



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.

Of more than 4000 young people aged 12 to 22 years who participated in the Commissioner's two Period Surveys and Sex Education Survey, 135 identified as Aboriginal.



Regardless of cultural background, 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

Young people described the importance of having access to accurate, relevant sex education to their ability to stay safe and feel confident and comfortable 'in future situations' 'in their bodies' and in their relationships.

While there was significant variability in the quality of sex education Aboriginal young people received, both in terms of content and timing, they were more likely than non-Aboriginal young people to rate its overall quality and relevance as poor.

- “ The lessons were like two classes out of the whole year. Very brief and shameful how little is taught in schools.”
- “ I had to look everything up on the Internet.”

Aboriginal young people also reported lower levels of trust in teachers and school lessons, as sources of information about relationships and sexual health, compared to non-Aboriginal young people. One in two (50%) Aboriginal young people surveyed reported knowing 'a little', 'not much' or 'nothing at all' about periods before their first period, with half reporting they don't recall being taught about relationships and sexual health education at school.



Aboriginal young people provided practical suggestions that they felt would improve sexual health education. They wanted this education to be more inclusive of cultural diversity, as well as gender diversity and sexual diversity.

They also suggested that sex education needs to start earlier and remain consistent across year levels, and be taught by a teacher who is confident and comfortable teaching it.

It was also important to Aboriginal young people that young people themselves have opportunities to inform what they learn, and to engage in mature and interactive conversations with their peers and teachers.

- “ Unbiased, comprehensive, and informative education that explores various walks of life and cultural experiences, including LGBTQA+ folk.”
- “ It being normalised. It not being a one-time subject, so we're aware of our bodies and others...how to understand and treat others. There's such a stigma that [it's] embarrassing to talk about these topics. It's so important for our young people to learn! Full transparency, safe spaces.”
- “ People don't like talking about them, cuz they're gross and I think that's understandable. But when it comes to teaching young girls who are in the age group of starting their periods, it's important to teach them about it and why it happens... how to deal with it, etc.”

Access to period products

Almost 1 in 3 (32%) of Aboriginal young people reported having had problems getting period products when they needed them, compared to one in five (20%) non-Aboriginal young people. The most common reason for this was cost – ‘period products are expensive’ – followed by ‘not having the products I needed with me’. Others described being too embarrassed to ask a parent or carer, or being unable to get to the shops.

Aboriginal young people reported being without access to products more frequently than non-Aboriginal young people, with 1 in 4 (26%) reporting either ‘frequently’ (4%) or ‘sometimes’ (22%) having no period products.

“ ‘Having to choose between food and period products is a choice no female should ever have to make.’

“ ‘It’s shame buying these products, especially in a small community, and it’s expensive.’

Whatever their own experience, Aboriginal young people felt overwhelmingly that no-one ought to be forced to choose between buying period products and meeting other basic needs. They described menstruation as something you do not ‘choose’ and cannot ‘control’. They saw period products as a necessity and ‘part of healthcare’ rather than a luxury. Even if products weren’t free, they believed they ‘should at least be less of a cost to people’.

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

Compared to non-Aboriginal young people, a higher proportion of Aboriginal young people reported having missed school due to their period. Just over half of the Aboriginal young people surveyed reported that their school didn’t have period products available for students, or that they didn’t know whether their school provided period products.



Young people also described the impacts of menstruation on their wellbeing and participation while at work, hanging out with friends, or playing sport and engaging in other forms of physical activity.

Beyond the challenges of not having products, Aboriginal young people described managing period pain, navigating limited bathroom access, a lack of bins or adequate disposal facilities, and a fear and shame associated with leaking on clothes or uniforms as they key issues they faced.

“ ‘Let me carry my bag around with me. Let me carry tampons and pads. Let me go to my locker during class, not give me yard duties for taking so long.’

“ ‘The teachers never believed the pain level of menstrual cramping. I was called lazy and a liar trying to get out of PE etc.’

The stigma and taboo surrounding periods, which one Aboriginal young person described as ‘the shame factor’, made it difficult for young people to receive the support they needed. Many young people described witnessing or experiencing a fellow student being bullied for having their period.

“ ‘People are super quick to judge and only females really help the girls. Guys usually just say ew.’

“ ‘I try and avoid sport, but I’m always too embarrassed to tell my gym teacher (he is male) so I end up going home or not going to school.’

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