

Impact of Periods on School Students* in South Australia

Commissioner for
Children & Young People

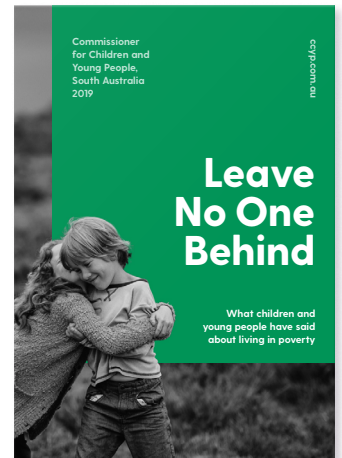
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An issue highlighted in the Commissioner for Children & Young People's report *Leave No One Behind* was period poverty. The report on young people's perceptions and experiences of poverty in South Australia identified that some young people are missing school because their families can't afford to buy the sanitary products they need.

To gain further insight into the barriers that exist to accessing period products at school (and university) the Commissioner undertook *The Period Survey*. The survey covered issues of stigma, taboo, ease of access to products, facilities and educational resources. A total of 2,517 responses were received.

Of the respondents:

- 89% were aged 7-21
- 76% were school students
- 99% were female and gender diverse
- 16% identified as LGBTQIA+
- 3% were Aboriginal
- 14% were CALD
- 5% live with a disability
- 6% were young carers



The scope of the problem

Having a period was reported as being both a barrier to attendance and to participation of school.

The major issues encountered included difficulties due to pain, stigma and attitudes, rules on going to the toilet, difficulty accessing period products, and school uniforms.

26% of respondents reported having missed out on attending school due to not having a period product.

51% of respondents reported not having access to products or not knowing how to access period products at school.

55% of respondents reported being of primary school age (7-12 years) when they had their first period.

47% of respondents said they knew only 'a little', 'not much' or 'nothing at all' before they had their first period.

63% of respondents said their education about periods came from school, with school being the second biggest source of information about periods after parents and caregivers.

Access Pathways

Students reported two main ways in which they accessed period products while at school:

- 1 Asking their friends (**76%** of respondents reported doing this)
- 2 Asking a teacher or other adult at the school (**20%** of respondents reported doing this)

“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' (Female, 16)

Barriers to Period Product Access

66% of students reported being uncomfortable talking about periods with their teachers. Students reported that the processes currently in place for accessing period products at school are embarrassing. Students are not only subjected to having to wait to speak to somebody about accessing a period product, they are at risk of being overheard by other students while asking.

“Sometimes it is difficult for a student to get permission to leave a class for the bathroom without having to publicly announce their menstruation.” (Female, 15)

Where period products are available at school, this is typically via a single vending machine located in the school toilets. To enable them to make the purchase through the vending machine,

students are not only required to have money on them, this money has to be cash in the form of coins.

“ ‘When you or your friends don’t have products on hand, asking school staff for products is the only option.’ (Female, 14)

Due to their young age, primary school students do not typically have as many friends who they can ask to supply them with a period product. They are therefore more likely to be subjected to the embarrassment of having to ask school staff or forced to improvise by using toilet paper or other inadequate solution (70% of respondents reported having used something else as a period product such as toilet paper, tissues, socks, and even torn sheets).

Some students who had gone through the process of accessing products at school said the products they were provided were insufficient. They were either not given enough products for their needs, or the products supplied were too light, too heavy, or not their preferred product – for example a tampon being supplied instead of a sanitary pad, or vice versa.

Stigma and taboo

Many students reported witnessing, or being subjected to bullying and teasing for having their period. Some students reported being made to feel uncomfortable by staff when asking for period products, or for asking to sit out of a particular activity because they were having their period – swimming and P.E. being two main examples given.

Students reported having to be very discreet and secretive while having their period; having to carefully take brightly wrapped period products out of their locker or bag without anybody seeing them. They also reported trying to use the bathroom when there were not too many people around so that other students would not hear period product packaging being opened.

Having to wear light coloured uniforms, especially dresses or sports uniforms, was also reported as problematic, particularly with the associated anxiety and fear of having an accidental leak that would show up on their uniform while they were at school.

“ ‘Also in primary levels, if teachers weren’t so irked out by the idea and make faces when talking about periods and putting a pad on, we wouldn’t be so self-conscious. Actually I think there’s a lot of reasons as to why girls are so self-conscious about this stuff.’ (Female, 15)

Rules

Students reported that the enforcement of rules around going to the toilet was demeaning and unfair, particularly when having a period. Many students reported being denied a request to go to the bathroom, and instead being forced to go at specified times unless they announced to the teacher, in front of the class, that they were having their period.

“ ‘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 900-1000 students) which makes queue times ridiculous. And you can’t take your bag with you to the toilet during class time.’ (Female, 16)

Inadequate Facilities

Students reported insufficient numbers of sanitary bins being made available, and how this caused queuing for particular bathroom stalls which also then revealed a student was having their period. There were also problems relating to the distance between classrooms and bathrooms, unisex bathrooms, and dirty and uncomfortable bathroom facilities more broadly.

Conclusion

There are a number of barriers currently facing school students who don’t have ready access to period products. These issues are causing students embarrassment and shame. The majority of survey respondents were unaware whether their school provided access to period products or not.

Education on periods is being taught too late for some young people, and this contributes to the shame, embarrassment and stigma young people feel if their periods start in primary school.

Some students are unable to attend school or participate in classes because they do not have access to period products when they need them. When students are forced to access period products at school, this is often embarrassing, unnecessarily difficult, and costly when not supplied free.

*inclusive of all gender diverse young people.