



Periods and Neurodivergent Children: a resource for parents and carers

What does this leaflet cover?

This leaflet gives parents and carers of neurodivergent children and young people some guidance on explaining periods and how to help their child cope with periods. This includes but is not limited to: autistic, ADHD, dyspraxia (DCD), sensory difficulties, and specific learning difficulties.

SECTION 1: Why, when, and how to talk about periods with your child

SECTION 2: How are children learning about periods

SECTION 3: Sensory issues

SECTION 4: Is my child's period normal?

SECTION 5: Resource section

Note: We recognise not all people who get a period are girls and not all girls get a period. We use a mixture of the words “girls”, “children”, “young people” and “teenagers” for this reason.

SECTION 1: Why, When, and How to talk about periods with your child

Why is it important to talk about periods to neurodivergent children?

Sometimes neurodivergent children can be anxious about their body changing. Some autistic people do not like change. Starting these conversations about periods before puberty can help children know what to expect, preventing shock, fear, confusion, and embarrassment.

When to start talking about periods and puberty?

The timing of the first period is becoming younger for everyone in the last century. In 1908 the average age of getting a first period was 13.5, now the average is around 12. It is important to know that some girls get their period from 8 years of age. There is some evidence¹ that autistic girls get their first period earlier than other girls.

In addition, some neurodivergent children need a little extra time to process information or time to get used to the idea of something new.

For these reasons, it is recommended to start talking about periods and body changes at 8 years of age.

How to educate your child?

Choose resources that will suit their preferred method of learning (books, websites, pictures, videos, conversations, social stories).

It can be helpful to explain period related things with photographs to set very clear expectations. Abstract images can be confusing.

Confusing images



image: Tutatamafilm/Shutterstock.com

An image like this one might make the child think the period blood will look like this.

Clear images



image: ssuaphotos/Shutterstock.com

Clear, realistic images allow the child to have realistic expectations.



image: Freepik.com

Abstract images like this one might be unclear or confusing.

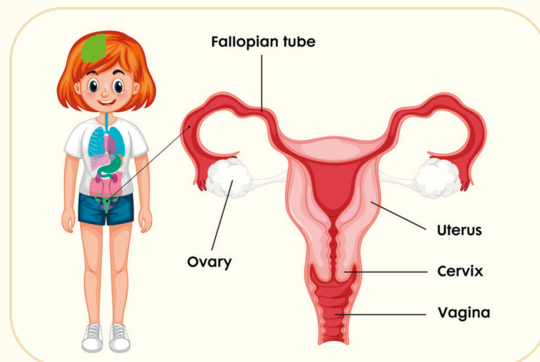


image: brgfx on Freepik

Anatomically correct but simple images like this one are more helpful.

The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods, a book by autistic author and researcher Robyn Steward, contains photographs showing what it is like to get a period e.g. what a used pad looks like with blood on it, how to put a pad on your pants, what a used tampon looks like, putting a used tampon in the bin. Some girls find these photographs very helpful so that they know what to expect.

See the resource section below for a range of resources in different forms. We provide a brief description to help you decide which one you might like to use. Some of these resources are aimed at a specific group of people e.g. “for autistic girls” but most will be suitable for anybody who wanted some extra information about periods e.g. children with ADHD, children with dyspraxia, children with learning difficulties, and neurotypical children.

You might want to look at these resources together or give the child the resource to look at on their own and then ask them if they have questions.



image: GeekClick/Shutterstock.com

Helpful tip: For some parents and their children, it can be easier to talk about potentially awkward topics in the car because you are not face-to-face.

Go through the practical steps:

- Show in the local shop where to get period products
- Practise opening the packaging
- Practise putting a pad on underwear
- Practise disposing of tampons and pads in the bin (not in toilet).
It is a good idea to wrap it in toilet paper if it is a bin in someone's house.

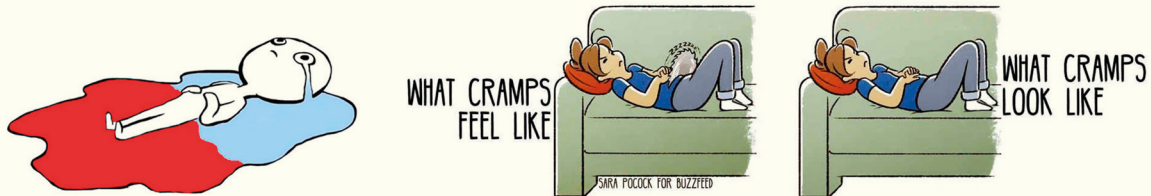
How to get free period products if you are living in Scotland

<https://www.mygov.scot/free-period-products>

SECTION 2: How are children learning about periods

Tik Tok and Instagram have overly dramatic images and narratives for humour. A child might not understand this though. For example:

When I'm on my period



Suggested script:

“Did you see anything on Tik Tok, Instagram or YouTube about periods you were confused or worried about?”

“Did you hear someone say something about periods you are worried or confused about?”

SECTION 3: Sensory issues

There are two separate sensory challenges when it comes to periods:

- A) The sensory experience of the period and coping with the period products and
- B) Everyday sensory issues.

A) The sensory experience of the period and coping with the period products

One researcher found that ‘Sensory friendly’ period products are: period underwear, fabric pads, and menstrual cups².

Everyone will have a different experience, and so it is a good idea to try out a few different period products to find the one most comfortable for your child. The current options are: tampons, disposable pads, reusable pads, menstrual cups, and period pants.



image: JLco Julia Amaral/Shutterstock.com

An important step is figuring out what period product your child wants to use. This can change as they get older. Some children find tampons uncomfortable when they first start getting their period, but then, a few years later, they might find them comfortable. Sometimes, people like to use different products for different occasions e.g. tampons if wearing tight clothes for an event, and pads for sleeping.

Suggested script:

“You need something to catch the blood when it comes out. Some girls like to use pads. These go on your pants and look like this. Other girls like to use tampons. They go into your vagina and look like this. Period pants also work well and are like this. Which one do you think you’d like to use? I think we should have a look at some before you get your period, so you know which one you’d like to use.”



image: Marina Demkina/Shutterstock.com

It is good to talk about washing and changing products when girls have their period. When using a pad, or period pants, these should be changed every 2-6 hours, depending on how heavy the period is. It may be helpful to suggest girls put a reminder on their phone or watch.



image: Asia Evtyshok/Shutterstock.com

Most people find tampons with an applicator (left in the picture above with the orange plastic) easier than tampons without an applicator (right in the picture above) when they first start using tampons.

When using something which goes inside the vagina (a tampon or a menstrual cup), it is important to remind girls to change it every 4-8 hours. It is very rare, but not changing a tampon or a menstrual cup can lead to toxic shock syndrome. This is a serious bacterial infection. It is a good idea to put an alarm reminder on your phone or your child’s phone. Or ask someone to remind your child to change their tampon/cup.

If you think your child will forget to change their tampon or menstrual cup, it is a good idea to choose a different period product instead.

B) Everyday sensory issues

Sensory challenges can be worse during a period. For example, if someone hates the noise of traffic usually, then this feeling might be more intense when a neurodivergent person is having their period.

Smells, tastes, feelings, lights, and other sensory challenges might also become more intense. It is good to be aware of this and explain it to your child.

Suggested script:

"I noticed you were finding your clothes extra uncomfortable today. I think it is because you are having your period. I know it is hard. I think it will get a little bit better though when your period stops in a few days."

Also, thinking processes (e.g. memory, attention) can become worse during a period. Organisation and planning may become worse at the time of a period. ADHD medication may not work as well at certain points in the menstrual cycle. It can be a good idea to talk to your doctor about this, and possibly ask them about adjusting the medication if needed.

A lot of people experience premenstrual syndrome (PMS) before a period. PMS can include: emotional symptoms like mood swings, feeling down or anxious, feeling irritable, feeling worried about things you do not usually worry about, low self-esteem and physical symptoms like feeling bloated (tummy sticking out), headaches, tiredness, sore breasts, cramps in your tummy or legs, wanting to eat more, and feeling sweaty. It is normal to feel this way and these symptoms usually pass when a period starts. Remind your child to be kind to themselves before and during a period.

SECTION 4: Is my child's period normal?

Periods can be hard to manage when people first experience them, but usually become more manageable with time. If your child is repeatedly unable to go to school or socialise during their period, you should seek medical advice. Some people experience a severe form of PMS called Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD). It really disrupts daily life. See your doctor if you think your child might have this. This website goes through when to go to a doctor about heavy periods in the **section called: Menstrual Information**

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/centre-reproductive-health/hope>

Here is a [video](#) about Typical and Problem periods (there is a transcript available with it). <https://www.ed.ac.uk/centre-reproductive-health/news/2021-news/menstrual-health-animation>

SECTION 5: Resource List

Neurodivergent people can find getting their period hard because of sensory issues, confusing explanations/instructions, and difficulty with change. Some of the resources below say they are for a specific group of neurodivergent people e.g. “autistic girls”, but they are suitable and helpful for other neurodivergent groups of children and people. For example, The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods book (listed below) will be useful for a child with dyspraxia or ADHD too.

Useful links

- [Managing Your Period When You Have Autism](#) - top tips about how to manage your period from Robyn Steward (Robyn wrote the Autism friendly guide to periods, in the book section below). There is a useful section on period pain. <https://www.menstrual-matters.com/autism/>
- [Preparing for and Surviving Puberty](#) - provides guidance for teaching your child about periods and the associated body changes. Section on periods can be found on pages 15-17. <https://centralsexualhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/11/'Preparing-for-and-Surviving-Puberty.pdf>
- [Sex Education](#) - guide for parents and carers on teaching neurodivergent children about puberty and periods. Produced by the National Autistic Society. <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/family-life-and-relationships/sex-education/parents-and-carers>
- [Dyspraxia Foundation](#) - personal care hints and tips about periods, contraception, doing your nails, hair, make-up, shaving, cleaning teeth and choosing clothes. <https://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Dyspraxia-personal-care-for-girls-women.pdf>
- [How to Help Girls with ADHD Manage Periods](#) - useful article on ADHD and periods. <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-girls-manage-adhd-and-periods/#:~:text=Set%20reminders.,of%20things%20during%20the%20day>

Videos and podcasts

- [Menstruation Animation](#) - video that discusses what a period is and typical period problems. Subtitles and a written transcript are available. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/centre-reproductive-health/news/2021-news/menstrual-health-animation>
- [1800 Seconds on Autism](#) - Recommended podcast that discusses autism, experiencing change and relationships. May be more suitable for older teenagers and young adults.

Non-fiction books:

- [‘The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods’](#) - informative book on period management with realistic photos of what a period and period supplies will look like. This book

will be useful for many neurodivergent children, not only autistic children. Written by Robyn Steward. <https://autismfriendlyperiods.com>

- ‘Periods: what you need to know’ - informative book on periods for children. <https://www.fpa.org.uk/product/periods-what-you-need-to-know/>
- ‘The Growing Up Guide for Girls’ - informative guide on puberty in girls with illustrations and literal language. Written for autistic children but will be suitable for many neurodivergent children. <https://uk.jkp.com/products/the-growing-up-guide-for-girls>
- ‘What’s happening to me? (Girls Edition)’ - informative guide to puberty for girls. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whats-Happening-Girls-Facts-Life/dp/0746069952>
- ‘Talking together... about Growing Up’ - workbook on puberty for parents of children with learning disabilities. <https://www.fpa.org.uk/product/talking-together-about-growing-up-pdf-2/>
- The Care and Keeping of You (Revised): The Body Book for Younger Girls - illustrated book about puberty for girls aged 8 and up. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Care-Keeping-You-Revised-American/dp/1609580834>

Fiction books with illustrations:

- ‘What’s happening to Ellie?’ - fictional book that follows Ellie’s experiences of puberty. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whats-Happening-Ellie-conditions-Sexuality/dp/1849055262>
- ‘Susan’s Growing Up’. A social story book for children with an intellectual disabilities. This is a word-free picture book to explain managing periods. The child and adult can look at it together. <https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/bookshop/paperbacks/susans-growing>.
- ‘Asperger’s Syndrome and Puberty’ - fictional book that follows the girl with the curly hair. Aimed at autistic girls and parents/carers. <https://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk/product/aspergers-syndrome-and-puberty>
- ‘Ellie Needs To Go’ - fictional book about public toilet safety that follows Ellie. Written for neurodivergent children. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ellie-Needs-Go-conditions-Sexuality/>

References

¹Corbett, B. A., Vandekar, S., Muscatello, R. A., & Tanguturi, Y. (2020). Pubertal Timing During Early Adolescence: Advanced Pubertal Onset in Females with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Autism research : official journal of the International Society for Autism Research*, 13(12), 2202–2215. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2406>

²Steward, R. (2019). *The autism-friendly guide to periods*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Acknowledgements:

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