

# What if... ?

## Menstruation management

### What if ... we want to improve menstruation management in our schools?

There's a long history of shame and secrecy around periods. Some of this comes from historical and cultural taboos that are passed down from one generation to the next, but for the past century or so, media advertising has played an influential role in perpetuating this. Dr. Elizabeth A. Kissling details this in *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation* (2006) and you can find a quick run down of the issue in [Lifting the Lid](#), a short film I made with the Open University. Advertising messages can make their way into schools in the form of leaflets and free lesson materials from major multinational corporations who manufacture and sell disposable menstrual products. Schools can accidentally transmit to pupils the message that periods should be kept secret, when actually they're something people may choose to keep private, but don't have to. Encouraging an atmosphere where students of all genders can speak freely about periods if they want to helps menstruators to compare notes. Greater openness supports a better overall attitude to the changes of puberty and a positive sense of wellbeing, and may help menstruators to realise if their periods are unusually painful, and seek medical help for reproductive health-related medical conditions such as [endometriosis](#).

When pupils do not have adequate facilities for menstruation management, it can have a negative impact on education and may result in school absence. This has been documented in a number of studies of schools in less economically developed countries, showing a [correlation between poor menstruation management and school absence](#), but there is also evidence that this affects pupils in the UK. [In a letter published in the British Medical Journal](#) in 2010, Dr. Daniel Hindley noted that in a study conducted at the Bolton NHS Foundation Trust, 'menstruation problems' was listed as the 5th most common reason given for school absence in a study of 251 primary and secondary pupil referrals to the Trust. In the letter, he

Chella Quint is a menstruation education researcher, artist and performer based in Sheffield. She founded the [#periodpositive](#) project to promote accurate and shame-free menstruation talk for schools and individuals.



concludes that, "In all cases of non-attendance, it is essential that preventive and early intervention should be seen as the cornerstone of multiagency working to ensure pupils' right to education and to protect their health and wellbeing."

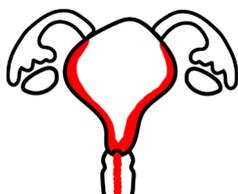
Sometimes the worry alone is enough to disrupt learning. While researching for my Master's Degree, one pupil actually came into a focus group session straight from a GCSE modular exam and happened to report the following:

"I came on during my exam, Miss! Everyone saw! It was the most embarrassing moment of my life and I couldn't even get up! I couldn't even think about my exam!" - Y9 girl, Sheffield, 2013

More recently with DECSY's Gender Respect Project, I replicated smaller scale versions of studies originally published in ['This is the time to grow up': Girls' experience of menstruation in school](#) by Dr. Shirley Prendergast, a senior research fellow for the Child Care and Development Group at the University of Cambridge, in 1992. Dr. Prendergast found:

"...General anxiety about menstruation in school was very significantly related to a number of aspects of school provision and facilities: less reliable toilet facilities, difficulties keeping supplies safe and obtaining emergency supplies...anxiety was also increased if a girl had not been told about menstruation by anybody in advance of onset". (Prendergast, p109, 1992)

My pupils consistently gave the same replies. As in 1992, pupils in my focus group also reported being very concerned about leaking menstrual blood as their biggest menstruation worry, and rated their school's menstruation management provision as inadequate. Some simple changes to support better menstruation management can make a world of difference,



allowing pupils to concentrate more on their work than on their worries. Dr. Prendergast goes on to recommend a school audit; this is an adapted and slightly updated version.

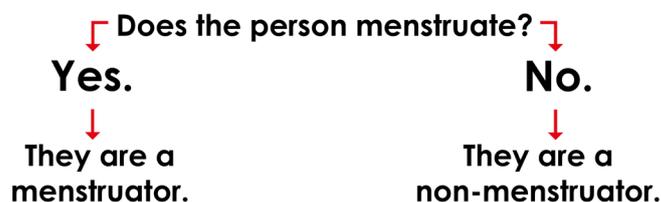
In your school, how easy is it for students to manage their periods? Please tick the appropriate box in this chart for each context, or leave blank if you do not know:

Availability/condition of school toilets (all genders)	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Toilets can be accessed during lessons					
Toilets can be accessed during exams					
Toilets can be accessed at break time					
Free menstrual products available					
Reusables (or information about them) available					
Facilities are clean, safe, locks on doors					
Hot water					
Hand drying					
Soap					
Loo roll					
Bins in all toilets					

Carrying out the audit can also be an opportunity to involve pupils, as it is their opinion about the condition of facilities that should count. The audit may reveal inconsistencies from class to class. Having completed an audit, start looking at changes you can make across the school. Here are some ideas for Period Positive schools, which apply to both primary and secondary schools.

**1. Don't make assumptions about who has periods.** Whether for physiological, gender identity, trauma or medical reasons, you may have pupils who you assume will menstruate but will not – some pupils are intersex, trans, non-binary or have chromosomal or hormonal medical conditions which delay puberty – be sensitive to individual pupils in your class and ensure you are aware of their medical statements and care plans. For trans and non-binary identifying pupils (who may not have indicated their gender identity to all staff) gender-neutral language can be critical to ensuring they receive valuable information that does not exclude.

How to adapt language to include menstruators of all genders in menstruation education:



Instead of	Replace it with
girl/woman (when meaning someone who menstruates)	menstruator
boy/man (when meaning someone who does not menstruate)	non-menstruator
becoming a woman	starting puberty/growing up
feminine hygiene products	menstrual products
femcare	menstruation management
women's health	reproductive health

**2. Small pedal bins can be put in the stalls of all toilets for boys and girls, including the disabled toilet.** This avoids singling out an early menstruator or trans boy who needs a bin. Explain to pupils that most things can't be flushed down the loo, and these bins are there for pupils' convenience. Many schools hire in 'sanitary disposal units' which are filled with disposable menstrual products and emptied by a specialist company, but many of them are poorly designed, difficult to operate, or too wide for many school toilet cubicles. Actually, ordinary small pedal bins can be used depending on the size of the school. See [advice on clinical waste from Gov.uk](#) which advises that human hygiene waste is packaged separately from other waste streams if premises generate more than one standard bag over the usual collection interval. Consider adding a gender-neutral toilet as some primary and secondary schools have already done. Include menstrual product disposal in conversations about recycling, waste management, littering and citizenship generally.

**3. Make a range of free menstrual products available in an accessible way.** Staff can place free menstrual products in a range of places, for example in a basket or bowl in plain sight in the reception, library, a year tutor's office, and free dispensers in the toilets themselves. This can encourage more open communication about menstruation. Teachers who wish to support those

# What if...?

continued

who feel shy can also put a 'talk to me about periods!' sign or a symbol, for example the #periodpositive logo below, in their classroom if they want to indicate that they can give out spare products, and are knowledgeable about menstruation and happy to answer questions.



**4. Show examples of a range of several different brands, styles and types of menstrual products.** A lot of people think there are only disposable pads and tampons, but there are reusable menstrual products too and they are gaining popularity for their convenience and cost-effectiveness. Advantages of reusables are that they are washable, comfortable, good for the environment and the budget. Menstrual cups come in a variety of sizes and styles from a number of different brands – teaching young people about reusables as well as disposables helps prepare them to make an informed choice about what they want to use. When teaching about disposables, use more than one brand – not just the free samples sent to schools, and avoid handing out branded leaflets and lesson activities. Cloth pads can also be made using this [free pad pattern archive wiki](#) – patterns or ask for free samples from a growing number of online distributors. Many menstrual cup companies will also provide example cups to schools.

Likewise, avoid using just one type of branded lesson resource as part of puberty education. Rebecca Stothard, subject leader for PSHE in Sheffield stopped using branded resources at her school:

"We decided not to use branded teaching packs in our school because we felt it was unfair to our students to promote any particular brand over another. We now show students

a range of different brands and products, including cloth pads and menstrual cups. We want students to have as much information as possible about all the options so that they can make an *informed, not influenced* choice."

**5. Use teachable moments to remove the sense of secrecy about menstruation.** Be alert for off-the-cuff opportunities, for example, a pupil needs a pad or someone teases a classmate with a derogatory assumption about being on their period, or a pupil leaks in class. Be sure to respond calmly if a leak happens, as expressing disgust creates a sense of shame around stains and blood. How you handle these moments set the tone – humour, neutrality and matter-of-factness work well – looks of disgust or ignoring these incidents can speak volumes. Teachable moments can also arise in other subjects, for example in physical education (menstruation management in sport, including menstrual cups).

**6. Make menstruation education into an ongoing conversation rather than a 'big talk'.** The best way to dispel myths and combat shame perpetuated by menstrual taboos is to think of it not as 'the talk' but as an ongoing conversation that can start with a toddler's first question about a parent's menstruation management observed at home, or formally in Key Stage 1 with a discussion of bodily functions and systems. Using humour is a great way in – tiny kids love bodily functions – they find them hilarious! 'Bogeys', 'wee and poo', 'being sick' and 'trumping' ...it's easy enough to explain that 'menstrual blood' is just one more interesting thing that comes out of your body sometimes when you start growing up – but only for most people who have a vagina. As pupils get older, using the lesson ideas on page 26 is an easy way to keep the 'period conversation' going.

For more tips on #periodpositive menstruation education and for more lesson ideas visit [www.periodpositive.com](http://www.periodpositive.com).

