

**South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2021**

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Menstruation Matters

**The impact of menstruation on wellbeing,
participation and school attendance**

PROJECT REPORT NO. 21 | MARCH 2021

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

Terminology


The term 'young people' is used throughout this report to describe the diversity of those who menstruate and reflect the biological reality that not all females menstruate and not all people who menstruate are female. Gender-neutral language also reflects the

language used by children and young people themselves. This helps to ensure that everyone receives the information and support they need in relation to menstruation and menstrual health and wellbeing, regardless of their gender identity.

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Commissioner's Foreword

In 2019, I released 'Leave No One Behind – what children and young people have said about living in poverty in South Australia'. The report was the culmination of many conversations on how poverty is experienced by children in South Australia in their everyday lives. One of the issues identified by children and young people in the report was the impact of product affordability and accessibility on school attendance.

To gain a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by children and young people in relation to period poverty, I undertook further work in the area in 2020. This work included a survey of public high schools to examine how they currently respond to requests for assistance from students facing period poverty, seeking their suggestions on ways they felt the situation could be improved.

What I heard was that access to period products is a significant issue affecting students, teachers and school administrators within schools across South Australia, and that the scale of the problem is much larger than was perhaps first thought.

Many schools reported a reliance upon assistance from manufacturers, charities and community groups to supply the period products they need to meet the demand that exists. However, many said these partnerships are becoming harder and harder to maintain as the numbers of students in need continues to grow year on year.

The evidence also suggests that individual 'champion' teachers are bearing the financial burden of supporting students who come to them for assistance in sourcing period products. Counsellors, wellbeing and first aid staff are also having their time diverted from other tasks, to address what is a basic product supply issue.

From young people I heard that many felt embarrassed or ashamed because of the often convoluted and informal process they were required to follow to access a period product needed, often urgently. They simply did not know where to turn for assistance with how to minimise the negative impacts that having a period each month caused.

In addition to the issue of accessing products, I was shocked to hear some of the other issues they raised. Many young people told me about the stigma they associate with menstruation, about the lack of knowledge they have about their bodies, about the lack of information they have about how to manage their periods, and how period pain is rarely acknowledged or taken into account in relation to their school performance or attendance.

To gain further insight into the new issues raised, in 2020 I released two consecutive surveys.

Over 3,000 survey responses were received from South Australian young people between the ages of 7 and 22 years.

The number and diversity of respondents reflects just how important this topic is to young people in South Australia. It also showed how under-acknowledged it is as an issue across our community.

The surveys asked respondents to share information about their perceptions and experiences of menstruation, including questions around the timing, content and quality of menstruation education they had received at school.

Other survey questions asked how they accessed period products, what facilities were made available, and whether or not their menstruation affected their capacity to participate in various educational, sporting and social activities.

Regardless of their background, South Australian young people raised a number of complex issues relating to menstruation. They included, but were certainly not limited to, access to period products. Even those who could easily access period products reported a lack of adequate information to enable them to make informed choices about how to manage their period. This included not knowing how to use certain products, being too embarrassed to ask for help, and not knowing who to ask for support.

Others who said they felt they had sufficient knowledge, said they found it difficult to safely and regularly dispose of period products in the school or work environment due to inadequate or inaccessible facilities. These shortfalls ranged from a lack of discreet disposal bins in toilet booths to a lack of soap to wash their hands prior to inserting tampons or positioning pads. They also had to contend with strict school rules or policies dictating toilet use, along with the negative attitudes of teachers and peers, employers and colleagues that is frequently displayed – both male and female alike.

These experiences not only affect young people – both those doing well and those doing it tough – they also affect the relationships they have with important people in their lives, including their parents, carers, families, friends and partners, teachers, coaches and employers.

Having gathered more insights on the topic and explored the issues raised, I have become increasingly aware of the under acknowledged and unaddressed challenges that menstruation can present to South Australia's children and young people.

These include lack of participation in sport and social activities, which can have a negative impact on overall wellbeing.

Children and young people have many ideas based on their own experiences for what positive change on this issue looks like, including how these changes could benefit people of all ages.

While survey respondents recognised the importance of biological explanations of the menstrual cycle, they equally sought information and advice about the practical, social and cultural aspects of periods.

Given the wide-ranging impacts of menstruation on key aspects of a young person's life, the onus should be on all sectors across the state – education, business, health, and community – to recognise menstrual wellbeing and dignity as a systemic issue and one that is fundamental to children's rights, central to economic productivity and to achieving gender equity across the State.

Through publication of this report I hope to raise the issue of menstrual wellbeing as a significant area of gender equity policy; one that must be addressed to improve the participation, education and wellbeing outcomes of all young South Australians who menstruate.

It is time to address menstrual wellbeing and the current failings in our responses to menstrual awareness, menstrual education and menstrual management for all South Australian children and young people. We can no longer shrug off the impact of menstruation as an individual challenge or something to be dealt with within the family. It is patently clear that to improve menstrual wellbeing across our community we must acknowledge that it is a systemic gender equity and equal opportunity issue, and that because of this it needs a comprehensive systemic policy response.



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People



The Issue

Although nearly half of the world's population menstruate at some point in their lives, menstruation presents significant challenges when individuals lack the information, resources, infrastructure and social support they need to manage their menstrual health and wellbeing safely and with dignity.

In most countries and contexts around the world, menstruation has long been surrounded by stigma, misconceptions, myths and taboo. Policymaking processes, traditionally designed by and for adult men, have ignored what is typically considered a private 'women's' issue.

While further research is needed, there is growing evidence linking poor menstruation education and management with gender disparities and poor health and wellbeing outcomes that include barriers to participating in education and contributing to the workplace.¹

For the most part menstruation is largely overlooked in policies and practice, even in global strategies that have a specific focus on women's health. The World Health Assembly's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health 2016–2030 does not mention menstrual health, and neither has menstruation been considered as a factor influencing attendance at school. The lack of attention to menstruation highlights the prevalence of menstrual stigma, but also reflects an expectation that women and those who menstruate know what to do and must simply 'get over it' and 'soldier on'.

Many young people report facing barriers to managing their menstruation comfortably and confidently, with periods having significant impacts on their lives, restricting their attendance and full participation at school and work, in their social and cultural lives and limiting the opportunities available to them. This undermines many fundamental rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including the right to education (Articles 28 and 29), right to be healthy (Article 24), the right to play (Article 31) and access to employment and other opportunities to contribute to their communities.

In 2014, the United Nations Human Rights Council acknowledged the impacts of menstrual stigma and lack of menstrual health management on gender equality. This indicates a growing recognition that menstruation is not 'only' a 'women's issue', but rather a societal issue affecting women's fundamental human rights. It affects participation and opportunities, including rights to health, safety and dignity, gender equality, education and employment.

By recognising menstruation as central, rather than peripheral, to opportunity and participation and affecting all aspects of life and citizenship, there is scope to elevate menstruation as a key education, employment and health policy issue.

Evidence suggests that positive experiences of menstruation come from having access to high quality information, appropriate infrastructure and resources to support menstrual hygiene. These actions can also reduce menstrual taboos and stigma.² The long-reaching benefits of good menstrual management include ‘increased confidence, higher educational attainment, and ultimately, improved quality of life over the life course’.³

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of menstrual wellbeing, governments around the world have been slow to implement programs and practices.

South Australia’s current health and wellbeing policies do not adequately acknowledge menstrual wellbeing as a desired health outcome, or make a link between it and systemic gender disparities in the social, cultural and economic participation of children and young people across our communities.

It’s time to consider menstrual health and wellbeing as a systemic problem and develop sustainable and coordinated responses beyond the provision of products and facilities. Investing in building the confidence and comfort of young people in managing their periods can also equip them with the skills they need to overcome other gender-based inequity in their lives.

Families, parents and carers will continue to have significant influence on children’s lives and development, but there is a wider role and responsibility for the State to foster conditions in which children can thrive, be safe, and adequately understand their own development.

Many children and young people have told us that they do not have a significant and trusted adult to support their menstrual wellbeing, or do not feel confident in seeking support from the adults in their life. Therefore children and young people rely on schools to provide accurate information relating to key aspects of their health and development.

The South Australian government has enshrined this responsibility in the Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People. Under this framework children’s physical, mental and emotional health are critical population level outcomes to which government agencies and institutions are required to give effect through their policy and operational activities. This means that children must be equipped with the necessary information, skills and services to grow strong and lead happy, healthy lives.

While some young people have said they receive a comprehensive menstruation education, we have heard from thousands of young people that menstruation education is inconsistent within and across schools. They report that it does not start early enough, it is not meeting the health needs of all children and young people, is not available at all year levels, and is often only one lesson per year.

This is despite health and physical education programs, relationships and sexual health education programs and child safe programs being part of South Australia’s curriculum for some years. SHINE SA also offers well utilised curricula and professional development to support teachers and other education staff and counsellors in the delivery of relationships and sexual health education programs in a majority of public high schools.

Lack of comprehensive menstrual education means significant numbers of children and young people are not equipped to manage their period in a way that enables their full participation in sport, work, school and life.



What Can We Do?

To address the issue of menstrual wellbeing and make positive inroads into gender inequity and inequality across health, education, and employment, it is time to take action.

South Australia has a number of critical existing policy levers to influence action across education, health and community sectors. By listening to young people's diverse experiences and insights, we can implement policy solutions that enable safe and dignified menstrual management and improve lifelong health, and education attendance and wellbeing.

South Australia's Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach, for example, provides an existing framework for action to address barriers children and young people experience in relation to menstruation. The HiAP approach recognises that a broad range of social, cultural, political, economic and environmental determinants influence health outside of the health care system. As such, sectors and agencies outside of the Department for Health could be engaged and mobilised to introduce menstrual wellbeing as part of the response to HiAP.

We can also learn from the public policy responses to the issues of menstrual wellbeing and period poverty being developed in other parts of the world.

Research suggests that whilst product supply and infrastructure responses are part of the solution, the complex socio-economic nature of managing menstruation across an individual's life course requires a suite of reinforcing policies. Reducing or eliminating the financial cost of period products is a central policy platform, but other change is also needed across key sectors and institutions to address the social stigma and taboos surrounding menstruation.⁴

Many countries are undertaking analysis of the productivity benefits of positive menstruation management. This is particularly so in key environments such as schools and workplaces, where strategies that include menstrual leave policies are now being put in place.⁵

A recent Australian survey conducted by the Victorian Women's Trust found that more than half of respondents who menstruate (58%) said that a day off to rest would make their period a better experience every month. Whilst the effectiveness of menstrual leave policies have been debated across the world, individual employers in several countries, including the United States and India, have adopted corporate policies allowing women to take a paid day off during their period. In Japan and Korea, such leave is embedded in legislation.

Other workplace and government-funded initiatives include the pilot 'menstrual certification' program in Sweden. This pilot focuses more on framing menstruation as a work-related topic, and explicitly embedding it into current procedures relating to work environment and discrimination.

Since August 2018, all students at schools, colleges and universities in Scotland have had access to free period products. Then in 2020, Scotland went further and became the first country in the world to make period products free for all. The Scottish parliament passed the *Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill*, which places a legal duty on local authorities to make pads and tampons freely available to 'anyone who needs them' at designated public places such as community centres, youth clubs, and pharmacies.⁶

“ *In a society as rich as Scotland, no one should have to suffer the indignity of not having the means to meet their basic needs. We also want to continue to reduce the stigma and address the overarching gender equality and dignity issues that affect everyone who menstruates, regardless of their income.*’ (Scottish Communities Secretary Aileen Campbell)

Anecdotal reports in Scotland are showing that one by-product of the free provision is that students have become much more open, communicative and positive about menstruation’.

Another country recognising the need for change is the United Kingdom (UK). In 2019, the UK the government established a Period Poverty Taskforce with the primary aim of reducing stigma and shame surrounding menstruation through education, improving access to period products for all women and girls, and building data and evidence on menstruation.

Later that same year, measures to provide free period products in all schools, hospitals and police custody centres across England were announced.

In a first for the UK, menstrual health support has recently been made free through an initiative known as social prescribing; a process whereby General Practitioners, nurses or other primary care professionals can prescribe a range of non-clinical services. With input from patients and specialists in women's health, menstrual activist and educator, Kate Shepherd Cohen, developed a Menstrual Cycle Support (MCS) course designed to help alleviate menstrual suffering. It is now being offered within the UK's National Health Service via social prescribing.

In Australia, as of July 2020, the Victorian government became the first state or territory to recognise the need to eliminate the barriers to education that menstruation can cause, through provision of free pads and tampons for all students attending government schools. Under the initiative, public schools will also receive free sanitary collection bins and students will be taught how to manage their periods.

'PADS AND TAMPONS ARE JUST AS ESSENTIAL AS TOILET PAPER AND SOAP. SO FROM THIS WEEK, WE'LL START SUPPLYING THEM IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS – FREE OF CHARGE. IT'S AN AUSTRALIAN FIRST. AND IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO.'

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews

In 2020, the South Australian Department for Education undertook a small scale program to provide free pads and tampons in select schools and develop localised responses to period poverty. This followed on from previous small scale programs led by a number of charities who supply products and distribution machines at some schools. These initiatives must be supported financially and in policy so that they can grow to a more sustainable scale across the entire school system.

In 2020, the SA Best Party and SA Labor Party joined forces to introduce a private members bill to establish sanitary item dispensing machines in all public high schools. Public support is also being encouraged through a petition asking the State government to provide a systemic response to period poverty.

What is needed now is to raise awareness of the impact of menstruation and period poverty on wellbeing, participation and work and school attendance.

This report documents what thousands of South Australian children and young people told us about the impact of menstruation on wellbeing, participation and education. Importantly, it also presents suggestions on how to make a real difference to the issue of menstrual wellbeing now and in the future.





The Period Surveys

A total of 2,985 children and young people aged 7 to 22 years provided 3,267 responses to two period surveys undertaken between May and September 2020.

The high level of participation and engagement with the surveys, and the depth and detail of children and young people's responses, indicate that menstruation is an issue that young people rarely have an opportunity to talk about, despite it having a significant impact on many aspects of their lives.

Half the respondents were aged between 15 and 17 years and just under one third were aged 12 to 14 years. A smaller proportion of respondents were aged 18 to 22 years, while the remaining respondents were aged 7 to 11 years.

Of the children and young people who participated across the two surveys:

- 96% identified as female
- 1% as male
- 2% as non-binary
- 19% as part of the LGBTQIA+ community
- 14% as being from a culturally or linguistically diverse background
- 5% as living with disability
- 4% as having caring responsibilities at home; and
- 3% as being from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

Key Insights

- While most young people have period products at most of the time, 1 in 4 children and young people reported experiencing problems getting period products when they needed them. These problems arise due to the cost of products, simply forgetting to take a product out, a lack of knowledge about what product is suitable, shame associated with buying products, or a reliance on others for support.
- Menstruation-related barriers that limit young people's participation in school, work, sport or other physical activities include a lack of information, confidence and supportive adults, limited access to pain relief, and environments with inadequate sanitation facilities.
- Policy responses must ensure that as well as access to period products, there is also access to adequate bathroom and disposal facilities and comprehensive education about menstruation. The cultural and social norms and stigma existing at an individual, community and systems level preventing open discussion and normalisation of menstruation must also be addressed.
- Young people want to be equipped with more than an understanding of the biological cycle. They want to know about the practical management of periods. For example, how to use products safely, and how the social aspects of menstruation vary within different cultural contexts.
- Children and young people believe all young people, regardless of gender identity, should receive comprehensive menstruation education. This would normalise conversations about menstruation as a systemic issue of rights and equity instead of a 'women's' issue, thereby promoting empathy, respect and gender equality.
- Young people want formal menstruation education to start at a younger age and remain consistent and age-appropriate across all year levels so they feel prepared, comfortable and confident no matter what age they are when they get their first period.
- Primary schools should consistently teach students about periods and provide adequate toilets, soap and bins for students to manage their period safely and with dignity.

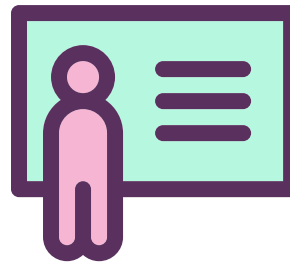
Recommendations

To create a more positive culture in relation to menstrual health and wellbeing, South Australia should adopt an integrated approach to menstrual awareness, menstrual education and menstrual management across health, education and wellbeing sectors.

Specifically it is recommended that South Australia:



Develop a Menstrual Wellbeing Policy as a core pillar of the Health in All Policy framework in relation to all services to adults, young people and children. The focus of the policy would be to look at the issue of menstrual wellbeing through the lens of gender equity and equality, and health literacy.



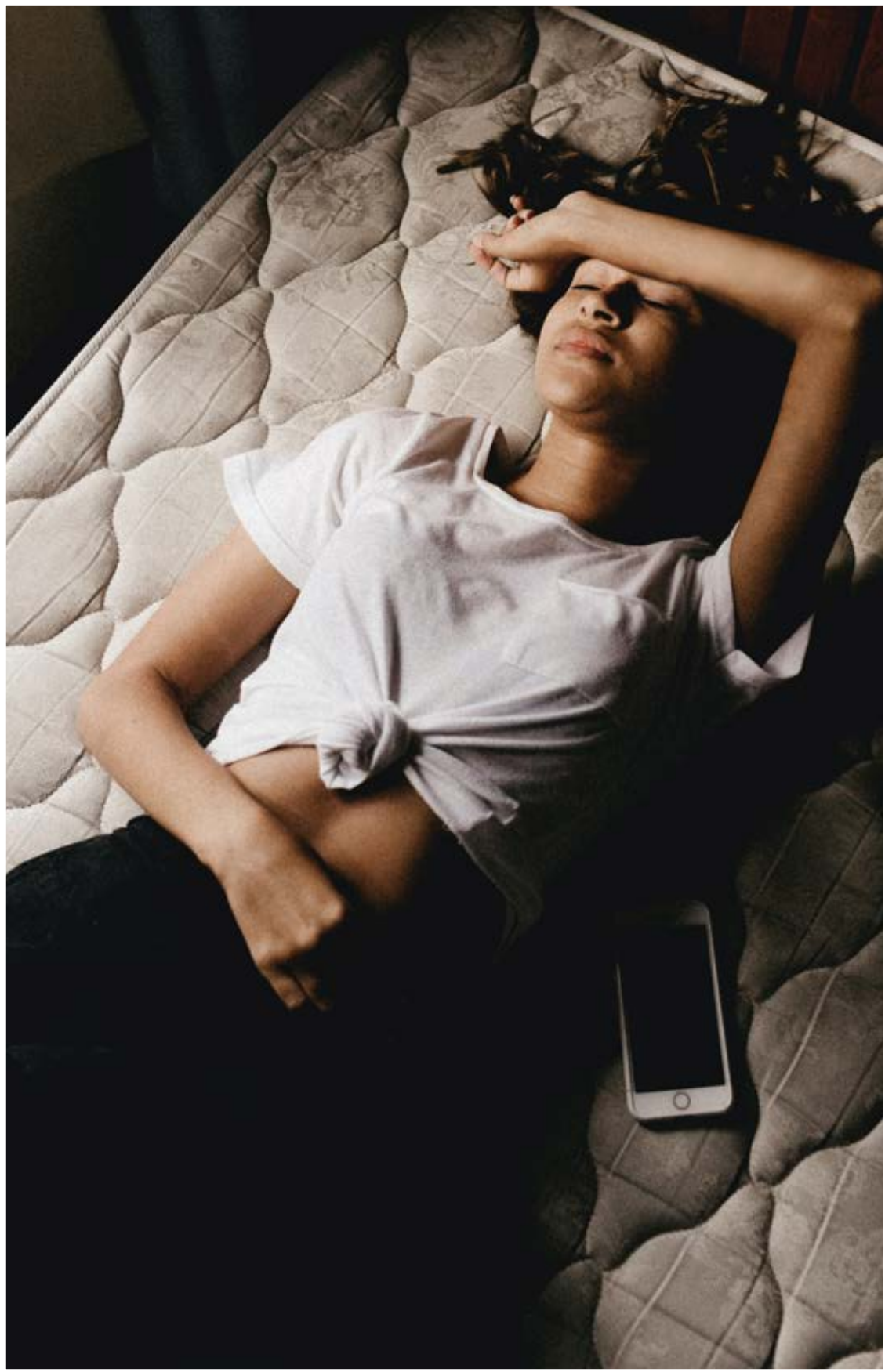
Review menstruation education to ensure all children, across primary and high schools, receive education beyond the biological cycle. This should include period management in day to day life, social and cultural aspects of menstruation, and practical information about products and support services available.



Formally recognise the barriers of menstruation to school attendance and develop best practice resources to support schools to use 'review and change where required procedures' in relation to bathroom access, sanitary bin supply and uniform policy.



Provide free period products to anyone who needs them at schools and designated public places such as community centres, youth facilities, libraries and chemists.



Impacts of Menstruation on Wellbeing

Children and young people want to address the social, economic, cultural and environmental barriers related to menstruation that impact on their wellbeing in school and in society more broadly. They have made it clear that improved wellbeing requires better menstruation education, universal access to period products and adequate facilities, as well as removal of the stigma around menstruation.

A large number of children and young people said that misconceptions and the taboo surrounding periods prevents them from having open discussions about menstruation. This can be at home, school, or in the community. They also said there was inadequate education and support, with most people who menstruate reporting that they are only being taught 'how to hide it' rather than 'how to manage it'.

They frequently reported not knowing enough about how to manage their period, including 'what to expect', 'what to do' and 'how to talk about it'.

This lack of information, along with the trivialisation and dismissal of symptoms related to menstruating culminated in shame, discomfort, confusion and fear. Many young people described

how unprepared they were for their first period: how they had 'no idea what was happening', felt 'scared' or 'freaked out' or were even left thinking they were 'going to die'.

Other young people have reported significant delays when seeking help for menstrual health conditions that have resulted in a range of negative impacts on their health, education, work, fertility and relationships.

The commonality of these experiences: not being informed, lacking confidence, experiencing levels of discomfort in managing their period, and the inability to talk about it with others, was staggering. Their experiences speak to what a difference a comprehensive and empowering education policy can make to period management, participation and adoption of help seeking behaviours.

'I WAS EXTREMELY INSECURE WHEN I FIRST GOT MY PERIOD AS I WAS WEARING PADS. THEY ARE THE WORST!! AS I WEAR TAMPONS NOW I AM SO CONFIDENT AND COMFORTABLE AND ACT AS IF IT IS A NORMAL DAY.'

Most children and young people reported at least one aspect of their lives being negatively impacted by menstrual pain, stigma, or lack of products or information. Despite this, many young people expressed a view that periods are just something that females 'must endure' and that there is an expectation they will 'get on with life'. Even if they struggled with pain or with using certain products, many reported that they 'don't wanna make a fuss'.

'I WAS TAUGHT WOMEN MUST SOLDIER ON DESPITE THE PAIN. I'VE ONLY TAKEN A FEW DAYS OFF SCHOOL FROM THE PAIN, BECAUSE I STRUGGLED TO GET OUT OF BED.'

For some young people, the stigma and emotional stress associated with menstruation is significant. Children and young people describe shame, self-consciousness, feelings of being silenced, fears of making a mess or enduring discomfort, and the panic that comes with the possibility that others might be able to see products and know they are menstruating. These concerns were particularly compounded when children and young people were already doing it tough, or felt they didn't have adequate education. Particularly in relation to what to expect in terms of pain or other physical symptoms, and the impact a period can have on mood, diet and energy levels.

Some children and young people described positive experiences with adults or teachers who were kind, understanding and supportive, readily offering information and products. However, many children and young people reported being questioned, ignored, humiliated and ridiculed by adults or peers in relation to their period. They described the direct impact this had on their wellbeing, not only while they were menstruating, but also when they weren't.

'BULLYING IS HUGE, ESPECIALLY IN THE PRE-TEEN AGE GROUP, BOYS WOULD SAY THINGS LIKE 'ARE YOU ON YOUR PERIOD – YOU'RE BEING A BITCH' AND OTHER EMBARRASSING AND DEROGATORY REMARKS TOWARDS GIRLS AND THEIR PERIODS. FOR THIS REASON I FELT INCREDIBLY UNCOMFORTABLE AROUND MY PERIOD, WHEN I DID, OR EVEN WHEN I DIDN'T HAVE IT.'

Both overt and covert forms of bullying were seen to contribute to real feelings of exclusion among those who menstruate or are menstruating. Young people reported either experiencing or witnessing others being 'laughed at', 'teased' or 'shamed' for their period by both peers and adults.

'THE PAIN CAN BE UNBEARABLE, TAMPONS AND PADS CAN BE ON SHORTAGE. YOU FEEL VERY UNCLEAN. YOU MAY NOT HAVE A SPARE PAIR OF UNDERWEAR. YOU WORRY PEOPLE CAN SEE THE BLOOD. YOU STOP CONCENTRATING AT SCHOOL AND SOMETIMES FRIENDS WILL TELL OTHERS YOU'RE ON YOUR PERIOD TO EMBARRASS YOU.'

While young people described the general impacts of period pain on their wellbeing, many respondents focused on the specific impacts of having their menstrual pain dismissed as 'trivial'. Not being taken seriously by adults as well as peers was cited as one of the key reasons why young people feel the need to keep periods secretive and discreet and 'just get on with it'. Children and young people described how a lack of understanding among teachers makes it uncomfortable to ask if they can sit out of a particular activity, the most common being PE lessons and swimming.

'WHENEVER WE TOLD THE TEACHERS WE COULDN'T SWIM BECAUSE WE HAD OUR PERIODS THEY WOULD GET MAD AT US AND GIVE US HARD WORK TO DO IN THE LESSON! LIKE THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE US, WHICH I REALLY DON'T UNDERSTAND. I MEAN WHO WOULD WANT TO MISS OUT ON SWIMMING???'

Many noted the considerable amount of energy it takes to 'soldier on' and avoid 'doing anything' that makes it obvious they are on their period. Even where periods did not necessarily affect attendance at school or other activities, the quality of a child or young person's participation was often impacted due to the feeling more self-conscious, tired, irritable or 'prone to becoming sick'. They reported that managing their menstruation also reduced their capacity to concentrate and be productive, which sometimes put a strain on their relationships.

Wellbeing was also impacted by problems arising from a reliance on parents, carers or another person in their household to cover the cost of the products and be willing to buy them on their behalf. They described being too

scared or embarrassed to ask for products (even from their parents) 'even though they knew it shouldn't be' uncomfortable. While discomfort was more commonly reported in relation to male carers, many children and young people described their discomfort in asking 'anyone' for support. For transgender young people, feeling anxious about asking for products was particularly pronounced.

" *'I only had a father when I first started mine and I didn't want to ask him to get me some. But then I moved out. I prefer using tampons but use pads because my new carer is old fashioned and I don't want to ask her to get me tampons, because then I would feel like she would say no.'*

Many described how their family or living situation impacted on their access to period products, with several young people drawing on their experience of homelessness and poverty. They also commented on the ways in which COVID-19 has exacerbated existing challenges accessing period products, including difficulty affording products, shop opening hours and shops not having products in stock.

" *'During the limits of COVID-19 especially when living with other females in the house / finance issues / not sure what to buy and buying the wrong things.'*

Children and young people raised issues with transport that made getting to and from the shops difficult, including being unable to get to shops independently. Even those with a safe way to get to and from the shops described significant barriers once they were in the shop. Particularly the embarrassment of being seen buying period products. Others felt shame and uncertainty about what to buy because they did not know what product was 'right' for them.

" *'They're quite expensive but not too much. But it's just embarrassing going to buy it out in public especially when a male serves you.'*



Impacts of Menstruation on Participation

Most young people reported missing out on participating in a range of activities they enjoy when they have their period. Reasons given included not having a period product, but also broader social, cultural, environmental and economic factors that limited their ability to engage and participate, even when they did have ready access to products.

It was common for young people to avoid staying at their friends' houses or wearing clothes they'd typically like to wear to social events, particularly white or light colour clothing, or clothing that is too tight. For those who did socialise, many tried to avoid being around less familiar people or attending unfamiliar places or 'activities with limited toilet access'. Young people also described how their cultural and religious practices, particularly prayers, changed during menstruation.

The most common response was that menstruation affected young people's capacity to participate in sport or engage in other physical activities. This included missing PE lessons at school, sporting commitments outside of school and 'working out'. Significant numbers reported missing out on playing sport because they did not have easy access to a period product. Even those who had reliable access to period products described avoiding physical activity due to their fears of leaking or concerns about how to use and trust certain products.

'I THINK IT IS HARD TO BE FULLY INVOLVED IN PE AS IT IS HARD TO TRUST THE PRODUCT YOU ARE USING WITH SUCH SUDDEN AND CONSTANT MOTION.'

The impacts of periods on swimming and other water activities was often mentioned. Many described this as being scared of leaking in the water or that they don't like using tampons or aren't comfortable doing so. This was either because they didn't know how to use tampons or because they were too scared to try.

Others reported a lack of energy, severe cramps, pain and other physical symptoms such as headaches, vomiting, and nausea being barriers to their participation in physical activities. Whatever the reason, children and young people recognised a lack of comfort or confidence managing their period as something that was compromising their fitness levels and capacity to engage in physical activity.

Some young people lacked practical information about what you can do and how to use products while menstruating. Many young people believe they should not swim or play sport while they have their period. Although it is essential that young people who menstruate are not pressured into 'soldiering on', it is also critical that they are correctly informed so that their opportunities to participate in everyday activities are not unnecessarily limited.

- “ *Sometimes I don't dance as the idea of using tampons kind of scares me and I am not comfortable using them. Swimming also for that reason.* ”
- “ *I avoid all sport because it's uncomfortable and the fast paced exercise makes me dizzy due to blood loss as well as headaches, dizziness and nausea being some of my symptoms. I also can't move a lot on my first and or second day due to pain so I stay home from school very often.* ”

While some young people only reported avoiding 'high intensity' activity while menstruating, others described how their severe period pain and discomfort made any kind of movement difficult. Some young people described being bedridden due to the discomfort of 'moving too much', 'sitting in certain positions' or 'standing'. They described the frustration of missing out on a range of commitments and experiences as a result of having to 'change schedules' based on their period. Some young people said they avoided leaving the house when they had their period, unless it was absolutely necessary, mainly due to pain, discomfort or a fear of leaking.

- “ *During the early days, I try to avoid moving because of my cramps. Unfortunately, at school it is very hard to stay in a consistently cramp-free position.* ”
- “ *I avoid moving..... my cramps get really bad so that I have to skip school and do nothing for a couple of days..... I avoid going to other people's houses, parties. I don't avoid swimming because the salt water (beach) helps relax muscles and therefore assists with cramps.* ”

Young people who reported being employed described the impact of menstruation on their ability to work. They described avoiding shifts due to not having a period product, or to a lack of time to access a bathroom or other safe, clean place to change products regularly enough. Others described missing work due to the stigmatising attitudes of colleagues, or because of high levels of pain and discomfort, particularly in 'fast paced' work environments where they had to be 'on their feet' for several hours.

- “ *I try to avoid working as I may not have access to a toilet at any time, which can be an issue with leaking and needing to change a tampon. I also prefer not to exercise while on my period.* ”

This can lead to significant social and financial costs that cause further anxiety and stress, ultimately reducing concentration and productivity. The choice to miss work, rather than try to manage their period in unsuitable environments, impacts on the wellbeing, productivity, learning and opportunities available to young people.

Children and young people from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds shared many of the same issues and experiences as other South Australian children and young people. However, there were certain activities unique to their religion or cultural background that they were 'not allowed to do' during their period. These included praying, attending usual places of worship, eating certain foods, touching religious symbols and abiding by culturally specific norms that reinforce menstruation as taboo.

- “ *Not allowed to go near the space where we pray. Not allowed to touch things before taking a shower. Not allowed to move a lot.* ”

Not being able to participate in cultural life was considered problematic and many did not think they were adequately informed about why these historical, cultural and religious taboos needed to be followed.

- “ *I didn't tell my parents for a year. In my culture it's like a taboo.* ”



Impacts of Menstruation on School Attendance

Children and young people explained their menstruation-related absence from school in terms of structural barriers. These included strict rules or policies dictating when students can use the bathroom during the school day; inadequate bathroom and disposal facilities; difficulty navigating lengthy processes to obtaining a period product, whether because of their cost, because they forgot to pack a product, or were fearful of asking others for help.

Difficulty managing pain and accessing pain relief, as well as attitudinal factors such as a lack of understanding or negative attitudes amongst teachers and peers, also had a significant impact on a young person's comfort and confidence at school. These factors often contributed to school absences or to reduced concentration while in class.

Significant numbers of children and young people reported that they missed school due to their period. Most of these young people reported missing less than 5 days per year. However, a smaller, but not insignificant number reported missing more than 20 days each year. For these young people, their lost school days meet the threshold for chronic absenteeism.

Particular groups of young people were more likely to report missing school due to menstruation. This indicates that barriers to menstrual education, products and support impact different groups of young people in unique and often unequal ways. Young people who identified as having a disability or being from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background reported the highest number of days absent from school.

Young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds more frequently reported not attending school due to not having period products available.

They were most likely to report the cost of products as the reason for not having one ('period products are expensive') when compared to other factors, such as 'not having the products I needed with me'. When compared with other young people they were also more likely to report being without access to products more frequently.

“ *Many girls skip days on school due to having their periods because it is too difficult to deal with at school, and you don't feel as comfortable, than in your own home.*”

“ *I don't go to school when I'm on it, as I don't know how to sneak stuff into the bathroom. I take the pill so I try to get my period in the holidays.*”

A recent report by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) on the correlation between school attendance and school achievement found that the effects of absence negatively accumulate over time and affect future years of schooling. Consistent with other studies of chronic absenteeism the AITSL study found that absence, irrespective of absence type, has a 'compounding negative impact on academic performance'.⁷ Missing school is not simply 'missing days' but rather missing key opportunities for learning, play and building positive relationships.

As a 2013 study by the Telethon Kids Institute put it, 'every day counts and there is no 'safe' threshold for absences'.⁸ The same study found that female secondary students started out slightly ahead of male students in terms of attendance in Year 7 (by 0.9 percentage points). However, this gap reduced throughout secondary school by 0.6 percentage points for each year so that by Year 10 the average school attendance rate for female students was 1 percentage point lower than their male counterparts.

Despite this, menstruation is not investigated or even mentioned in these studies as a possible cause for student absences. Rather, absences are commonly explained in terms of family circumstances, socio-economic status, or drug and alcohol issues. This highlights the need for a much greater understanding of the range of social, cultural, economic and environmental factors that currently make attendance at school uncomfortable and unfeasible for children and young people who menstruate.

Both official and unofficial school rules and policies often restrict student access to bathrooms or lockers at certain times of the school day. Children and young people described not being allowed to leave class at certain times, sometimes even when they announced that they were on their period in front of the class – something most students were uncomfortable doing.

Some students described school toilets being locked during lesson times. This leaves students to go during their break times, often leading to long queues that make it harder to change a product quickly or discreetly.

Of greater concern, young people described the failure of some schools to understand student health needs and provide support for the basic necessity of toilet use. Instead access to a toilet is being used as a discipline issue, rather than an issue of dignity. Their responses highlight the irony that schools regulate student access to toilets to minimise disruptions to learning, but this actually contributes to student absence. Others mentioned the frustration of schools keeping certain classrooms locked during break times, particularly if period products are kept there.

- “ ‘We have strict toilet policies in our school. Only 1 girl at a time can go during class time from the whole school (mine is about 900-1,000 students) which makes queue times ridiculous. And you can't take your bag with you to the toilet during class time.’
- “ ‘In high school (and even primary school), a lot of teachers wouldn't allow students to go to the bathroom during class – especially classes that were straight after break times. This made for a very uncomfortable situation: do I sit here and bleed through my underwear/clothing and potentially leave a mark on the seat I'm on? Or do I tell my teacher the issue, even though it makes me uncomfortable to share such personal information?’

Where school bags are not permitted in classrooms, students must go to their lockers to retrieve products from their bags. Then because they can't carry their bags to the bathroom they have to try and discreetly retrieve a product from their bag and carry it to the bathroom unnoticed. They wrote about the shame of being seen taking a product out of their school bag and smuggling it to the toilet via the sleeve of a uniform without attracting embarrassing comments or unwanted attention from others.

- “ ‘A friend of mine dropped an unopened pad in front of my all girls, grade 9 year level and everyone made fun of her for it. There is a huge stigma around it.’

Inadequate bathroom facilities or bins to dispose of period products at school was another issue children and young people identified, particularly in primary schools. Students reported an insufficient number of toilets or sanitary bins being available and how this caused queueing for particular bathroom stalls, while also revealing when a student was having their period.

More broadly, there were also concerns about 'dirty' and 'gross' bathrooms, unisex bathrooms, and bathrooms with too many windows. Some schools do not provide soap, making it difficult for young people to change their products as regularly or hygienically as advised.

“ *There was a time where the school's cleaners didn't actually change the sanitary bins for a very long time at our school. The bins were overflowing so it made me feel uncomfortable to go in and change my pad or even use the toilet at all. Also teachers (especially the female ones surprisingly) tend to not care and don't let the students go to their lockers even if you tell them you need a pad.*”

Children and young people reported that the processes currently in place to access period products at school are embarrassing, inconsistent and difficult to navigate. Young people described the significant amount of time it took to get a period product at school: whether waiting in line to see a student nurse, visiting the front office or student services, or waiting for a teacher (with whom they feel comfortable) to become available, so they can try ‘catching that teacher on their own’ without anyone else hearing.

Even when students were allowed to leave class to go to the bathroom, the geographical distance between classrooms and bathrooms added to what is already a lengthy and shameful process of accessing products at school. In some cases students were required to walk across the school campus. Many felt this was time they could not afford, particularly when they were wanting to use or change their product urgently to avoid leaking or staining of their uniform.

“ *You have to go to the front office and talk to an older lady and ask for a period product. She then scolds you and says ‘you should have some with you.’*”

In addition to the fear of being overheard by other students, survey respondents also expressed their past experiences or concerns about potentially being reprimanded or bullied by staff or peers because they were menstruating. Hostile attitudes from teachers added to the embarrassment of asking for help, with young people reporting being questioned or humiliated by being asked why they took so long in the toilet upon their return. On top of not being allowed pain medication at school, students wrote about having their pain dismissed as trivial and insignificant.

‘NOT TELL US TO ‘JUST GET OVER IT’ BECAUSE 7 GIRLS IN MY YEAR HAVE BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH ENDOMETRIOSIS AND PCOS, AND THEY GET ANNOYED AT US FOR MISSING A COUPLE OF LESSONS!’

It was less common for students to report vending machines in school toilets where pads and tampons could be purchased. Machines were typically only available in certain toilet blocks and required students to be able to afford to purchase these products, as well as have the right coins on them to be able to do so.

Some students described going through the process of accessing products only to find that the products their school provided were insufficient: they were either not given enough products to meet their needs, or the supplied products were too light, too heavy or not their preferred – for example, a tampon being supplied instead of a pad, or vice versa.

While many children and young people raised the inadequacy of toilet facilities as a barrier to safe and healthy period management – even those specifically designed for females – male toilets are far less likely to be built with menstruation in mind. This places transgender young people in the difficult position of having to choose between either managing their period safely, or using the toilet that affirms their gender identity.

Having to wear light-coloured uniforms, particularly school dresses, was also reported as problematic when students have their periods. Young women described the anxiety or fear associated with having a leak that would show up and stain their uniform while at school. Schools do not commonly have spare uniforms to provide, leaving many respondents with no option but to go home when this happens.

‘ALLOWING ME TO WEAR P.E. INSTEAD OF HAVING TO WEAR A DRESS WHERE IT IS EASIER TO SEE IF IT BLEEDS THROUGH.’



WHAT
WOULD
MAKE
THINGS
BETTER?

Comprehensive Menstrual Education

Children and young people understood that the discomfort, myths and taboo surrounding periods is prevalent at a level that goes well beyond school. However, they saw the critical importance that schools and teachers play in preparing children and young people for the future, fostering in them an understanding of their own development that includes knowing about menstruation before it begins.

As such, they thought it was important for teachers to be supported to feel confident and comfortable teaching about menstruation in a comprehensive and meaningful way. Of particular importance was guidance for teachers around taking a holistic approach to teaching about menstruation; one that goes well beyond a purely biological approach to capturing the diversity of social, cultural and historical aspects of menstruation both in Australia and around the world.

Children and young people saw these improvements to menstruation education as key to reducing stigma around it. Thereby ensuring access to products, healthcare, pain management and good hygiene, as well as to information and treatment options for other period related illnesses or health conditions. Addressing the significant gaps they identified in their current menstruation education was key to improving the lives and comfort of everyone. Not only for young people themselves, but also

for their fellow students, parents and carers, teachers and employers impacted at all schools, organisations and workplaces.

At whatever stage of a young person's education they were taught about menstruation, it was common for respondents to describe these lessons as lacking in depth and practical information. Some young people reported that their school covered only 'the very basics' and then 'told us to look it up'. This highlights the significance other sources of information provide including that of their peers, family, books, magazines, health professionals and media, including advertisements and social media. Yet young people also reported varied levels of knowledge about these sources, and about the concerns they had regarding the way in which menstruation is typically presented, particularly in the media.

'AT MY SCHOOL, OUR SEX ED CLASS WAS VERY BROAD WITH SO MUCH TO COVER... PERIODS WAS A BRIEF CHAT AND THAT WAS ALL. WE DIDN'T HAVE A LOT OF TIME TO COVER EVERYTHING.'

Young people understood that biological explanations of menstruation are important in understanding 'what periods are' and 'why they happen'. However, there was a real sense that this information was limited and without more detailed and practical explanations and opportunities to discuss the 'real life applications' of this knowledge, including 'how to deal with periods', and how people experience menstruation differently.

Young people's suggestions for how to improve period education at school included being taught how to have respectful conversations about menstruation, how to access and use products, and 'what to do if you don't have any products with you'. They described the need for information that covers what to expect 'other than blood' including the range of potential physiological symptoms young people experience, such as abdominal pain, cramps, headaches, changes in mood, energy levels and dietary preferences.

“ It was very biologically focused, specifically about reproduction. I would have liked to learn more about managing periods, such as the different products available apart from pads and tampons. I didn't learn anything about cramping or how alarming it would look to find blood all over my underwear that first time. I think some visuals, even if it was confronting, would have better prepared me. Also learning about discharge, because I thought I had an infection and went to the doctor and only then did I learn it was normal.’

'TEACH US ABOUT ALL OUR OPTIONS SO WE CAN MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS THAT BEST SUIT US. BE PROFESSIONAL, DON'T MAKE FACES, BE WARM AND KIND, ESPECIALLY TO THE LITTLE ONES. CONTINUE TEACHING ABOUT THIS KIND OF STUFF EVEN IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOL. I FIND THAT THIS SORT OF STUFF IS TAUGHT IN YEARS 2-4 AND BY THE TIME YOU ACTUALLY GET YOUR PERIOD, YOU'VE FORGOTTEN.'

Young people almost universally advocated for everyone, regardless of their gender identity, to receive a comprehensive menstruation education. Most young people expressed hope that teaching everyone about menstruation, particularly boys and young men, would normalise menstruation, open up important conversations and increase maturity, empathy, kindness and gender equality. This would also help to address the embarrassment and fear of being bullied or teased about menstruation, which creates barriers to open discussion about the full range of considerations required.

“ So many boys grow up to have no understanding of periods, which can make them unsympathetic in the workforce and in relationships, this negatively impacts the people around them who have periods.’

“ Lots of boys on social media apps will talk about them in a nasty way, which makes me uncomfortable and kinda self-conscious in a way, periods, etc. should be out on social medias more, making sure people know that it's okay and that it's not weird.’

Young people stressed the importance of ensuring all students are informed about menstruation in a meaningful and practical way, and regardless of whether boys and girls are in the same classroom. A proportion of respondents advocated for single gender classes because they felt separating students would enable lessons to be more practical and detailed, less embarrassing, and perhaps ultimately more useful.

**'IT WAS LESS
EMBARRASSING TO BE
TAUGHT IN SINGLE GENDER
CLASSES. HOWEVER,
IT'S ESSENTIAL FOR ALL
GENDERS TO LEARN ABOUT
PERIODS SO THEY CAN
SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH
PERIODS THROUGHOUT
THEIR LIFE'**

“ I know boys need to be educated, but split classrooms for more explicit teaching on how girls can handle it would be really useful because it would feel like a safe space to ask questions!’

When describing their ideal classroom environments for learning about periods, children and young people described how their teacher's level of comfort influences their own level of comfort. The more comfortable their teacher is, the more comfortable students are. Conversely, where a teacher is visibly uncomfortable or appears 'disgusted' by menstruation or period products, students are more likely to feel embarrassed and find it difficult to engage.

“ A teacher I had in year 4 was very unprofessional when teaching us about pads. She made a disgusted face the whole time which made us all feel very odd... I did however have one teacher who thought of a clever idea to make a box and give EVERYONE a slip of paper to write a question if they wanted. She then made everyone write anything on there even if it was just a greeting then put their paper in the box so no one felt uncomfortable. The next lesson, she would read out and answer the questions. This was very useful.’

Positive Portrayal in the Media

Children and young people noted that it was rare for periods to be portrayed in the media. Where they did see representations of menstruation, it was most commonly in advertising for period products.

Young people described their impressions of how periods were portrayed in the media as negative and unnatural, ‘gross’, disgusting and shameful. By upholding silence around menstruation, dominant narratives in advertising perpetuate the belief that periods are something to be avoided and kept secret.

“ *The media does not show what a period is really like, especially in younger females. We do not sit in a meadow of daisies, wear white clothing or pretend that life is all sunshine and rainbows. We can be very moody, in a lot of pain and sometimes over life.* ”

Young people described media representations of menstruation as unrealistic, inaccurate and stigmatising, either exaggerating or dismissing the reality of pain, and often making it seem like pads and tampons actually solve pain. There was also a common perception that media representations reinforce gendered stereotypes about emotions, behaviours, and appearances, portraying women as ‘dirty’, ‘emotional’, ‘hysterical’ or ‘irrational’.

“ *It’s also not acceptable to just start talking about periods even among women in the media unless it’s some education documentary. The women often keep hushed voices and act like it’s a big conspiracy, and the end of the world if someone were to hear them mention a period.* ”

Some young people described the very real impact media has in its portrayal of periods as ‘either a punchline or a stereotype’ of how young people see themselves and interpret their own experiences. As one person commented, periods are represented as something ‘very gross’ rather than ‘a normal bodily process’ and this ‘creates distance between girls and their own bodies’.

Young people also noted that positive representations and open discussions are becoming more common, and that there is a normalising of periods on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. While many young people noted these positive representations, they also recognised that they are not the norm.

‘WOMEN ARE PORTRAYED AS BEING IRRATIONALLY EMOTIONAL ON THEIR PERIOD, AND I THINK THEY ARE PORTRAYED AS WEIRD OR DIRTY BY SOME MEN.’

‘THE MEDIA IS CONTROLLED BY MEN SO IT’S A MALE VIEW ON WHAT IT’S LIKE IN THE END. NOT OUR ACTUAL LIVED EXPERIENCE’

Knowing When to See a Doctor

Many young people described how their period pain affected their lives and limited their opportunities to participate in activities they enjoy.

For others, a normalisation of pain in the absence of adequate information and support led to significant health implications.

Many reported not realising how bad their pain was, or how many options existed in terms of period products or pain management. They assumed others were experiencing the same thing because they had not been taught about the diversity of experiences and what constitutes a 'normal' or 'healthy' amount of pain.

Many were unable to access the necessary support they needed until they built up the courage to speak to others about their experiences, and this could sometimes be many years after their first period.

'MOST DAYS I'M IN BED DUE TO ENDOMETRIOSIS. I WAS 20 BEFORE THEY FOUND OUT THAT I HAD ENDOMETRIOSIS AND I HAD BEEN SUFFERING SINCE I WAS 9, BUT NOT ONE DOCTOR BELIEVED MY PAIN.'

Children and young people not only want to be taught 'how things work' but also what to do, particularly 'if things go wrong'. This included being informed about when they might need to consider seeing a health professional, and how contraception can help regulate periods. They also wanted more information about variations in the colour of menstrual blood and what is considered 'regular' or 'irregular', healthy or potentially unhealthy.

'EDUCATION SHOULD REALLY GO MORE IN DEPTH ABOUT WHAT IS A NORMAL AND ABNORMAL PERIOD CYCLE AND HOW MUCH PAIN IS TOO MUCH. THIS WILL REALLY HELP YOUNG GIRLS RECOGNISE WHEN THEY MIGHT HAVE A PERIOD RELATED CONDITION SUCH AS ENDOMETRIOSIS FOR EXAMPLE, AND GET THAT INVESTIGATED SOONER [RATHER] THAN LATER.'

Inclusive Education

Children and young people highlighted that it is not only girls or women who menstruate. They focused on the experiences of transgender men and non-binary young people to highlight the importance of properly informing and educating all children and young people about menstruation.

Others wanted to see more gender-neutral language, and for menstruation education to be more inclusive, covering 'how non-binary people or transgender people fit into the period world'.

“ *Use more gender neutral language to show that it's okay to be a boy/non binary etc. and have a period! Also more info about practicalities of dealing with periods would be good for young people.* ”

Respondents described how discrimination due to gender identity can prevent non-binary and transgender young people from accessing the information and support they need. When menstruation is only considered a 'women's issue', the significant and unique impacts on these young people's lives can be overlooked.

Transgender and non-binary young people described barriers and considerations unique to their own experiences, including how these were made particularly difficult when menstruation is defined as a 'woman's' experience or issue. For these young people who are already struggling to have their identity respected, the emotional and physical aspects of menstruation can be a significant source of heightened anxiety and embarrassment.

Transgender and non-binary young people described how having their period, from thinking about it to buying or using products, magnified their gender dysphoria. Many reported being afraid to buy period products or talk about menstruation. They also described their fear around seeking help from others because of how society and other people might view them, including being misgendered.

“ *As a transgender male I was too embarrassed to go and get something that many consider a 'female hygiene' product. I also feel as if people will see me as 'dirty' for buying them and needing them, presumably because I'm currently on my period* ”

“ *As a trans male, it's difficult to speak up about needing them.* ”

'HOW TO DEAL WITH PERIODS AS A TRANS MAN, OR THE LACK OF PERIODS AS A TRANS WOMAN WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD TO LEARN MORE ABOUT.'

Affordable Products

Children and young people consistently spoke about the importance of making period products free and accessible. Responses highlight that products are currently unaffordable, leaving many to experience the shame and exclusion commonly associated with ‘going without’.

Some respondents drew on their own lived experience of being unable to afford products, while others shared their perceptions and observations. Whatever their own experience, respondents overwhelmingly felt that no one ought to be forced to choose between period products and meeting other basic needs.

“ *There’s been points in my life where I couldn’t afford period products and I don’t believe anyone should have to feel unclean, uncomfortable and ashamed to ask for help. It should be something that vulnerable people can access for free.*”

‘IT’S A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT TO HAVE DIGNITY, AND WHEN YOU FEEL UNCLEAN IT FEELS AS THOUGH YOU HAVE LOST YOUR DIGNITY. EVERY PERSON WHO HAS A PERIOD SHOULD BE ABLE TO ACCESS PERIOD PRODUCTS.’

Those who described themselves in the ‘fortunate’ position of being able to afford products themselves expressed their concern and empathy toward those who may not be as lucky, particularly those experiencing homelessness or living in poverty.

Many children and young people reported having problems getting period products when they needed them. They elaborated on a range of social, cultural and financial issues that included living situations, safety and transport issues, the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation, and how these can all be significant barriers to consistent and reliable access to period products.

After being ‘caught out’ without the products on them when needed, the most common reason for not having period products was cost. Children and young people described the financial impact managing periods has beyond the cost of just period products. For example, the cost of pain medication and contraceptives.

Period Management at School

Children and young people want period products to be provided at school in a non-stigmatising, universal way that is well-known. They also want wash and bathroom facilities to improve so that they meet reasonable hygiene standards. This included increasing the number of sanitary bins, making soap available and cleaning bathroom facilities more regularly.

'PROVIDING MORE SANITARY BINS SO THEY DON'T GET FULL. ALLOWING GIRLS TO GO TO THE BATHROOM WITHOUT THEM HAVING TO SAY THEY'RE ON THEIR PERIOD. FULL LENGTH MIRRORS SO YOU CAN CHECK IF YOU'RE LEAKING. BETTER ACCESSIBILITY IN CASE YOU FORGOT. (EG. A SIGN 'IF YOU NEED A PAD GO TO THE SSO)'

There was a strong belief among respondents that school students should be allowed to go to the bathroom when they need to, without being questioned by their teacher and even if this is soon after recess or lunch time.

They wanted school bathrooms to be left unlocked during lesson times so that they could change period products as regularly as necessary. They also want school classrooms to be left unlocked during break times if that is where period products are kept.

'IF WE ASK AND THE TEACHERS REPLY 'YOU SHOULD HAVE GONE AT BREAK' [THAT] IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH. THEY KNOW WE MIGHT HAVE OUR PERIODS AND MAYBE WE NEED TO CHANGE A TAMPON SUDDENLY. I THINK THEY JUST NEED TO HAVE A KINDER MORE OPEN MIND.'

“ ‘So many times I have needed to go to the bathroom during class to change a pad or tampon or just to check that I haven't leaked all over my uniform. Lots of teachers, especially the male ones, will insist that I simply should have gone during recess or lunch time. This is highly impractical because you cannot put your period on a schedule. Men (and some women) need to be more educated on teenage girls having periods - it's always awkward whenever you bring up the word 'period' in front of a man, and that should not be the case' ”

Many children and young people would like to have the option of wearing their PE uniform at certain times during their period, mainly as this uniform is more comfortable than their school dress, which is often lighter in colour. They also suggested that schools keep a range of spare uniforms available so that students are not forced to go home if they bleed onto their uniform.

“ *Have spare clothing available in all sizes so it is not embarrassing when after bleeding through clothes, we don't stand out so much for being in a ridiculously oversized uniform, adding to the humiliation as everyone knows!*”

Other respondents focused on the difficulty of managing their period pain at school. They would like schools to allow students to use heat packs (that schools could provide) or take pain relief medication without being judged and without having to seek parental permission every time.

‘BEING MORE INCLUSIVE AND MORE EDUCATIONAL WOULD HAVE HELPED. FREE PERIOD PRODUCTS AND FREE PAIN MEDICATION OR EVEN HEAT BAGS AT SCHOOL TO TEACH GIRLS THAT IT IS OKAY TO TREAT THEIR PERIOD PAIN - EVEN AT SCHOOL. AND TO TEACH BOYS TO USE LESS NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS AND NOT TO COMPLAIN WHEN GIRLS OR OTHERS GET TO USE HEAT BAGS. ETC’

Understanding Period Products

Children and young people described their need for more practical and comprehensive information about period products.

This included knowing what the full range of products are, what they do, what to ‘start with’ and what is the most suitable to use for various flow rates experienced throughout their menstrual cycle. They also want to know when and how to use each product, and how often on average each one needs to be changed.

They said receiving a comprehensive menstruation education about the variety of products available for use is key to managing their hygiene, health, safety and wellbeing, as well as influencing their capacity to participate in the full range of social and physical activities they enjoy.

Disposable pads and tampons were the two products most commonly taught about at school. However, even knowledge about these products was limited, and much of the practical side of product use was left up to students’ imaginations, including how often to change products.

This was particularly the case for tampons. Many young people expressed uncertainty and reservation about using tampons. Many did not know how to insert a tampon correctly and were nervous about doing so. In particular, it was common for children and young people attending religious schools to report that their teachers or parents would often cast moral

judgment on the use of tampons, which they considered to be ‘invasive’; or they did not mention tampons being an option at all.

“ *‘Products such as tampons and moon cups weren’t discussed. Sense of shame and secrecy was implied. Made to seem like an inconvenience and dirty thing at school. Also the demo pads they used looked like nappies and weren’t inline with current products. Lucky I had a good education through my family.’*

Many children and young people wanted more information about what can be used other than pads, liners or tampons. They were particularly interested in reusable and sustainable options, wanting more information about products like period cups and period underwear.

Beyond the practical use of individual products, children and young people also described wanting to know at a broader level ‘what to use when’, including what product was best at night time, and what to do if you don’t have a product. They wanted to be more informed about the risks or ‘dangers’ associated with period products too, so they can ensure their safe use and avoid health complications such as Toxic Shock Syndrome.



Next Steps

Children and young people have valuable insights to offer through their lived experiences. Their contributions should inform any efforts made to increase the confidence and comfort of those children and young people who menstruate.

They envision communities where all who menstruate have non-stigmatising and universal access to period products that suit their needs, as well as a supportive environment where they can manage their period without fear or embarrassment.

The perceptions and experiences of young people who menstruate highlight the fact that there are countless reasons why someone who is menstruating might not attend school or be able to fully participate in their education, work or other activities in society, even if they have reliable access to period products.

As such, policy solutions should include, but not be limited to, the non-stigmatising universal provision of period products. There is a strong need for multi-sector support and investment in wider cultural change across whole communities and sectors that will increase understanding and reduce the stigma that surrounds menstruation.

Beyond increasing access to products, young people focus on the benefits of comprehensive menstruation education for people of all gender identities. They link education to more informed choices, higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, healthier relationships and better health outcomes. They also recognise that more support for teachers is necessary to break down taboo and myths.

The experiences of and issues raised by South Australian young people highlight the need for changes in infrastructure across schools, workplaces and other community spaces. They make a strong case for improving the timing, consistency and quality of menstruation education currently being offered in schools to address gaps and inconsistencies. This includes providing more detailed information and support to those who need it, as well as improving the accuracy and diversity of information about menstruation that is being reported upon in mainstream and social media.

As one young person put it, 'there needs to be more awareness of menstruation and surrounding issues and stigma to demystify these problems and the psychological tolls this may have on people'.

“ *Don't shy away from saying it out loud. There were times in my school experience where teachers (male and female) would be awkward when discussing periods and use slang terms such as 'crimson wave' and 'Mother Nature being nasty'. This caused confusion and discomfort for a lot of students seeking help.*”

We are calling on leaders and decision makers across sectors to work together on this issue. We need to have the conversations and develop and implement the policies and processes that embed menstruation as a normal biological function. At the same time we need to address menstruation-related barriers to wellbeing, participation and education that we know exist.

We have learned that experiences of menstruation and the ways in which it is experienced and managed vary widely between people and within differing social, cultural, political, educational, family and socioeconomic contexts. Strategies for positive change must therefore account for this diversity and be tailored to meet the needs of specific groups who are facing unique barriers and therefore disproportionate negative impacts.

Positive approaches to menstruation and the actions that follow will have a significant impact on young people and have potential to improve the quality of their lives in ways that adults generally take for granted. It is well past the time for talking. The actions that young people suggest throughout this report are not unreasonable and are certainly achievable if we find the will to do what they have suggested needs doing.

'I HOPE ALL THIS ACTUALLY AMOUNTS TO SOMETHING.'



Appendix 1

Survey results

A total of 2,985 children and young people aged 7 to 22 years participated in two Period Surveys undertaken between May and September 2020. Across the two surveys they provided a combined total of 3,267 responses. The high level of participation and engagement with the surveys, and the depth and detail of children and young people's responses, indicate that menstruation is an issue they rarely have an opportunity to talk about, despite how significantly it impacts on many aspects of their lives.

Half the respondents were aged 15 and 17 years while just under one third were aged 12 to 14 years. A smaller proportion of respondents were aged 18 to 22 years, with the remaining respondents between 7 and 11 years of age.

Most respondents reported being school students (84%), with the majority of these in secondary school (81%). A smaller number of respondents reported being university students (10%) or TAFE students (3%). Sixteen per cent reported that they were currently employed. Just over one quarter of those who had participated in the second Period Survey (27%) indicated that they had also participated in the first Period Survey.

Menstruation education

More than half of the young people who responded to the first Period Survey were of primary school age (7 to 12 years) when they first got their period. Of these respondents, more than half knew 'a little' or 'not much' about menstruation at the time, with 5% knowing 'nothing at all'. Even those aged 13 years or above reported only having limited knowledge of menstruation at the time. More than one third said they knew only 'a little' (25%) or 'not much' (10%) about menstruation and 2% said they knew 'nothing at all'.

What do children and young people want to learn about menstruation?

The most common aspect of periods covered at school was 'the biological process', with 82% of respondents reporting they had learnt 'why we have periods'.

When the focus is solely on biology, the everyday social, cultural, environmental and financial factors that influence experiences of menstruation are often overlooked. The majority of respondents (60%) were not taught, or said they were unsure whether their menstruation education at school covered 'how to manage periods in day to day life'.

While more than two thirds of survey respondents (70%) were taught what kind of period products exist, only half (51%) were taught how to actually use the products properly, including how often to change them. Most children and young people who participated in the survey (59%), were not taught about period hygiene, or were unsure whether or not their education covered period hygiene.

While only 40% of respondents reported learning about the existence of period pain, significantly fewer children and young people (24%) reported learning about ways to manage this pain. Many young people described how their period pain affected their lives and limited their opportunities to participate in activities they enjoy.

Less than one quarter of respondents were taught about 'normal and abnormal' periods and wanted to be more informed so that they were able to recognise whether their pain was 'normal' or whether it indicated a more serious health issue such as endometriosis or polycystic ovary syndrome.

Who do children and young people talk to about menstruation?

When asked about their levels of comfort talking about periods with particular people in their lives, children and young people described those they're most comfortable with as being supportive and understanding and that they made them feel 'like it's not weird and that it's completely normal'.

The majority of respondents reported being most comfortable with female friends and female family members. However, a small proportion of young people used men's lack of personal experience with menstruation as part of the reason they felt more comfortable talking with male friends or male family members.

In contrast, almost three quarters of respondents (74%) reported being uncomfortable talking to male family members, with just over half (56%) reporting being uncomfortable talking to male friends. Those who were uncomfortable talking to men explained that these kinds of conversations aren't 'normalised' and men 'didn't understand' or just 'think it's gross'.

Almost one third of survey respondents were 'not too comfortable' or 'not comfortable at all' talking to a doctor or health professional about menstruation. They often explained this view as being based on their own personal experience of a doctor who had dismissed or trivialised their pain. Others described how a general lack of knowledge about periods, about what to expect and how to talk about menstruation more broadly, contributes to their anxiety and discomfort.

Two thirds of respondents (67%) reported being 'not too comfortable' or 'not comfortable at all' talking to a school teacher about periods. They described how this discomfort prevents open discussion and is a significant barrier to accessing timely and accurate information and products. For example, in most schools, the semiformal or informal response currently in place to allow students to access period products relies on students being able to approach and talk to teachers.

Most respondents (88%) were taught about menstruation by a female teacher, and some respondents reported feeling more comfortable with a female teacher. Regardless of their teacher's gender, children and young people were most concerned with how a teacher approached the subject. They think it is crucial that teachers are 'approachable, kind, and can make learning about ourselves less taboo'.

The importance of being able to access period products easily

Many respondents described access to free period products as critical to their health, dignity, hygiene, and ability to attend school, work and participate in recreational and social activities. Children and young people overwhelmingly believe in the importance of people who have periods being able to access free period products, with 98% of respondents reporting this was 'very important' (83%) or 'somewhat important' (15%).

The most common explanations for the importance of making period products free and accessible related to how unaffordable they currently are and how, as a consequence, many are left to experience the shame and exclusion associated with 'going without'.

Problems getting period products

One in 4 children and young people surveyed reported problems getting period products when they needed them. After being 'caught out' the most common reason given for not having a period product when it was needed is their cost. More than 1 in 4 (27%) of those who reported they had problems accessing period products explained this was because they are expensive.

Overall, most children and young people reported having access to period products most of the time they need them. Just over one third (36%) reported that accessing products had 'never' been an issue while 46% reported it was 'hardly ever' an issue. These respondents often described feeling more comfortable asking others for products or support. However, 15% reported having no products 'sometimes' while 2% reported having no access to period products 'frequently'.

Regardless of how frequently they had access to period products, respondents described not having access to them, whether as a result of poverty or simply forgetting, as having significant emotional impact.

The most common feelings associated with not having access to period products when they were needed included feeling anxious, self-conscious, embarrassed and dirty. Others described feelings of shame, their fear of seeking help from others, leaking onto clothes, or smelling like period blood.

Responses to not having period products

Almost three quarters of those who did not have period products when they needed them (72%) reported having used something else in lieu of a proper product, such as torn cloth, a sock, or toilet paper.

More than one third of respondents (37%) reported using a period product less suitable than their preferred period product. Some children and young people described situations where they had 'built up the courage' to ask a stranger for period products. Others described not changing their period products as much as they knew they should, or bleeding onto their clothes and underwear because they had 'nothing'.

Asking a friend for a period product was the most common response to not having a period product, with more than three quarters of respondents having done so. However, all of these respondents were aged 12 years or older. This highlights the particular barriers that exist for younger students, particularly those in primary school whose friends may not yet have started their period and are therefore less likely to be able to provide emotional support or access to products.

Significantly fewer respondents had asked a teacher for a period product, supporting what children and young people had raised about the issues of accessing period products while at school, and the discomfort their teachers often displayed.

Problems accessing period products at school

Less than half of the primary or secondary school student respondents (44%) reported that period products are available at their school. While those in single sex girls' schools were more likely to report greater ease of access to products at school, most school students (55%) reported that products were not available, or that they did not know whether or not products were available.

Children and young people also raised the design of period product packaging as a problem. They focused on the brightly coloured packaging, which can make products difficult to conceal and remove from bags, particularly at school. Respondents also reported the embarrassment associated with the loud noise of unwrapping a product, particularly at school, but also in public bathrooms where everyone can then hear that someone has their period. Many children and young people thought managing periods at school would be easier if more was done to improve education and address the stigma surrounding menstruation.

Knowledge about period products

While more than two thirds of survey respondents (68%) were taught what kind of period products exist, less than half (49%) were taught how to actually use the products properly. Even among those children and young people who learnt about the types of products available, 1 in 3 were not taught, or were unsure whether they were taught, how to use them.

More than half of respondents (59%) were not taught about period hygiene or were unsure if they were taught about period hygiene.

They described comprehensive menstruation education about period products as being key to hygiene, health and safety, as well as crucial to overall wellbeing and their capacity to participate in any physical activity or other activities they enjoy.

Respondents were most likely to be using or willing to consider using the period products about which they reported knowing the most: disposable pads (94%), underwear liners (77%), and tampons (66%). Nevertheless, 1 in 5 respondents were unsure about using tampons and 1 in 10 would 'never use' tampons.

One in 5 young people had not heard of reusable pads and 1 in 5 were unsure about using this product. While 1 in 3 would consider using reusable pads, only 4% of respondents reported currently using this product. Only 4% currently use period cups while almost 1 in 3 would 'never' use period cups. Of the reusable products, period underwear was the most commonly used. Yet only 14% of respondents reported currently using period underwear with 39% willing to consider its use.

The products children and young people were least likely to have heard about were Implanon and Intra-Uterine Device (IUD). Only a very small minority reported currently using these products with most respondents being unsure about their use. Compared to the Implanon and IUD, children and young people were more aware of the contraceptive pill, and this was the most commonly used form of contraception, although 16% of all respondents still had not heard of this product. One in 5 respondents were unsure about using the contraceptive pill and 1 in 10 'would never use' the contraceptive pill.

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Endnotes

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