

During 2021, the Commissioner for Children and Young People released two reports on the impact of periods on young people's wellbeing, participation and school attendance, and their experience of South Australian sex education.

From more than 4000 young people aged 12 to 22 years who participated in the Commissioner's two Period Surveys and Sex Education Survey, 652 identified as being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.



Regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, young people shared many similar issues, perceptions, and experiences of periods and sexual health education. Yet there are some differences worth noting, insofar as they indicate that barriers to education and support regarding menstruation and broader sexual health and safety, impact differing groups of young people in different, and often unequal, ways.

## The timing, quality and relevance of education on periods, relationships, and sexual health

Young people seek school-based relationship and sexual health education that provides consistent, contemporary, and inclusive content that is relevant to every young person in South Australia. They also reflected on increased discomfort and a general sense of confusion when left to their 'own devices' in the absence of comprehensive relationship and sexual health education.

- “ A lot of societal issues come from poor sexual education, so it is extremely important for it to be improved.’
- “ It is best they learn from a reputable source that has their best interests at heart.’
- “ If teenagers are properly informed, and not given censored or watered down information, they are more likely to take it seriously and actually practice out safe sex and safe relationships’

One in four culturally and linguistically diverse young people were taught about periods, relationships, and sexual health as a part of their religious education. This was often delivered in lessons called 'Made in the Image of God'. These students were more likely to rate their sex education overall as 'poor' compared to those who were taught sex education in a stand-alone program, or as part of Health and Physical Education, Science, or Biology subjects.



Many young people noted their sex education lessons were overwhelmingly focused on topics related to biology, including puberty and anatomy, diseases and pregnancy. While many saw some value in this, they also expressed the view that it was only useful if they were also provided with social and cultural context. They also sought practical information and skills that prepared them to deal with real-life situations.

- “ Basic health advice was the only thing provided and abstinence was preached while no conversation about gender, cultural, sexual, or religious diversity was had.’
- “ I think more emphasis should be placed on the healthy relationships part... I think students should be given more opportunity to ask questions, perhaps anonymously and these queries should be taken into consideration by teachers during lessons.’

Young people highlighted that their ideal relationship and sex education would be sensitive to cultural diversity, would 'fit the times', and be delivered in 'a mature classroom' by teachers who are able to answer questions that might arise, rather than answer every question with 'ask your parents'.

When it came to menstruation specifically, young people wanted to learn practical ways to manage their periods. This included being taught how to use certain products, and how best to manage period pain. They also wanted to be able to identify what might be considered a 'normal' and 'healthy' period as opposed to symptoms such as pain, flow, and regularity that indicate something is 'not right' or needs 'looking into' by a GP.

## Access to period products

One in five young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds reported having had problems getting period products when they needed them. The most common reason was 'not having the products I needed with me' followed by 'the cost'.



While the stigma and taboo surrounding periods was raised in some way by almost all young people surveyed, respondents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds wrote about culturally specific norms that reinforce menstruation as taboo.

- “ I didn't tell my parents for a year. In my culture it's like a taboo.”
- “ My mother would not allow me to use tampons as she viewed them as taboo, and would therefore not purchase them for me, even after explaining the discomfort pads would cause me during sports and school.”

### Impacts of menstruation on wellbeing, participation and school attendance

There were certain activities unique to their religion or cultural background, that culturally and linguistically diverse young people were 'not allowed to do' during their period. This included praying, attending usual places of worship, eating certain foods, and touching religious symbols.

- “ Well in my culture if I have period I cannot go to the temple or pray in front of the god's picture at home.”

### 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.

While many young people accepted these beliefs and customs as part of their culture or religion, many also expressed the view that they felt inadequately informed about menstruation, particularly the social aspects.

- “ The only thing that's bad about periods are the misconceptions people have around them, and the way they're taught does not give us much help on how to deal with them.”
- “ I wish people understood and were more empathetic with people on them, and being able to miss out on things because of it, and people being more accepting of it and it not being weird.”

They said education that directly engages with historical, cultural, and religious taboos would go some way to addressing the myths, misconceptions and stigma surrounding menstruation.

- “ It'd be epic if they taught us that it's totally normal and okay, not something we have to hide and be ashamed of.”

One in two (50%) of culturally and linguistically diverse young people reported having missed school due to their period.

- “ Sometimes period pains are very debilitating and can stop us from doing tasks on time, therefore they should be more understanding and give us some extra time rather than telling us that 'we are girls and to just suck it up'.”

More than half reported too that period products were either not available at their school or university, or they didn't know whether they were or not.

- “ The nurses' office is quite a far away from the bathrooms you have to make a makeshift pad for the trip there to get a period product.”

The also expressed the view that uniform dress codes can be particularly unhelpful when you're trying to manage your period and that schools should be more accommodating in this regard.

- “ I am annoyed that I must wear a skirt at my school and feel self-conscious about being on my period with a short-ish skirt on, in an environment with lots of people. I generally avoid exercise in public, but that's because I get lazy during this time.”

\* Find out more in the Commissioner's *Menstruation Matters and Sex Education in South Australia* reports at [ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports](https://ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports)