



**Period Education**  
UK

“Everyone needs  
to be educated”:  
pupils’ voices on  
menstrual  
education and PE

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A REPORT FOR  
SCHOOLS AND THE  
EDUCATION SECTOR

OCTOBER 2024

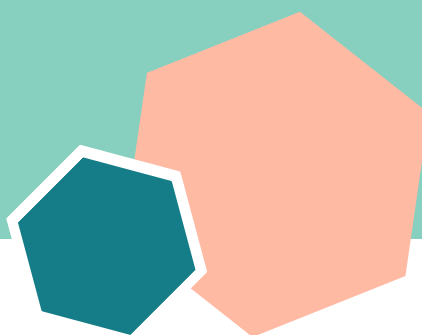


# OVERVIEW

This report is based on the research paper "Everyone needs to be educated": pupils' voices on menstrual education and PE. The research was conducted and written by Dr Natalie Brown, Swansea University & Welsh Institute of Performance Science and Dr Laura Forrest, University of the West of Scotland, with contributions from Rebekah Williams, Stride Active; Dr Georgie Bruinvels,

University College London; Dr Jessica Piasecki, Nottingham Trent University.

We would like to thank all schools and pupils who contributed their time to this research. A special thanks to Youth Sport Trust, Girls Active for their ongoing support.



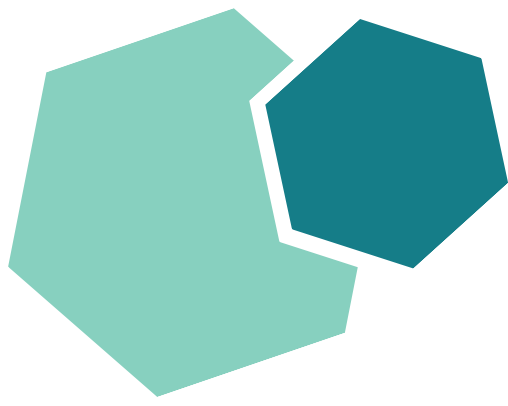
## ABOUT PERIOD EDUCATION

We are a group of academics and specialists working in schools, community and elite sport across the United Kingdom. Within our respective fields, we are experts in the menstrual cycle, menstrual cycle education and the menstrual cycle in relation to sport, exercise and physical activity.

Our research is centred on capturing voices of young people and teachers. We believe their experiences are key to re-shaping and creating change related to the menstrual cycle and have informed all resources we have produced.

It is through our research process and findings that we develop and produce free resources for schools and young people to use. More information can be found on our [website](#).





# RECOMMENDATIONS



1

Review menstrual education in your school, including frequency of lessons, the content delivered, who teaches it and who it is delivered to (both boys and girls).

2

Develop pupil voice - find out what pupils don't know, what they want to know and how they think a period positive environment can be created in school.

3

Encourage open, positive conversations amongst staff and pupils, challenging attitudes and raising awareness.

4

Consider how you can support pupils to manage their menstrual cycle symptoms, in all lesson, and especially in PE.

5

Consider flexible options within PE, providing choice on physical activities and kit, to help girls remain engaged.

6

Review toilet policies, including access, unisex use and where period products are kept in relation to facilities to help girls feel comfortable changing products and are less worried about leaking.

# RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

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Menstruation is a normal biological process for females that marks the start of the menstrual cycle (Bull et al., 2019), occurring from puberty through adulthood until menopause. Physical, affective and behavioural symptoms associated with the menstrual cycle can significantly impair the daily lives of individuals (Kessel, 2000). School experiences and participation in physical activity and exercise can be affected by menstruation in adolescence and can have detrimental effects on quality of life, health, academic and professional performance (Curry et al., 2023). Specifically in the United Kingdom, 82% of teachers perceived the menstrual cycle to limit school attendance (Brown et al., 2022). Similarly, a negative effect on school behaviour and participation in Physical Education (PE) were reported by 88% of teachers (Brown et al., 2022). This research is supported by recent reports in which periods have been cited as one barrier to physical activity and PE by adolescents in the UK (YST Girls Active, 2023). However, investigations have lacked understanding why the menstrual cycle negatively influences these aspects of schools, to create recommendations for change.



## AIMS

Through listening to pupil voice, this research aimed to understand young people's perceptions and experiences of menstrual education received in schools. This included perceived gaps in their own understanding, alongside levels of comfort experienced when having conversations with teachers, peers and parents. A secondary aim was to explore first-hand how girls felt their periods affected participation in Physical Education (PE) in school.

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## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive study was conducted.

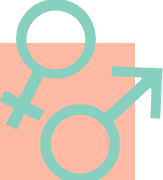
9 focus groups across 6 schools in England and Wales.

Where possible, purposeful sampling was applied to recruit a mix of urban and rural schools, incorporating a range of socio-economic demographics.

Participants were pupils assigned female at birth who were in years 6 to 10 (ages 10-15), or equivalent. Pupils were not required to have reached menarche.

# FINDINGS: EDUCATION PREFERENCES

Participants shared different experiences of menstrual education received at school.



Pupils often explained their preferences to receive education separately from their male peers, to increase levels of comfort when having conversations and to reduce feelings of being judged or embarrassed. However, pupils clearly voiced that boys should also receive education on the menstrual cycle to increase their understanding and compassion.

“Although it may be more comfortable to have like a lesson with just females, the boys need to learn about it more because it is like a serious topic. They just joke about it’s the most embarrassing thing and it’s horrible.”

Participants perceived teachers to be able to provide menstrual cycle education, but their level of confidence was of importance, as was teacher gender.

“It would be better if a female teacher [delivered lessons] because they have periods. I had a male biology teacher, and you could just tell the male teacher didn’t really know what to say, he was just reading what was on the board.”

Pupils frequently disclosed they only had one menstrual education lesson at school. In some instances menstrual education was completely absent which was exacerbated during the COVID pandemic (March 2020-July 2021). The timing of delivery of menstrual education was frequently reported to be too late.

**“I THINK BEFORE I GOT MY PERIOD I WAS SO SCARED BECAUSE THEY NEVER TOLD US.”**

Commonly, information on what to expect and what to do on your first period was delivered in primary school (years 5-6) along with information on some period products (tampons and pads). Further information on reproduction was sometimes received during biology lessons, alongside symptoms (period cramps, mood swings, body changes) but this focussed on educational content of the Biology curriculum rather than considering the impact on individuals. Participants also reported a lack of education and information provided on the causes of symptoms, how to cope with the differing types of symptom, and recognising and dealing with irregularities. Even more so was the complete absence of any education on how to manage periods during PE.

“The boys in our school they thought like you could control when you had your period. Like you could be like, I want my period now and I don’t want my period now and yeah, I’m just going to make it stop.”

“Because they make fun of it [menstruation], some people don’t change [period products] in school and that’s real bad.”



## FINDINGS: PERIOD POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Participants displayed a lack of awareness relating to many aspects of the menstrual cycle within school and wider society, this included anatomical awareness, causes of irregularities, causes of symptoms and what is deemed a normal cycle.

### “WHY DO YOU HAVE CRAMPS, LIKE, WHAT CAUSES THEM?”

It was consistently reported that some aspects of the school culture and environments were unsupportive for individuals menstruating.

Access to toilets was discussed in all focus groups, many revealed that access to toilets is limited or not possible during lessons. Mixed or unisex toilets caused unease due to comments from other pupils when changing period products.

All focus groups reported period products were available in their schools, yet there were varying degrees of embarrassment associated with accessing products. Some pupils felt too embarrassed to ask a teacher or school reception staff where they were stored. However, pupils did demonstrate an understanding as to why products were not supplied in toilets.

Levels of comfort and confidence when conversing on the topic were variable amongst pupils and dependent on the person they were speaking to. Pupils tended to have conversations with mothers, family members and friends. In some instances, the preference was to speak to teachers over parent/guardians. However, this was not consistent across all pupils.

Different factors were presented that affected comfort of conversation:

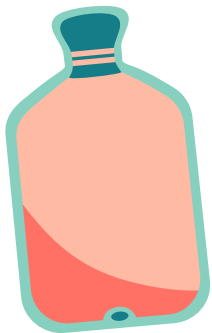
1. School environments
2. Gender and personal experience
3. Teacher openness
4. Perceptions of teacher openness
5. Familiarity with teachers
6. Surroundings
7. Initiation of conversation
8. Pupil openness

“some teachers can be a bit awkward, I mentioned it to a boy teacher and he looked very panicked’.”

“Personally, I think that the reason why most teachers are like that is because we weren’t open to them in the first place because I think maybe because like if we talked to them sooner or we told them a bit more they would be a bit more understanding.”

## FINDINGS: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Pupils reported a wide range of menstrual-related symptoms experienced but a lack of management strategies whilst in school, due to limited education.



Physical symptoms, such as cramps and emotional symptoms like mood swings were reported.

In one instance it was reported to affect mental health ‘it’s quite bad for my mental health’. The physical symptom of bleeding was associated with negative experiences at school, with pupils reporting their worry that others can see pads or know they are on their period.

“At school I’m conscious of anyone, if you can see it. If they can tell you’re on [menstruating].”

The fear of leaking in lessons, was reported as being shameful and a nuisance. Words such as:

**EMBARASSING**

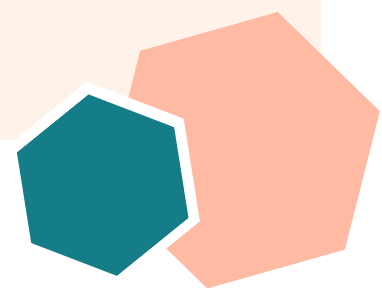
**SUFFERING**      **ANNOYING**

**INCONVENIENCE**

were used to describe experiences of periods whilst at school. This was enhanced by the fear of boys’ reactions, and sometimes girls as well, making fun. The worry of irregular periods and bleeding unexpectedly was also evident.



“The first time I had my period was when I was wearing a skort and it was PE when I got my first period and I had to go into the bathroom but because I didn’t know a lot about it, I didn’t have any pads or anything so I had to use tissue and I was really scared cause I hadn’t known much about it and I didn’t really know what to do, so I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t tell my mum.”



## FINDINGS: IMPACT ON SCHOOL

Whilst some pupils acknowledged the menstrual cycle does not affect them in school, the majority discussed the negative impact it can have on:



### LEARNING



### ENGAGEMENT



### ATTENDANCE

Generally, pupils reported that the first two days of their period were the worst for affecting their learning and engagement in lessons. Being distracted by menstrual pain or the worry of leaking were discussed.

Pupils talked about:

1. Difficulties managing emotions and concentration
2. Low motivation
3. Increased tiredness
4. Negative impact on school attendance and behaviour

**“IT AFFECTS HOW MUCH I ATTEND IN LESSONS. SAY, HOW MUCH I GET DISTRACTED OR HOW MUCH I JUST GO, “NO, I’M NOT DOING IT,” BECAUSE I JUST DON’T FEEL LIKE IT.”**

School attendance was affected, with reports of menstrual cramps causing missed school days. The impact of menstruating during exams was discussed, by pupils, saying it:

**“IT WOULD BE THE WORST”.**





# FINDINGS: PHYSICAL EDUCATION

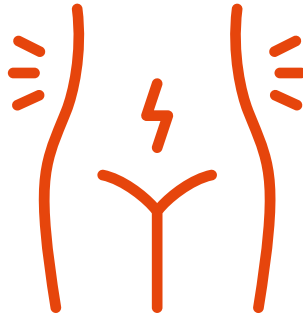
Education preferences, a positive period environment and personal experiences were all discussed in relation to physical education (PE) specifically.

Pupils reported that PE was the most affected aspect of school when menstruating. Menstrual cramps affected participation in PE, with many pupils preferring not to exercise as a result. However, pupils did discuss changes that could be made to PE lessons which would encourage them to take part.

There was a consensus for greater flexibility in activity choices if experiencing menstrual cramps, with a preference for slow movement and exercise such as yoga, or to be involved in a different capacity such as coaching. By Year 10, pupils felt they had more choice in their PE lessons, but suggested this should be throughout all school years, given not all girls began their periods in the same school year. It did not seem that girls were unwilling to participate, more so they wanted to better understand what activity was more appropriate for their symptoms on that particular day. They felt that education is required on how to manage periods whilst exercising.

**“WE HAVEN’T BEEN TOLD. NOT BY PARENTS, NOT BY TEACHERS.”**

When it comes to accessing toilets in school whilst menstruating, PE lessons were deemed most difficult by some. Pupils shared perceptions of some PE teachers lacking empathy or being unable to access toilets whilst out on the field during lessons, which can be “really stressful”.



Uniform and PE kit were discussed across the focus groups with mixed experiences; dark uniform was preferred, whilst there were negative experiences of skirts for PE kit. Whereas there was a positive response where PE kit had been changed. It became apparent across the groups that choice was essential.

“I really liked when the leggings first came out because it makes me feel more comfortable when I’m doing PE because if you leak, it’s not really noticeable compared to when you’re wearing a skirt or shorts.”

Linked to this was pupils’ discomfort when getting changed into PE kit, often exacerbating fears that others might notice they are on their period.

“I don’t like getting changed in PE in case anyone sees anything.”



Timing of PE in relation to menstruation and the type of physical activity was a consideration for some pupils.

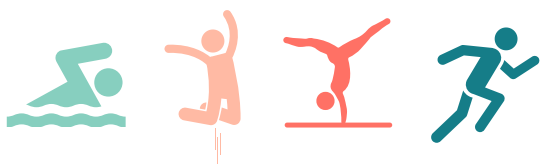
“PE on my period, it’s awful. The pain and uncomfortable, you feel like you are going to leak and stuff.”



Menstrual-related breast pain was reported to affect participation in PE. Leaking was also mentioned as a fear that impacted participation in PE.

**“PERIOD BOOBS, WHERE IT’S JUST LIKE FOR EXAMPLE WHEN YOU’RE RUNNING, AND IT JUST HURTS SO MUCH.”**

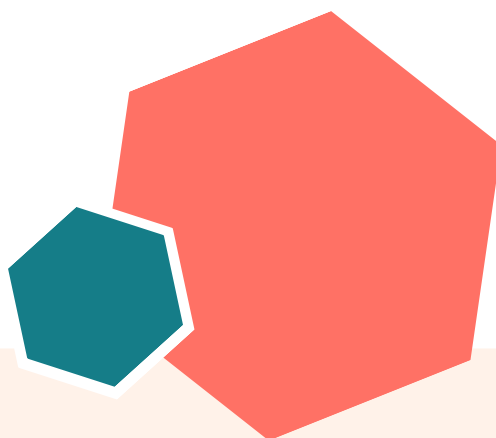
Both the fear of leaking and pain were attributing factors to the type of exercise participants were more likely to take part in (e.g. yoga) compared to those they would avoid: The activities reported to avoid included 1) Running and jumping 2) Gymnastics and 3) Swimming.



Unfortunately, even pupils engaged in swimming felt they were unable to and had no choice. Whereas in other activities participants requested having the option to take part in a different capacity such as coaching.

Menstrual related symptoms such as low mood and ‘feeling extra tired’ also affected participation in PE. This influenced signing up for competitive events such as sports day, ‘you could have signed up for running the week before that, you wouldn’t know you would be due on [menstruating] you get to the day and don’t want to do it’.

However, some participants had an enjoyment for PE or were not affected by menstrual cycle-related symptoms and therefore participated in PE and did not perceive to let periods stop them.



“It affects my ability to do some activities. For example, you can’t do swimming, I can’t, I love running and I can’t do running at break times because it hurts bad.”

# APPLICATION OF FINDINGS

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Overall, the findings of this study highlight the expansive impact menstruation and menstrual cycle-related symptoms has on school and PE participation, particularly linked to 1) lack of education received in school 2) negative experiences of menstruating at school and 3) lack of comfort talking to teachers, especially non-menstruators or teachers who were perceived to be less confident/knowledgeable on the topic. The abundance of information requested by pupils highlights the deficit in education provided to pupils to understand and manage periods in school and in relation to staying physically active.

## SCHOOLS OFFER A PLATFORM FOR EDUCATION

Schools can play an important role in developing health literacy, specifically menstrual health. Despite menstrual education being mandatory in England and Wales school curriculums since 2020-22, pupils within the focus groups lacked understanding of the menstrual cycle.

Our previous research, which surveyed teachers, outlined the lack of education provided in schools across the United Kingdom. Only 63% of primary and secondary teachers reported menstrual education was provided and when it was provided, the primary focus was to teach the biology of the menstrual cycle (56%) or provision of menstrual products (40%). The findings of the present study reveal similar experiences from pupils.

Pupils reported a lack of education, in some cases receiving no information at all from school; instead gaining information

and support externally via parents or social media/internet.

Where information was provided in schools it was factual, focussed on what happens and was perceived as a 'tick box' lesson. This left girls with a lack of education on lived experiences, lack of awareness of menstrual irregularities or management solutions and a complete absence of support on staying active whilst menstruating.

It is recommended that menstrual education, beyond reproductive biology, should be integrated into school curricula, particularly how to physically manage periods. More importantly, this education should be provided for everyone, including those who do not menstruate.

Period Education UK has created a set of resources and lesson plans which can be delivered through PE or other subjects.

**FREE RESOURCES AT**  
**[WWW.PERIODEDUCATION.ORG](http://WWW.PERIODEDUCATION.ORG)**

## APPROPRIATE FACILITIES

Pupils in the current study reported awareness of access to period products in their schools. However, the location of products and thus the discomfort in requesting period products from teachers presented a larger barrier to access.

Pupils in the current study acknowledged and understood schools restricting access due to poor behaviour, however across all focus groups, pupils consistently discussed the concern of not being able to access toilets and the related fear of leaking during class. Pupils reported this distracted them during lessons and feared standing up at the end of class.



A further issue regarding toilets was raised with the fear of changing period products, especially in unisex toilets where pupils queued to use female only toilets or avoided changing period products all day during school, which can negatively affect health and wellbeing. Schools need to consider the negative consequences of unisex toilets and restricting access to toilets for management of menstruation and promoting a period positive environment.



## SPECIFIC PE CONSIDERATIONS



In England, only 44% of girls meet Chief Medical Officer Guidelines for physical activity (Sport England, 2023). Pupils reported menstruation itself was a barrier to participation in PE, related to the physical and emotional symptoms. Pupils reported a lack of empathy by teachers towards physical symptoms, specifically menstrual cramps. Other factors such as breast pain, disruption to mood, a lack of motivation and activity type influenced participation in PE, alongside style and colour of PE kit. This contextualises previously reported figures where 78% of girls who said they used to be 'sporty' admitted avoiding taking part in sport when on their period (Women in Sport, 2022).

It is essential for teachers to recognise that alternative exercise should be offered to girls when menstruating, that exercise can reduce menstrual discomfort (Sutar et al., 2016). Alongside increased education for pupils, teachers and parents/guardians may benefit from training on the potential impact the menstrual cycle has on participation in PE, including ways to approach the conversation and provide exercise options to increase the likelihood of girls staying active. This could be achieved by providing continual professional development opportunities to qualified teachers, but also through Higher Education teacher training programmes.



## SUMMARY

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Schools can play a significant role in providing menstrual education, to improve health and wellbeing of pupils across the United Kingdom. Our research highlights the need to ensure girls' voices are considered when developing menstrual education, with the request for lived experiences to be shared, thus highlighting the potential for people's stories to be impactful in creating changes both in and outside of school.

It is paramount that females, from an earlier age, maintain physical activity and a general healthy lifestyle. The latter of which are not feasible if quality menstrual education is not provided, nor if there is little awareness surrounding the benefits of physical activity for symptom management. For improvements in physical activity in girls at school, key areas for action and policy implementation include an inclusive approach to curriculum development to address gender norms and adequate training of professionals so they have a range of skills to ensure inclusion of adolescent girls (Duffey et al., 2021).

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Consideration should be given to lesson adjustments, both in the delivery of menstrual education but also specifically in PE to help support girls to stay physically active and improve overall health. Providing resources to teachers designed with the pupil voice captured in the present study is required. Future research should explore the effectiveness of menstrual education in schools and changes in pupil knowledge. Research highlights involving parents/guardians and peers within menstrual education may be effective approaches and should be explored further.

If you are a school or educational establishment that would like to make changes to improve the menstrual cycle education and environment, please refer to the key recommendations on page 3.

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# GET IN TOUCH

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 OPTIMAL.PERIOD



## Period Education UK

This report was produced by Period Education UK, with support from the following institutions.

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