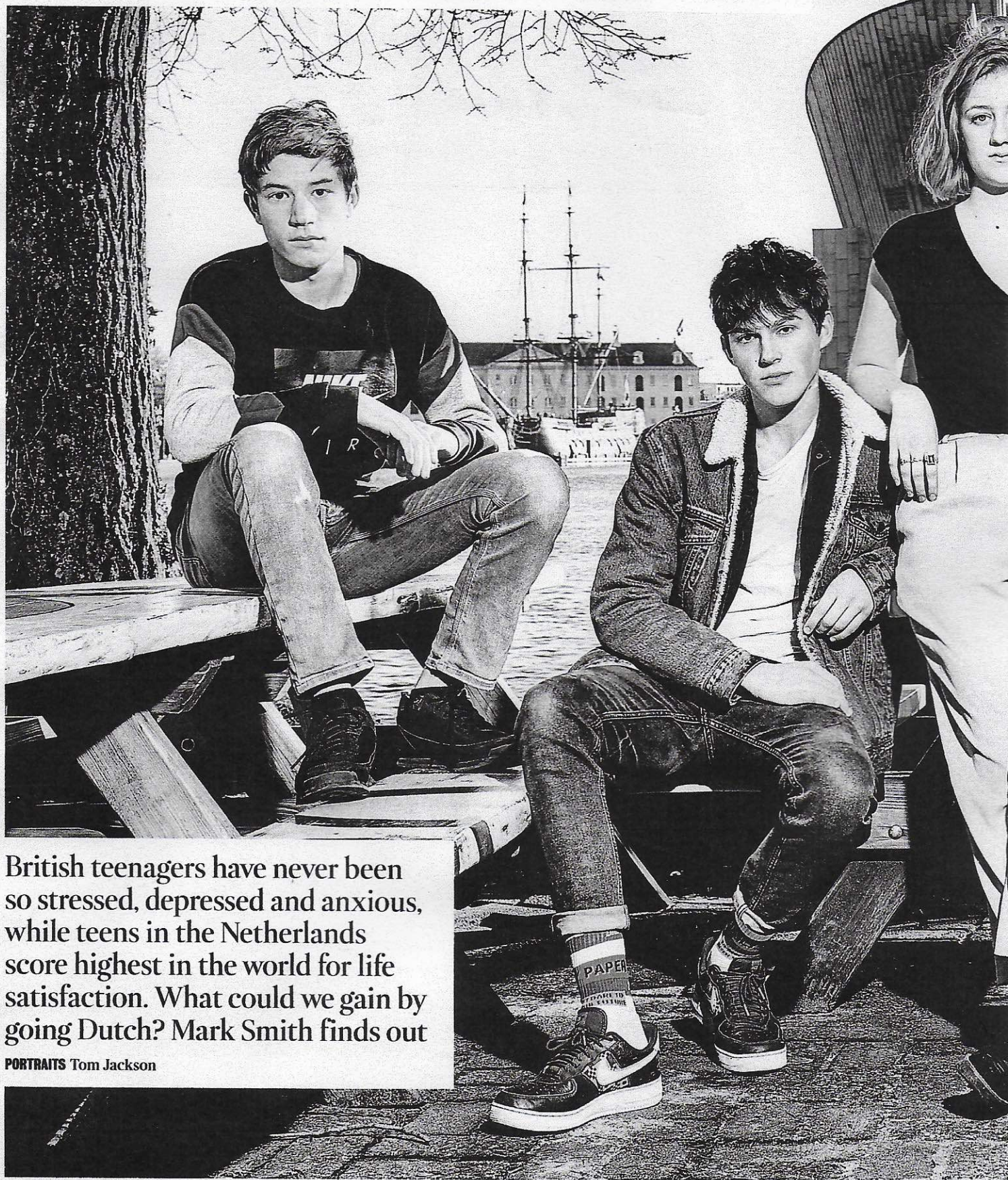


# COOL. SMART. INDEPENDENT. HAPPY. WHY ARE DUTCH TEENS SO SORTED?



British teenagers have never been so stressed, depressed and anxious, while teens in the Netherlands score highest in the world for life satisfaction. What could we gain by going Dutch? Mark Smith finds out

PORTRAITS Tom Jackson



**W**hen I moved to Amsterdam ten years ago, I was astonished by the number of unaccompanied minors tearing about the place, mostly on bikes. Weren't parents worried that their (admittedly very robust-looking) kids would end up face-down in one of the many unfenced canals, I'd demand of colleagues who

had procreated. Didn't they fear some lanky child-catcher would leap out from behind a windmill or an elm tree? With a giant net?

In response, they'd look at me with a facial expression I now know to be reserved for panicky Brexpat, and point out that the thing Dutch parents really fear is the idea of raising a child who's fretful and dependent (subtext: someone like you). *Nee, hoor*: they aspire to raise kids who are secure and socially confident. That this can be achieved via the (bike) path of least resistance, without having to spend time and money ferrying little Taco or Pien around the whole time, is regarded as a happy by-product for these pragmatic parents. End of story. Now, shall we go for a coffee?

The Dutch approach shouldn't be mistaken for indifference, however. Indeed, Dutch elders are unapologetically hands-on when it comes to equipping their kids to engage with the inevitable conflicts and curiosities of adolescence. A case in point is the impending *Lentekriebels* (literally, "spring itches") week, a nationwide sex and relationships education drive this month that reinforces the idea that no question about bodies or emotions should be off limits.

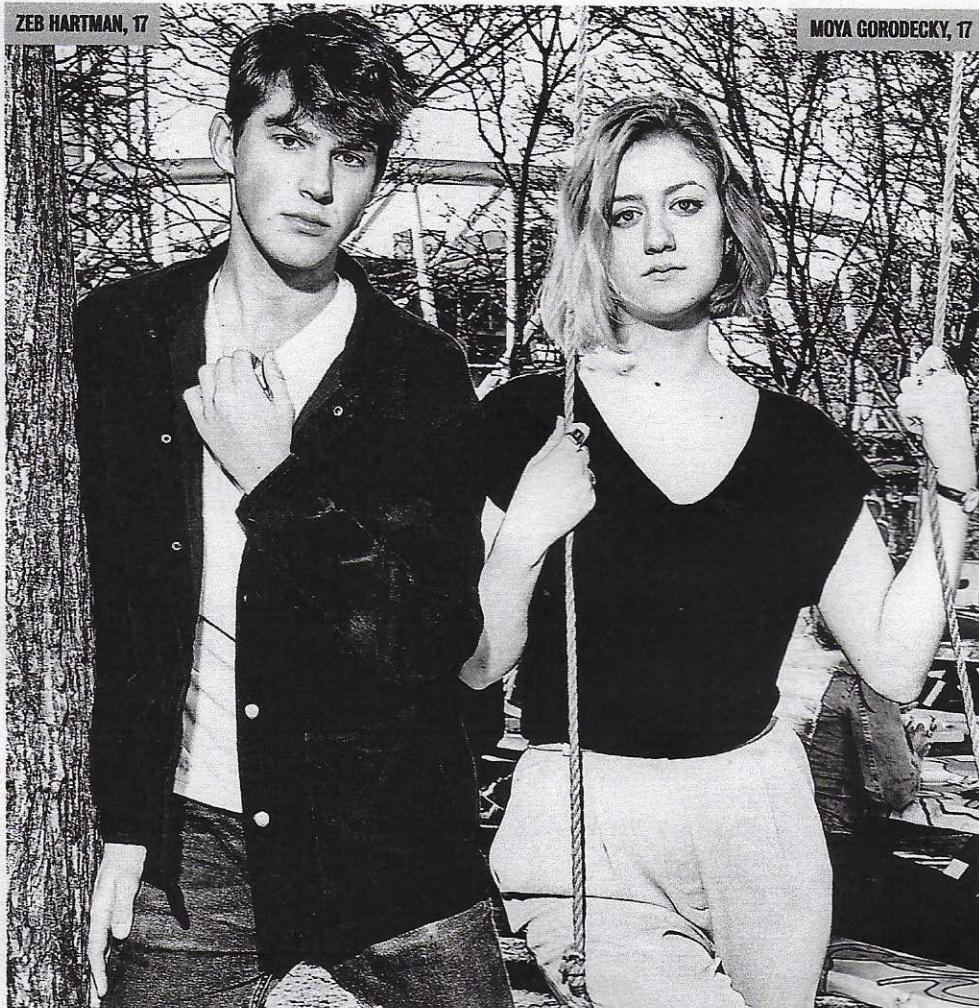
As Rina Mae Acosta, an American expat and co-author of the book *The Happiest Kids in the World: Bringing up Children the Dutch Way*, tells me, "It's not that their parents allow everything, by any means, but everything is open to discussion." Dutch teens lose their virginity at around the same age as their British and American counterparts, but they tend to do so under their parents' roof with parental knowledge.

At school, the enemy is status anxiety. Through confidence classes and, yes, mindfulness coaching, Dutch teens are constantly assured that no good will come from comparing themselves with others, whether on Pinterest or in piano lessons. Calm collaboration, as exemplified by *het poldermodel*, the method of consensus-based decision-making that informs the direction of social policy on a national level, is king.

What's more, it all seems to work. Since 2013, when a Unicef report labelled Dutch children the happiest in the developed world, this uncompetitive bunch of kids have managed to be top of the league when it comes to life satisfaction – hovering somewhere around the 8.4 out of 10 mark.

ZEB HARTMAN, 17

MOYA GORODECKY, 17



## 'My parents' mindset is that if there's a genuine dialogue I'll be more open. That has definitely worked'

Compare this with the highly individualistic UK, where the suicide rate among teenagers has gone up by 67 per cent in the past ten years and around 200 schoolchildren killed themselves last year. Meanwhile, studies are linking social media use to increasing anxiety and depression in British teenagers.

It surely helps that the Dutch collectively adhere to a work/life balance that enables parents to share quality time with their kids, rather than throwing money or screens at the situation.

The London-based parent blogger Anna Whitehouse, aka Mother Pukka, set up her Flex Appeal campaign, which makes the case for more flexible, family-friendly working in the UK, after a five-year stint in Amsterdam. "At first, I remember thinking the Dutch were not as hard working as we are in the UK," she

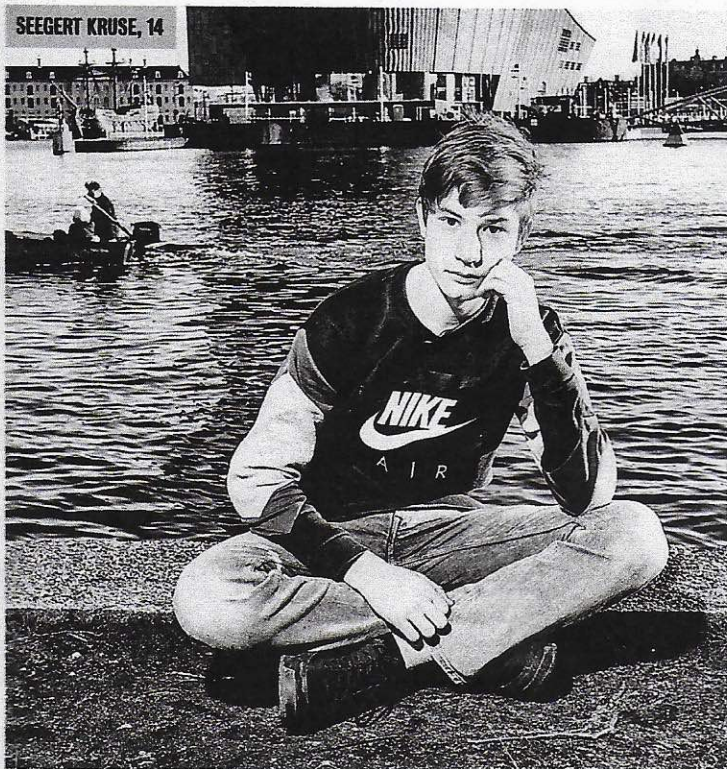
tells me. "They leave the office at 4.59pm and don't put the hours in. But what I fast came to realise was that Dutch culture prioritises family and relationships. They weren't playing a game of competitive busyness and presenteeism that we play in the UK; families had time for dinner together and proper conversations. I believe that's why their kids end up being happier humans. Your kids aren't some hushed secret in the Netherlands – they're the priority."

### MOYA GORODECKY, 17

Having a lot of friends in England and Ireland, I do notice that the Netherlands is a much freer environment and I can see why Dutch kids would be happier. Everyone is treated very equally; there isn't such an emphasis on social status. Dutch parents are relaxed, so my friends and I would play out on the

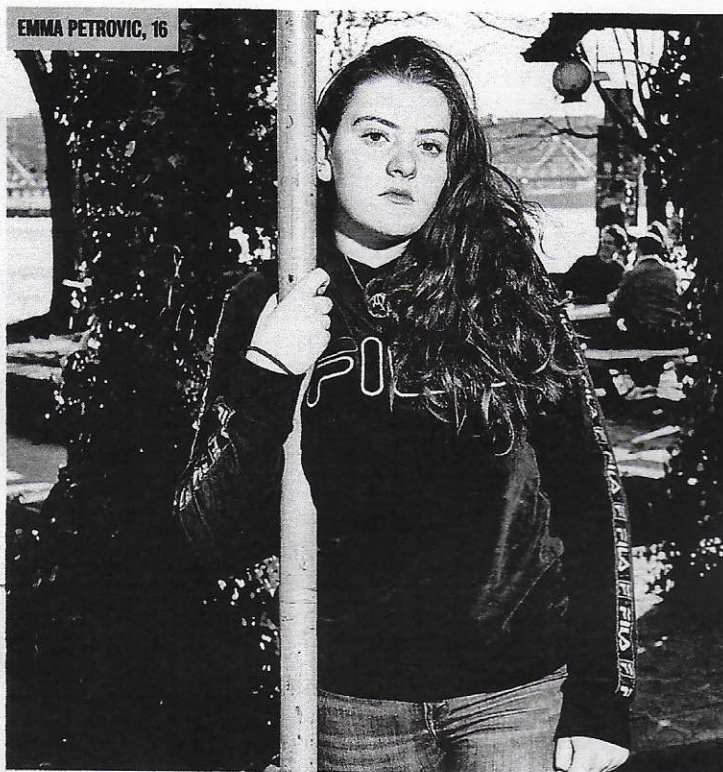


SEEGERT KRUSE, 14



**'I don't feel any pressure to do anything unless I want to'**

EMMA PETROVIC, 16



**'The Dutch approach is to trust kids with their own decision-making'**

street in the centre of Amsterdam at four years old. Everybody knows everybody else on our block so we were safe, and there was a feeling that everyone was keeping an eye out for one another. There's not such a sense of minding your own business as elsewhere.

A lot of schools are Montessori ones and it's a very laid-back system in which you are given opportunities to make discoveries at your own pace. It was collaborative rather than competitive. I enjoyed that. I cannot handle structure – I'm a chaotic person and if people start telling me to do stuff I get very stressed.

I have insanely accepting parents. When I was ten I saw a poster about Aids and asked my mum about it. We were sitting in a public baths and she immediately told me everything about sex, without any awkwardness. With regard to drink and drugs, my parents' mindset is that if there's a genuine dialogue I'll be more open. That has definitely worked. I've never felt the need to take drugs just to rebel.

My friendship group is very mixed, with lots of people who are mixed race, gay, transgender, bi. My best friend is gay; one good friend is a transgender man. I'm surrounded by difference. Straight guys are pretty comfortable praising women here – it's not always about how you

look. Sometimes if you're at a party they might need to check which pronouns to use, though.

#### ZEB HARTMAN, 17

I think my generation is pretty grateful for the high quality of life that we enjoy in the Netherlands, and as a nation I'd say we prize freedom over money on the whole. I think the freedom to do what you want to do plays a big part in how happy you are.

In school we're free to study pretty much anything that we find interesting – recent events in US politics made me want to know more about the history of America, so that's what I'm focusing on at the moment.

But, of course, freedom is also a bit dangerous. If you don't learn to do something constructive with your freedom, life isn't going to be very fulfilling. Sure, you can spend your whole time taking pictures of yourself for social media, but is that going to make you happy? My friends and I use social media for all sorts of things – we all just attended the massive climate march in the Hague and that was entirely driven by social media. Gathering thousands of people in support of a huge world problem warrants a day away from school.

Dutch parenting is defined by pragmatism.

Parents know that their daughters are going to be off at parties kissing boys – why not empower them to be safe while they're doing it? I've been friends with the same core group since we were six. We're tight but we're all individuals – the girls dress to please themselves, not other people. There isn't much mystery around subjects like drugs – it's normal to see people taking them on TV or on YouTube and talking about the effects. My parents wouldn't appreciate it if I did Ecstasy every weekend, but they understand that people my age are curious. The thing they really want to avoid is having to scrape you off the pavement.

#### SEEGERT KRUSE, 14

There's nothing I've ever really wanted to do that I haven't been allowed to. It's kind of like a negotiation where everyone's point of view is considered. For example, my parents and I made a deal that if I don't drink alcohol or do drugs until I'm 18, they'll pay for my driving licence. I'm not into drugs and fighting or anything and I don't feel any pressure to do anything unless I want to. One of my friends has tried weed. Others skip classes, but it's not a scandal or anything.

Sexuality is not a big deal here. If I were ➤



to tell my father I was gay he would be fine with it. If someone comes out as gay, most of the time the rest of the class accepts it and doesn't bully that person. I don't think being transgender is a big deal here, either. There is a bit of emphasis on self-confidence. Some girls I know in the first grade weren't confident at all and they were given confidence training after school. I think that's great.

We have a lottery system here that decides which school you go to – you're given a number and it corresponds to a school. Some friends ended up going to a place that's 12 miles away, but I think it's a good system because your parents can't interfere in which school you go to. I can't think of a school that has a uniform. Uniforms are a bad idea because you can't express yourself with colour. Sometimes you just want to wear green.

#### EMMA PETROVIC, 16

I'm not at all surprised that we're the happiest young people in the world – Amsterdam in particular is a very free city when it comes to drugs and marijuana, which young people are naturally curious about. I've got Chinese friends I've made online and they're doing all this stuff whether or not it's legal – they'll always find some way to do it. Why be a hypocrite?

My dad's Serbian. He doesn't live with us, and the way he does things is different from the Dutch approach, which is to trust kids with their own decision-making because the worst that can happen is they'll learn from their mistakes. The first time my friends and I had a party at the house we rolled up the carpet and put away the valuables. Because we demonstrated that we were responsible that first time, it's been fine ever since.

In our school system, if you're not very academic you can move into a different stream where you're not doing tests and projects the whole time. There's no stigma attached to that – different people's brains work differently.

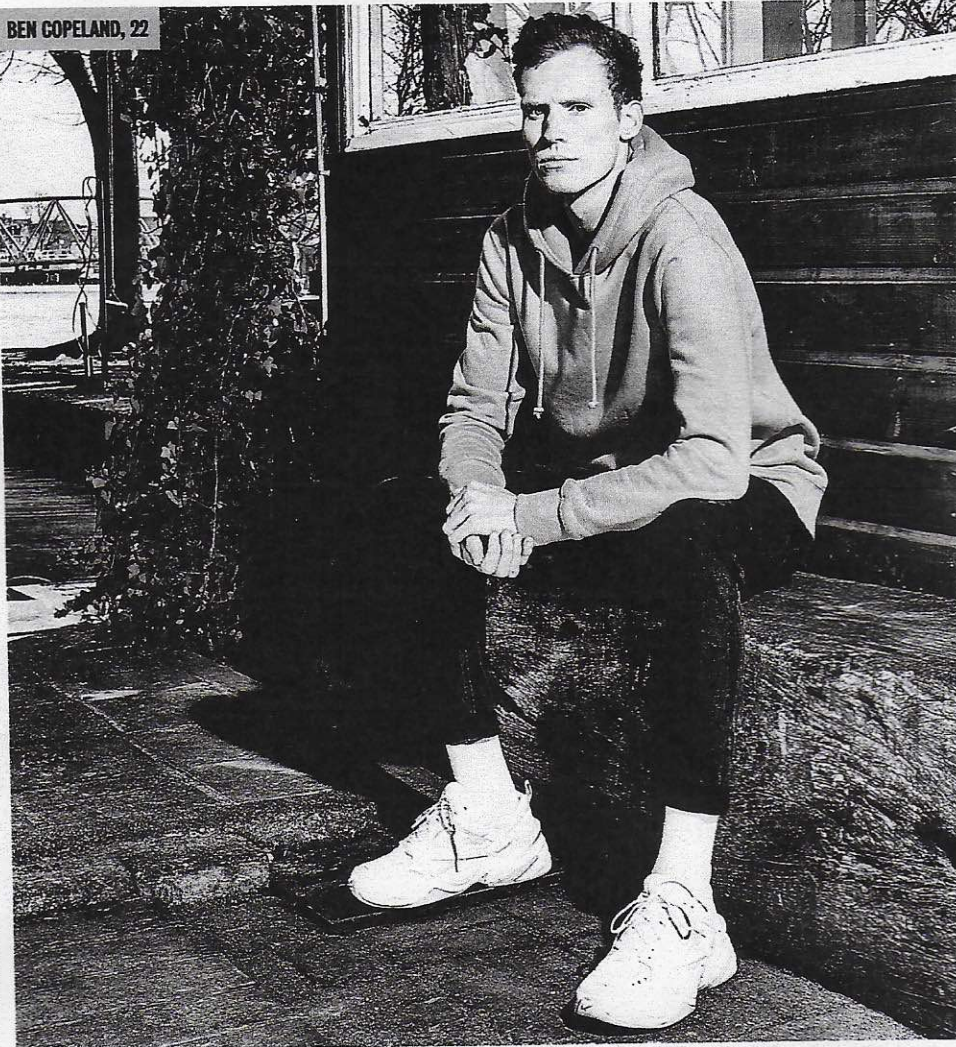
We have a mentoring programme at school and you're encouraged to be totally honest about your life. Let's say you're having problems making friends – there are after-school classes that can help build your self-confidence.

Life always looks perfect on social media, but it's not very Dutch to compare yourself with other people the whole time. I don't compare myself with what I see on Instagram and I think that's a very good thing, because half the time you don't know whether those images are real. Being sexy has nothing to do with being cool or respected, anyway. I have a beautiful friend who's not on social media at all – she doesn't want to be on her phone all day comparing herself with models. It's a personal choice.

#### BEN COPELAND, 22

As a model, I've shared apartments all over the world with young people from Lithuania,

BEN COPELAND, 22



### 'You learn to take a balanced view, which is something I think Dutch people are pretty good at'

Argentina, Belarus and America, and I've come to the conclusion that we have it pretty good here in the Netherlands.

I grew up an only child on a farmhouse in the middle of nature with the freedom to play whenever I wanted. From the age of 11 I had to cycle 14km (9 miles) to school, because there was no alternative. At first it was annoying – I didn't have an iPod or anything to distract me – but soon enough I found some mates who lived nearby and we'd meet at the clock tower and cycle together. Those bike rides just fooling around and chatting are now my fondest memories of high school.

In Dutch there is no phrase that means "good boy" or "good girl" – that's how you'd speak to a dog, not a child. I never felt pressure from my parents to be perfect,

and if anything I'm pretty self-motivated. They were supportive and the education was tough sometimes, but you learn to take a balanced view, which is something I think Dutch people are pretty good at. If ever I was stressed with school work, friends would encourage me to chill out or have fun. It wasn't remotely competitive.

When I went to visit my cousins in Australia recently, they were attending girls' schools and boys' schools and I find that unimaginable. I mainly had female friends in high school and I don't understand why you would separate one half of the human race from another. There was a point in school where people started to have sex with each other, there was no pressure at all. If you didn't have sex, so be it. If you did, good for you. ■