

What LGBTQIA+ Young People Told us About... Periods, Relationships, and their Sexual Health Education

Commissioner for
Children & Young People
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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 a total of 4000 young people aged 12 to 22 years who participated in the Commissioner's two Period Surveys and Sex Education Survey, 936 identified as being part of South Australia's LGBTQIA+ community.



Regardless of sexuality or gender identity, young people shared many similar issues, perceptions, and experiences. 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

Most gender diverse and sexually diverse young people describe feeling let down by their relationship and sexual health education. They said this is because it is often focused on male and heteronormative experiences and denies them practical, relevant and accurate information and skills relevant to their own lives.

LGBTQIA+ young people were twice as likely to report that their relationships and sexual health education was 'not relevant at all'. Almost half (44%) rated their overall relationship and sexual health education as poor, compared to the one quarter (26%) of young people who did not identify as gender or sexually diverse.



Gender and sexual diversity, and homophobia and transphobia, were among topics least likely to be taught or discussed in school-based relationship and sexual health education. Young people reported that these gaps in their sex education not only perpetuate stigma and discrimination, but also directly impact on their sexual safety, wellbeing, and relationships.

- “ ‘Education around the LGBTQIA+ community... would have made for a much more accepting cohort’
- “ ‘I know how to date and have great and safe sex with women... [but] I'm gay’

Young people focused on the need to acknowledge and normalise gender and sexual diversity both in classroom environments and in the curriculum content. They expressed a firm belief that everyone benefits where diversity is understood, respected, and celebrated.

Young People sought teachers who were comfortable and confident, who could normalise diverse topics, and who were able to use inclusive language and engage with young people in an in-depth discussion rather than resorting to 'fear mongering or scare tactics'.

- “ ‘Young people need education that, no matter how embarrassing for the students or teacher, is inclusive and informative of all races, genders, sexualities and religious on topics about such topics as well as what a healthy and safe relationship looks like.’

Regardless of whether young people preferred single or mixed gender classes, most young people highlighted that all children and young people should be taught the same comprehensive information, as this will promote greater respect, empathy, and equality across society.

- “ ‘Young people just want to feel included... We are so full of questions such as 'am I normal' and we need an outlet where we can ask and not feel like we are doing something wrong... Every year our bodies and lives are changing, just because someone may be past the legal age to have sex does not mean their education should stop there.’

In the Commissioner's two Period Surveys, 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, highlighting 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'.

- “ ‘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’

Access to period products

LGBTQIA+ young people were twice as likely to report having had problems getting period products when they needed them, and 1 in 3 LGBTQIA+ young people reported 'frequently' or 'sometimes' not having products. Of these young people, 85% had used something else (like toilet paper or socks) in lieu of a product, a significantly higher proportion than young people who did not identify as LGBTQIA+.



While 'not having products with me' and the cost of products were the most common reasons for being without a product, LGBTQIA+ young people were more likely to report being afraid to buy period products, to talk about menstruation, or to seek help from others because of how other people might view them or misgender them. Transgender and gender diverse young people described how having their period, from thinking about it to buying or using products, magnified their gender dysphoria.

- “ 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”



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 impacts of menstruation on wellbeing, participation, and school attendance

The emotional and physical aspects of menstruation can be a source of heightened anxiety and embarrassment for those already struggling to have their gender identity respected. When menstruation is only considered a 'women's' experience, the significant and unique impacts on transgender and non-binary young people's lives can be overlooked.

- “ Since I am non-binary and have dysphoria surrounding my period, I take contraceptive pills to skip it all together. But when I did get it, I would avoid going out (outside of school) due to how wrong it feels for me to have it in the first place.”

Two thirds of the LGBTQIA+ young people surveyed reported having missed school due to their period. Just over half of LGBTQIA+ young people reported that their school didn't have period products available for students, or that they didn't know whether their school provided period products.

While many young people raised the inadequacy of female toilet facilities as a barrier to safe and healthy period management, male toilets are far less likely to be built with menstruation in mind. This places transgender men in a difficult position of choosing between managing their period safely, or using the toilet that affirms their gender identity.

Some young people also expressed the view that not having their period pain acknowledged or taken seriously was upsetting and often prevented them from seeking medical assistance as they felt this could be viewed as being weak or wasting everyone's time. This also meant that when there was a problem it was not being picked up early and could lead to young people suffering more unnecessarily.

- “ I had extremely painful periods and more understanding would have been helpful. It wasn't until I graduated high school, I realised the level of pain I was experiencing wasn't right. Sanity products in the bathrooms more easily accessible would have made a huge difference.”

* Find out more in the Commissioner's *Menstruation Matters and Sex Education in South Australia* reports at ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports