



# CENTRING THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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## INTRODUCTION

This brief summarises research on young people's menstruation experiences and priorities in the United Kingdom. The voices of young people sit at the core of tackling period poverty's 'toxic trio' (the cost of period products, a lack of education about periods, and shame, stigma and taboos) <sup>(1)</sup>. When we centre these voices, we learn that:

- period education needs to move beyond biology and take up issues relevant to young people's lives and menstruation experiences
- period poverty solutions led by young people have more success (i.e. stigma reduction and improved period product access and menstrual health knowledge)
- parents and relatives, boys and classmates, educators and schools all have a role to play as allies in improving young people's menstruation experiences.

## METHODOLOGY

In addition to a review of predominantly UK-based research on young people's experiences of menstruation and menstruation education, we utilised the latest data from a doctoral study<sup>1</sup> based out of Birmingham City University. In total, 442 teenage girls (aged 15 to 19) from schools across Birmingham and the West Midlands, took part in the menstrual health and attitudes survey. Almost half (49%) of participants identified as Asian, just over a third (36%) as white, 10% as Black and 4.4% as mixed-race. Such diversity is a strength of the survey. **Survey findings are in bold.**

<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate Amie Randhawa conducted the survey toward her forthcoming doctoral thesis. Survey responses were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

## MOVING BEYOND BIOLOGY: IMPROVING PERIOD EDUCATION

“ The menstruation education we got was really, really brief. I remember a PSHE lesson where we were all given a little box, with pads and stuff in, and most of us hadn't even started our periods yet. ”

Louise, aged 18

“ We were shown the diagrams and videos, and that was about it. ”

Rebecca, aged 21<sup>2</sup>

Girls<sup>3</sup> report that menstruation education in schools focuses on the biology and hygiene management of menstruation, but neglects discussions more relevant to their lives (2-6). The taboos that surround talking about periods means much of this education is delivered in an atmosphere of unease (2). Educators may rely on videos, stifling discussion and questions from young people (5). Lessons are often piecemeal, with the science of menstruation taught in Biology and menstrual product information provided in PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) lessons (6). Research, from more than 20 years ago (3) to the present (4, 6), continuously shows that girls want to learn about the 'lived experience' of a period. That is, they want to talk about what having a period is like, including the various and highly individual emotional, social and physical experiences of menstruation.

Girls want to learn about the embodied experience of periods, like cramps and hormonal changes, as well as how to deal with them (6). **The vast majority of teen girls experience period pain (94%). Most experience moderate (55%) to severe pain (31%), and the rest mild pain (14%).** Talking about period pain, as well as flow, duration and other physiological aspects, may encourage

young people to seek out help if they suspect their own periods fall outside the range of what is typical. **In the UK, only 8% of girls (aged 15 to 19) know what the common gynaecological condition endometriosis<sup>4</sup> is;** a rate significantly lower than in other countries (24% in Australia (7) and 19% in Italy (8)). **The vast majority (86%) of teen girls want to learn about endometriosis, with school being their preferred source, and they think that boys should learn about it too (83%).** Period pain causes young people to miss school. **Nearly a quarter (23%) of teen girls miss school due to their periods, and the vast majority of those do so because their periods are too painful (91%). Nausea (37%), heavy bleeding (25%) and sickness (21%) are additional reasons.**

Menstruation education needs to include space for young people to talk about how societal stigma around periods affects their own feelings and experiences. **Over half of teen girls (54%) 'don't mind' their period, but well over a third (38%) feel negatively about it. Almost half (48%) strongly agree with the statement 'menstruation is something I just have to put up with.' Nearly a third (31%) strongly agree with the statement 'I envy boys because they don't have**

<sup>2</sup> Quotes are teen girls and young women's reflections on menstrual education from Amie Randhawa's qualitative study on adolescent experiences of endometriosis in her forthcoming doctoral thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Menstruation education research in the UK has largely been conducted with (cis) girls; the diversity of experiences of those who menstruate has yet to be adequately explored.

<sup>4</sup> Endometriosis affects approximately five to 10% of girls and women. Many adults with the condition first experience symptoms (e.g. excessively heavy and/or painful periods and painful intercourse) in adolescence. In the UK, it takes seven to 10 years to receive a diagnosis. Increasing young people's, as well as health professionals' and the wider public's, awareness of endometriosis may help address long diagnostic delays.

menstruation'. Almost a quarter (22%) strongly disagreed that 'menstruation is something to feel happy about'. While period education should not overly focus on negative aspects of menstruation, there is evidence (9) that proscriptive approaches to promoting solely positive, naturalistic views of periods may leave some young people feeling inadequate if their experiences fail to match expectations. Individual experience of a period may be painful, messy or unpredictable. Thus, period education should recognise this spectrum and diversity of experience.

Young people often feel unprepared for their period. For some, this is because their period began before formal period education and others because their periods started well after lessons (6). **While the average age of menarche in our survey population was 12.5, some girls had their first period before the age of nine and others after the age of 16.** Given such a wide age range, menstruation education ideally needs to be ongoing, rather than one-off lessons in a particular year group.

## SOLUTIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people learn about the 'reality' of periods from their friends (3, 5) and their own experiences (6). **Most teen girls feel comfortable talking about periods with female friends (86%, of which 64% feel 'very comfortable' and 24% 'comfortable')** Friends provide an important space to share experiences, 'commiserate,' and support each other around the negative aspects of menstruation (10).

Young people also take part in such discussions online, where they can be anonymous (6). However, some information and discussions online can cause distress; young people might be subject to derogatory comments or portrayals of periods on social media that reinforce negative stereotypes (6, 11).

**Nearly a third (31%) of teen girls say they would use the internet to seek out more information about periods. The internet, however, is rarely teen girls' primary information source, with only 3% reporting learning about periods online.** Therefore, while there is a need for high quality, positive period information online, 'in real life' means of sharing information remain key as young people primarily first learn about menstruation from their mothers or at school. Teenagers value other teenagers' views more than adults' views (12). For example, anti-bullying and smoking campaigns led by young people have a bigger impact on attitudes than those led by teachers (12). The 'pro-social' power of young people in tackling period poverty has been used with great success in Scotland (13, 14).

## THE ROLE OF ALLIES: MOTHERS, FATHERS, BOYS AND SCHOOLS

**“ I think it would be made less of a stigma as like, when girls get taught about periods boys should get taught them as well. Even though they don't have them, they should still be educated about them because for the rest of their lives they'll be round people that do and then maybe it would help them to understand... ”**

Jess, aged 17 (6, p.26)

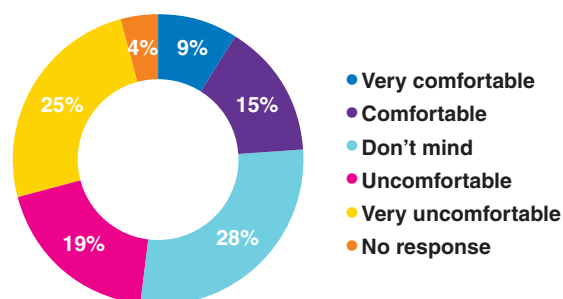
Young people are the experts of their own period experiences. Others, from parents and relatives, boys and classmates, to educators and schools, have a role to play as allies. To be an ally primarily means listening to young people who menstruate, but also working alongside them to address period stigma, myths and poverty.

**Teachers & Schools:** Schools were the second most likely place teen girls first learned about menstruation. While a quarter of teen girls (25%) first learn about periods at school, few (3%) see schools as a source for further information. This is likely because some young people are not comfortable talking about menstruation matters with teachers. Most girls (63%) say they are ‘very uncomfortable’ (34%) or ‘uncomfortable’ (29%) talking about periods with teachers. Teen girls would be more comfortable discussing endometriosis with a school nurse (37%) than with a teacher (27%). Students prefer outside experts (youth workers, sexual health professionals, etc.) over teachers to deliver the related curriculum of Relationships and Sex Education due to embarrassment and concerns over anonymity (21, 22). Furthermore, a recent survey with Year 6 and secondary school teachers, found nearly a third (29%) feel unprepared to teach lessons on menstruation (23).

More schools across the UK will be rolling out compulsory menstruation education as well as introducing free period products for pupils. How to implement such initiatives in ways that make schools allies of young people requires further research. Young people are often not allowed to go to the toilet during lesson times – contributing to the shame they may feel when menstruating (6).

Access to period products may remain a challenge if pupils must ask staff for them directly. The compounding stigma of poverty and periods means young people may be too embarrassed to ask for period products. When products are freely available in toilet cubicles,

**Chart 1: Teen Girls’ Comfort Levels Speaking to Male Friends About Periods**



misuse of tampons and pads is less likely if there is also meaningful pupil engagement and menstruation education (13,14).

**Boys & Classmates:** Teen girls are slightly more, on average, comfortable talking with male friends than they are with male relatives about periods. Almost a quarter (24%) of teen girls are either ‘very comfortable’ or ‘comfortable’ talking to male friends and 28% ‘don’t mind’. However, nearly half (44%) are either ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘very uncomfortable’ (see Chart 1).

Boys report feeling uneducated about periods (5). When schools separate boys from all menstruation lessons, this segregation reinforces the notion that periods are something secretive, that girls should keep hidden (5, 6). Boys want to learn more about menstruation and girls want them to as well (6). Girls still, however, feel most comfortable speaking about periods with female peers. Menstruation education, therefore, should ideally be delivered through co-ed as well as single-sex lessons.

Educating boys about menstruation may help them become better allies. Bullying and teasing about periods remains commonplace. One in five girls experience it themselves (18) and almost half (43%) witness a peer being bullied or teased about periods (19). Girls worry about being shamed at school, particularly by boys, about their periods (5, 20). This may cause anxiety, prompting girls to go to great lengths to conceal their periods, including hiding

menstrual products, limiting clothing choices, and refraining from physical activities (5, 6, 10).

**Mothers & Female Relatives:** Many teen girls first learn about menstruation from their mothers (43%) and almost a quarter (23%) learn from a sister or other female relative. Mothers are the preferred source of further period information for teen girls (35%). After female friends, teen girls are most comfortable talking about periods with female relatives and siblings. Most teen girls (78%) feel either ‘very comfortable’ (51%) or ‘comfortable’ (27%) talking about periods with their mothers (or aunts, grandmothers, or female guardian) and 65% feel either ‘very comfortable’ (44%) or ‘comfortable’ (31%) talking about it with a sister.

Mothers, as well as female relatives, are key allies in providing information and support to young people. Some may need support to do this as many learned the ‘menstrual etiquette’ of British culture, requiring girls and women

to hide all evidence of menstruation and not openly discuss periods (15). Mothers who feel embarrassed to give ‘the period talk’ or do not have access to accurate information may not be able to answer questions adequately, leaving some young people feeling unprepared or misinformed (2, 16, 17). Locating menstruation education in schools, however, ensures all young people have access to more accurate information.

**Fathers & Male Relatives:** Teen girls are much less comfortable talking with male relatives about their periods than female relatives. Most teen girls (64%) are either ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘very uncomfortable’ discussing menstruation with fathers (or uncles, grandfathers, male guardians) and just over half (51%) are ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘very uncomfortable’ talking about it with brothers. More research is needed on how male relatives can better support girls. Campaigns such as #Pads4Dads seek to help make more fathers positive period allies.

## LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE TO ‘GET IT RIGHT’

“If decisions are made without students – schools will get it wrong” says Sarah Carr, PSHE lead for the Newcastle East mixed multi Academy Trust (NEAT), covering four primary and a secondary school in a region where nearly half of all children live under the poverty line.<sup>5</sup> To address period poverty in ways that work best for NEAT students, pupils are engaged in a number of ways. A Student Voice project included young people in period poverty solutions. A survey captured a larger number of students’ views and needs. Through a partnership with Bethan Kitchen from Brash Events and funding from Streetwise Newcastle, the results from these projects were used to create a play that is set to be performed at NEAT schools and showcased at a local Newcastle theatre.

Pupils said they not only needed free period products, but also fresh tights and leggings. The ‘Health Hubs’ created in NEAT schools, through Plan International UK funding, stocks these items and is responsive to student need. Some students (including boys) take period products home to family members who cannot afford or access them. The hub provides packages of period products for pupils who need them over term breaks and summer holidays. A student says about the hub: “It’s good that there is always stuff I can get at any time of the day. It’s also good to be able to take stuff home when I do come on if I can’t get it from home.”

<sup>5</sup> Stone, J. and Hirsch D. (2019) *Local Indicators of Child Poverty, 2017/2018*. Loughborough University. [Online] <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/child-poverty-indicators-2019-report-to-ecp-1.pdf> [Accessed: 29 January 2020]

# CONCLUSION

Centring the voices of young people shows that period poverty and education initiatives must move beyond biology, draw on 'peer power' and support the role of relatives, boys and classmates, and schools as allies.

- *'Menstruation Learning Brief 2: Best Practices and Latest Innovations in UK Period Poverty Initiatives'* summarise best practices and in UK period poverty solutions
- *'Menstruation Learning Brief 3: Inclusivity and Diversity – UK Expert Views'* outlines approaches to ensuring all young people who menstruate are included in such initiatives
- *'Menstruation Learning Brief 4: Evidencing and Evaluating Period Poverty Initiatives for Impact'* provides tools for evaluating the impact of these initiatives

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