

What Young People Living with Disability 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 more than 4000 young people aged 12 to 22 years who participated in the Commissioner's two Period Surveys and Sex Education Survey, 199 identified as young people living with a disability.



Young people were not asked to provide specific information about their disability, however, of those who did, their experiences included sensory processing disorders, mental illnesses, chronic illnesses, and physical disability.

Young people living with disability raised similar issues, perceptions and experiences as other young people who do not live with disability. However, there were 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 with disability are first and foremost young people. They therefore have the same fundamental rights as young people living without disability. This includes the right to access quality education and healthcare free from coercion or discrimination, to enjoy respectful relationships, and to have safe sexual experiences.

Unsurprisingly, young people living with disability share many of the same concerns, questions, and aspirations as their peers living without disability do. Often, however, they are not seen as requiring information about relationships and sexual health, nor are they considered to be capable of making their own decisions about this area of their lives.

“Sexual health and relationship education is just as, if not more important a facet of education as something like English or Mathematics, as it provides the tools and training to be able to function in society, and to allow parents to opt out of it is allowing them to deprive their children of the opportunity to develop themselves.”

Not being informed places young people living with disability at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, experiencing abuse, having an unplanned pregnancy, and participating in risky sexual behaviours.

“As someone with a physical disability I felt under-represented and not prepared.”

Young people living with disability were twice as likely as young people not living with disability (19% compared to 8%) to report that their relationship and sexual health education was ‘not relevant’ to their lived experience.

“It lacked any diversity education including LGBTQ, and disability. Religious and cultural views were covered but only to discuss as a reason why someone might not want to have sex. But that was also only slightly touched on”

Young people living with disability were also almost twice as likely to rate their overall experience of relationships and sexual health education as poor, or very poor (49% compared to 27%).

“I know in year 8 there were other classes doing sex ed, but I didn't do anything remotely related to that that year. I haven't learnt anything about male anatomy or puberty, and I feel like I should have.”

They also reported lower levels of trust in teachers and lessons at school as a source of information about relationships and sexual health. Approximately half of those surveyed reported not learning anything at all about relationships or sexual health at school.

“I think I missed out on sex Ed in high school. Most of what I know about periods I have taught myself through the Internet. School didn't teach me much but the basics, like why does it occur, what a tampon is, and what a pad is.”

Research evidence shows that when appropriate education is tailored to meet the needs of young people living with disability, they are much more likely to experience increased skill development, better health, more confidence, and a greater sense of dignity and self-worth.

“As someone with a physical disability I felt under-represented and not prepared.”

Young people have highlighted how their generation is ‘far more aware of sex, sexual expression and relationships’ than adults ‘give them credit for’ but that their education does not reflect this reality or provide them with practical information and skills. Their suggestions for improving education included more opportunities for young people ‘to be listened to and heard’, more

discussion and inclusion of 'diverse experiences and practices, particular points of sensitivity and the importance of consent'.

- “ ‘I'm most frustrated I didn't learn more about healthy and unhealthy periods, such as when period pain becomes abnormal pain that should be looked into.’
- “ ‘Someone who is comfortable (but not too comfortable, or creepy) with the content. Someone the students already respect and connect with. Discussing multiple aspects of the topic... Including sexual health for all.’

Access to period products

Approximately 1 in 3 young people living with disability reported having had problems accessing a period product when they needed one. This compared with the difficulty 1 in 5 young people living without a disability reported.



Young people living with disability were also the group most likely to report 'frequently' not having access to products (10% of respondents living with disability, compared to 1% of those not living with disability) or 'sometimes' not having access to products (27% of respondents living with disability, compared to 13% living without disability).

- “ ‘If access is a big enough issue that there are well documented cases of people being made to miss school or work bc of a natural process, that is a sign that access should be free. It's like making people pay to use the toilet.’

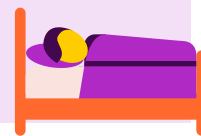
'Actually have accessible period products and disposal in multiple areas (I remember being 10 years old and not being allowed into the 'big kids' yr 6/7 toilet to dispose of my pads in those hygiene bins so I had to go the whole day without changing my pads).'

- “ ‘We receive spares at school when we don't ask too frequently however in public when our friends don't have any it is awkward using toilet paper when you don't have the money.’

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

Impacts of menstruation on wellbeing, participation and school attendance

Young people with disability were more likely to report longer absences from school due to their period. Students living with disability were three times more likely than students living without disability to miss more than 21 days of school due to their period. Almost 1 in 5 (19%) young people living with disability reporting missing more than 21 days of school per year due to their period and of these 1 in 10 reported missing over 31 days of school per year.



In addition to these impacts on education, a higher proportion of young people living with disability reported missing out on social events, work, sport and general participation in activities they enjoy due to not having a period product.

Young people living with disability have incredibly diverse experiences, yet generally have a greater reliance on the adults around them for support. While all young people focused on the stigma surrounding menstruation as a significant barrier to adequate education, products, and support from others, those living with disability raised specific concerns about feeling 'embarrassed and undignified' and their 'fear of going to an adult and talking about personal and puberty related things'.

- “ ‘Deciding the dresses were light in summer was a terrible idea.’
- “ ‘I wish my parents would let me use different things to block blood, because I have a sensory processing disorder and I can't handle wearing pads - but it's the only thing my mum will tell me about.’

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.