

BEST PRACTICE AND INNOVATIONS IN UK PERIOD POVERTY INITIATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

This brief summarises best practice and innovations in period poverty and menstruation education initiatives. It does so by drawing on the latest evidence and lessons learned from those on the frontline of tackling the ‘toxic trio’¹ of period poverty in the UK. This evidence shows us that:

- dignity and respect for all those who menstruate should guide best practice in distribution of free period products
- uniting products with education is key to effectively addressing period poverty
- responsive, inclusive approaches guide best practice in menstruation education.

METHODOLOGY

From September to October 2019, we issued a call for evidence for UK-based period poverty, equality and education initiatives. In total, we received 14 submissions that form the basis of emerging best practice derived from the accumulated knowledge of a growing number of period poverty initiatives in the UK. Submissions came from organisations engaged in menstruation education, free period product distribution and/or period poverty and menstruation equity advocacy (for a summary, see *Table 1 UK-Based Period Equality Initiatives: Call for Evidence Submissions*, at the end of this brief). We collated and analysed evidence thematically to identify both commonly shared emerging best practice and innovative approaches.

The three main themes identified: distribution with dignity, combining products with education, and responsive menstruation education, are discussed in this brief.

Note: Where appropriate, examples are provided to illustrate listed best practice (for further information and examples, see Resource Summary, at the end of this brief).

¹ The ‘toxic trio’ of period poverty includes the cost of period products, a lack of education about periods, and shame, stigma and taboos (Plan International UK’s (2018) *Menstrual Manifesto* <https://plan-uk.org/blogs/our-menstrual-manifesto>).

DISTRIBUTION WITH DIGNITY

In order to reach as many of those in need of free period products as possible across the UK, period equality advocates and volunteers have been distributing products in a variety of venues including schools and colleges, food banks, women's and community centres, shelters and hostels, libraries and sports stadiums. Collated practice-based evidence from across these initiatives revealed a principle of dignity and respect for all those needing free period products. Identified best practices for distributing free period products include:

- 1. *Planning thoughtful advertising and distribution strategies to ensure product uptake.*** Participatory approaches work best to devise and continually improve uptake. While consultation to gain user input is valuable, co-production/ownership is the gold standard approach and leads to initiatives that are more successful.
- 2. *Adopting language that does not perpetuate stigma around poverty.*** Avoid replicating the notion that periods are 'unhygienic' or 'dirty'. Use the term 'period or menstruation products' rather than 'sanitary or feminine hygiene products'. Frame economic poverty and costly products as the problem, not periods. Intended recipients of free period products often do not want to be identified as someone who experiences economic hardship (i.e. they do not want to be labelled as 'poor') or someone who may struggle to access products for reasons unrelated to income. In user-facing materials, organisations should refrain from referring to distribution projects as 'period poverty' initiatives. Many organisations simply state that they provide 'free period products for all those who need them'.
- 3. *Adopting inclusive gender-neutral language.*** Not all cisgender girls and women menstruate and not all those who menstruate identify as female. Use language such as 'those who menstruate/require period products'.
- 4. *Offering a range of disposable and reusable period product options, without judgement.*** Facilitate informed choice by offering a range of products, both reusable and disposable, along with information about each. Disposable products include tampons of different sizes/absorbencies and pads of different sizes/absorbencies. Options for each should be explored, such as perfumed or unperfumed pads, pads with or without wings and tampons with or without an applicator. The growing market of options seeking to take on environmental challenges should also be discussed, ensuring young people are aware of all the choices available to them e.g. organic cotton or plastic-free products. Reusable options include menstruation cups, cloth pads and period pants. It should not be assumed only certain users will take up a product as organisations report those of all ages and economic backgrounds express interest in both reusable and disposable options. Younger people show a preference for pads, but an individual's product preference has been shown to change over time, based on circumstance.
- 5. *Ensuring period products are easily accessible.*** For distribution points outside of schools, adopt a 'no questions asked' policy for all those requesting products no matter their age or gender. In schools, make products freely available in toilets.
- 6. *Taking stock of which products are popular and replenish accordingly,*** but offer education opportunities about plastic-free disposables and reusable products to encourage uptake.
- 7. *Ensuring period products are of good quality, safe and have not expired.*** Avoid providing solely the cheapest disposable period products. Such products are often poor quality.

COMBINING PRODUCTS WITH EDUCATION: “A BOX OF PADS ISN’T ENOUGH”

Distributing period products is often the first step to addressing period poverty. Stigma, taboos and myths surrounding menstruation and period products. Distribution programmes should, ideally, be offered alongside menstruation education. In short, providing a box of pads and tampons is often not enough to tackle the ‘toxic trio’ of period poverty.

Frontline staff, volunteers, and teachers distributing products need training and support to encourage best practices listed above. Such training may need to be delivered in flexible, creative ways as staff often face time constraints. Dedicated time for face-to-face training is ideal, but training can be

offered remotely (online or over the phone), or more informally over time through ongoing conversations. Reusable products are often seen as too expensive, hard to find or difficult to use. Where possible offer workshops on how to use these products and how to access affordable options. A list of different types of period products is available from Women’s Environmental Network’s (WEN) ‘Enviromenstrual’ initiative (for further information on this initiative, see *Resource Summary*, at the end of this brief).

The following case study highlights how young people in schools have advocated for better menstruation education alongside free period products:

UNITING FREE PRODUCTS WITH EDUCATION: PUTTING PUPILS IN CHARGE FOR SUCCESS

“If you talk to young people they will tell you they want better education – providing free products helps open up this chat. Young people love the idea of peer-led period education and will deliver it if you let them,” states Molly Brown, Hey Girls’ Education and Impact Manager, based on her work and research on period poverty in schools. This is illustrated in the case of St Paul’s RC High School in Glasgow, Scotland, where students decided that they should have free, private access to period products without having to ask staff. Products were made available in the cubicles of female, disabled and gender-neutral toilets, with extras in PE changing rooms and pastoral care facilities. A student steering group monitored stock levels and promoted the project to all pupils in assemblies.

Students, however, felt strongly that assemblies and posters about the free period products were not enough. To address the embarrassment that prevents the take-up of products, peer-led education sessions were introduced. Older students received training to deliver workshops for younger years. St Paul’s is one example of the emerging peer-led learning strategies to improve period education and product access.

RESPONSIVE EDUCATION: PARTICIPATORY AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES

Practice-based evidence from the organisations delivering menstruation education across the country showed that responsive, participatory and inclusive approaches guide best practice in meeting the diverse education needs of young people. Young people's menstruation education needs vary depending on a whole host of intersecting factors. We explore the importance of recognising the intersectional diversity of young people who menstruate in *Menstruation Learning Brief 3: Inclusivity and Diversity – UK Expert Views*. Educators, therefore, must strive to understand the perspectives of young people in order to support and move them forward in their knowledge about periods. Listening to young people is key to this process. Such responsive and inclusive approaches guide the following best practices in menstruation education:

1. *Identifying learners' current knowledge of periods.* Initial 'know your body' and anatomy lessons are often needed. As evidenced in *Menstruation Learning Brief 1: Centring the Voices of Young People*, young people want education to move beyond biological, abstract lessons about periods. They want to know and talk about what having a period is like, and are especially keen to learn about managing menstrual pain and cramps.
2. *Creating an atmosphere that is safe and non-judgemental.* For example, collect written anonymous questions and answer them aloud to facilitate conversation. Empathy and humour help alleviate the tensions learners may have when speaking about periods. When discussing period products, talk about the range of disposable and reusable options without bias. Adopt a 'choose what works best for you' approach, acknowledging that what works best often changes over time.
3. *Addressing shame and stigma about periods and use period-friendly language.* Question and challenge negative period euphemisms, such as 'the curse' or 'the blob'. Avoid replicating notions that periods are 'unhygienic' or 'dirty' when discussing menstruation management. Talk about why the terms 'sanitary or feminine hygiene products' can reinforce stigma.
4. *Adopting inclusive language and practices.* Embed gender-neutral language from the start ('those who menstruate'). Tackle myths that all and only cisgender girls and women menstruate. Ensure examples and images used in learning materials represent a diversity of those who menstruate.
5. *Being mindful of the unknown diversity of experiences in the room.* For example, when discussing female anatomy, be mindful this could be an especially sensitive topic for learners who have experienced, or have worries about, female genital mutilation. Such discussions may also trigger those who have experienced other forms of trauma such as sexual abuse or assault. Ensure appropriate support is available, should they be required.
6. *Tailoring menstruation education to meet other identified needs.* For example, when working with young people with special educational needs and disabilities, ensure lessons are adapted appropriately. One-off, rather than ongoing, lessons may be needed for learners who are homeless or asylum seekers who must move location often. Some organisations create special sessions to meet the needs of trans, non-binary and gender fluid learners.
7. *Being flexible, use a range of interactive, engaging learning techniques both in and*

outside of schools. Offer opportunities for learners to see, touch and ask questions about a range of period products. Have learners make their own cloth period pads to facilitate conversations about reusable products, taboos around menstrual blood, and more. Boys have been found to enjoy learning about periods in more informal ways, such as through ‘pop up’ drop-in sessions. Organisations report recruiting and accessing schools in which to run menstruation and free product distribution programmes can be challenging. Consider running programmes in non-school settings. For example, The Real Period Project runs education workshops for 10 to 12 year old girls and their mothers/ female guardians with the aim of fostering ongoing, open dialogue about periods.

8. *Uniting menstruation education with environmental education and action.* Young people of all backgrounds are interested and invested in learning about the environmental impact of products. Recently, the Department for Education (DfE) challenged schools to reduce single-use plastics. This represents an opportunity for schools to discuss the range of period products in different subject settings and create further education opportunities. Examples of how to address this through education and school infrastructure include:

- Ensuring bins are provided for period products in *all* toilet stalls to encourage use (tampons, pads and panty liners flushed down toilets are a major cause of ocean pollution) and reasons for this highlighted through publicly shared information in toilets, assemblies and education.
- Supporting access to a wider range of period products through education and campaigning. This includes schools providing education about the reusable options introduced through the DfE scheme.

- Working alongside organisations that can offer different perspectives and education to pupils alongside statutory lessons to provide information about a range of period products (for information on organisations providing such materials, see *Resource Summary*, at the end of this brief).

9. *Supporting and training facilitators/ educators to create period-friendly environments.* Ideally, offer face-to-face training with opportunities for trainees to address their own taboos and questions about periods. Organisations offering menstruation education training programmes for teachers and staff include *Brook*, *#GirlCodeSandwell*, *Hey Girls*, and *Rethink Periods* (see Table 1). Examples of encouraging a period-friendly environment in schools include:

- supporting both female and male staff to be mindful of the needs of those who menstruate (e.g. allowing toilet breaks, when needed),
- stocking the library with high-quality books about periods, and/or
- finding creative ways to embed menstruation education across a variety of subjects beyond Biology or PSHE (e.g. make cloth period pads in Home Economics, explore the environmental impact of period products in Geography, calculate ‘tampon tax’ in Maths or Business Studies).

10. *Evaluating programmes to document progress and learning to continually improve and record success.* Leave time for feedback. Devise short, but meaningful ways to capture learners’ views. Young people want their voices heard, however, they may be ‘put off’ if it is a lengthy, intrusive process. We provide more tools for evaluating impact in *Menstruation Learning Brief 4: Evidencing and Evaluating Period Poverty Initiatives for Impact*.

CONCLUSION: LINKING PERIOD POVERTY TO FEMINIST, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ANTI-POVERTY MOVEMENTS

The best practices outlined in this brief, distributing period products with dignity, uniting products with education, and responsive menstruation education, describe improving an *individual's* period experience. The causes of period poverty, however, are widely accepted to be linked to broader issues including socio-economic inequality and societal taboos, discomforts and biases around girls' and women's bodies. Many organisations that distribute free period products and provide menstruation education add their expertise and voices to larger anti-poverty, feminist and environmental campaigns in order to tackle the underlying causes of period poverty and societal taboos about menstruation and increase awareness of these issues across society.

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Table 1:UK-Based Period Equality Initiatives: Call for Evidence Submissions

Organisation	Area	Period Initiatives/Target Audience
Bloody Good Education Programme bloodygoodperiod.com/education	London, England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female reproductive health information and signposting Distributes free period products and education to asylum seekers and refugees
Brook – Let’s Talk. Period legacy.brook.org.uk/about-brook/ lets-talk-period	Locations across England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menstruation education for all young people Distributes free period products (including sustainable options) Special programming for vulnerable 12-25 year olds who menstruate Staff training
Cyrenians cyrenians.scot	Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributes free period products (disposable & reusable) to low income and/or vulnerable individuals Education on period poverty, menstruation taboos & reusable products Period poverty advocacy with a range of stakeholders
Freedom4Girls freedom4girls.co.uk	Leeds & West Yorkshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menstruation education for under 25s Raising period poverty awareness
#GirlCodeSandwell (Sandwell Council) scvo.info/free-period-products-for-young-people	Sandwell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributes free period products Menstruation education for children and young people Workforce training
Hey Girls heygirls.co.uk	UK-wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributes free period products through ‘Buy One – Give One’ scheme (in schools, community settings, etc.) Menstruation education lesson plans and resource Training for teachers, youth workers, etc. Campaigns: Pads 4 Dads, Bloody Big Brunch and Period Dignity at Work
Homeless Period Wolverhampton thehomelessperiod-wolverhampton.co.uk	Wolverhampton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributes free period products Menstruation education in and outside of schools Period poverty advocacy, campaigning and policy work
P-Card legacy.brook.org.uk/about-brook/ lets-talk-period	Locations across England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distribute free period products (including sustainable ones) to those aged 12 to 24 years who attend Let’s Talk. Period education sessions
The Period Project Merseyside periodprojectmerseyside.com	Merseyside	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collects and distributes free period products Engaged in menstruation education and period poverty campaigns, linking this work with feminist organising and events
Pride & Periods (Suffolk Libraries) suffolklibraries.co.uk/health/ pride-and-periods	Suffolk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributes free period products via libraries Period poverty advocacy and awareness
Project GIVE inspiringhealthychoices.co.uk/ project-give	Wolverhampton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributes free period products, including fresh underwear and wet wipes Menstruation education and period poverty awareness Serving people who menstruate aged 11+
Menstrual Matters menstrual-matters.com	Online resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion and provision of evidence-based menstruation education Free web source and low cost print resources for individuals, schools, clinicians and activists
The Real Period Project realperiodproject.org	Bristol & Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menstruation education initiative for young people (in and outside of school settings), parents, educators and individuals wanting to know more about their menstrual cycle
Rethink Periods (City to Sea) citytosea.org.uk/plasticfreeperiods/ rethink-periods	National initiative, Bristol based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Menstruation education focused on product awareness, environmental impact and period myths, taboos and celebrations Educational resources for stages KS2 through to KS4 Teacher training Provides product demonstration boxes with reusable and disposable plastic-free period products

RESOURCE SUMMARY

Brook – provides menstruation education and free period products

- Help and advice/resources on periods, for young people:
<https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/periods/>
https://www.brook.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Period_tracker.pdf
- Free e-learning resources for professionals, including handouts on periods/puberty:
https://www.brook.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Brook_Period_handout_v2.pdf
https://www.brook.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Brook_Puberty_handout_final.pdf
- Free online learning course to support professionals delivering puberty and menstruation education – register at www.learn.brook.org.uk

Hey Girls – provides menstruation education and sustainable period products through ‘Buy One-Give One’ scheme

- ‘How to Distribute Period Products’ Summer 2019 Edition
<https://www.heygirls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Hey-Girls-Schools-Guide.pdf>
- Free resources for schools (primary and secondary) and youth groups; facilitating positive conversations with young people about periods:
<https://www.heygirls.co.uk/education/schools/>
<https://www.heygirls.co.uk/education/my-period-programme/>
- Information for boys and male relatives:
<https://www.heygirls.co.uk/education/hey-boys/>
<https://www.heygirls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Pads-4-Dads-Booklet-Final.pdf>

Menstrual Matters – provides free web source and low cost print menstruation education resources

- Non-profit online information hub on menstruation, health and wellbeing, taking up topics such as how menstrual myths and taboos help to perpetuate gender inequalities:
<https://www.menstrual-matters.com/>

The Real Period Project – provides menstruation education for young people in and outside of school

- Educational sessions/lesson plans for schools (primary, secondary and Higher Education):
<https://www.realperiodproject.org/educators/primary/>
<https://www.realperiodproject.org/educators/secondary/>
<https://www.realperiodproject.org/educators/higher-education/>
- Provides resources and support for parents/carers:
<https://www.realperiodproject.org/parents/>

Rethink Periods (City to Sea) – provides free programming, updates period education in primary and secondary schools with unbiased information on all products available and the social and environmental contexts of menstruation

- Educational resources: <https://www.citytosea.org.uk/plasticfreeperiods/rethink-periods/>

WEN (Women’s Environmental Network) – runs ‘Enviromenstrual’ to raise awareness of hidden plastic and chemicals in conventional menstrual products

- Resources on, and discount codes for, plastic-free and reusable products: www.wen.org.uk/aboutenvironmenstrual