

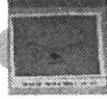
MENSTRUATION



Independent menstrual hygiene improves quality of life and promotes social acceptance



Getting My Period



Blood Will Come



I Wear Pads



Changing Pads



Creating A Bathroom Folder



Student's Period



Sometimes I Have Cramps



My Period is Private

Teaching Menstruation

Puberty is a confusing and sometimes frightening time for all girls. This is especially true for girls with disabilities or learning differences. Most typically developed girls can understand and accept the changes that will take place with their bodies as they begin puberty, but girls with special needs often don't understand why their bodies are changing, or that these changes are normal and appropriate.

Menstruation is an especially difficult concept to teach girls with autism because it involves not only drastic changes to their bodies, but a requirement of learning new skills to handle the necessary hygiene routines independently.

The goal of this curriculum, as with all the units in this book, is to reduce fear and distress, teach self-care skills and encourage responsibility and independence. Learning self-care of one's menstruation also allows a student to demonstrate modesty.

Several years ago, a parent approached our school nurse with concern about the onset of her daughter's period. Her daughter had autism, and although she could handle most hygiene skills on her own, the mother had no idea how to prepare her for menstruation. The student, who we'll call Cathy, had limited verbal ability, mild to moderate mental impairment, sensory sensitivities and many obsessive-compulsive rituals and routines.

Since Cathy already had some pubic hair, we knew that we had less than a year before the possible onset of her first period. The school nurse and I prepared a curriculum and a step-by-step plan based on her cognitive and physical capabilities, discussed our plan with the mother and asked her to keep an eye on her daughter's development while supporting our curriculum plan at home.

We introduced Cathy to the concept of menstruation with a story called *Getting My Period*. I also wrote an individualized story using her name and picture throughout, to be read and discussed at home with her mother. After that, we discussed the use of pads and actually practiced putting them in a pair of panties. This was a tabletop activity used with photo sequence cards to show the step-by-step process. Cathy practiced using the photo cards as a guideline.

We also introduced the concept of blood using a story called Blood Will Come, and even used red food coloring on sanitary pads to illustrate the menstrual blood. The food coloring on the pad looks remarkably like real menstrual blood, which was appropriate, because we wanted the "bloodied "pads to look as much like the real thing as possible. We then returned to practicing the sequence activity of putting in a clean, white pad, and carefully removing the dirty, red pad. We practiced folding and wrapping the dirty pad, throwing it into the appropriate trash receptacle, and finally, washing hands with soap and water. An activity booklet called I Wear Pads In My Panties helped to reinforce the pad sequence and was used as a demonstration of Cathy's comprehension of the concepts presented.

Our student was doing remarkably well with all the activities and concepts, but we knew it was time to practice actually wearing the pads in her underwear. We asked the mother to select a brand and type of pad, which would be best suited to her daughter. The mother had Cathy help her with this, bearing in mind that once a particular pad was selected they would need to stay with that brand and style indefinitely since Cathy had little tolerance for change. (People with autism become used to the feel, appearance and even brand name of a particular product and may have a very difficult time tolerating something different.)

Cathy was uncomfortable and reluctant at first to wear pads in her panties. But we started slowly, allowing her time to get used to the feel of the pads and the change in her bathroom routine. Eventually she was able to wear the pads all day for 5 days in a row. Even though she had not started her period yet, her mother would help her check the pads. ("No blood yet? That's okay, maybe blood will come tomorrow.")

We knew the day would come soon and occasionally asked the student if the blood came yet. We also knew that her mother was checking at home and would let us know when Cathy started her period. But we all missed her actual first day! Cathy began her period one weekend and told no one, not even her mother! She knew what she was supposed to do, began putting in the pads as she was taught and carefully managed her first day of her first period. When her mother discovered it the next day, she was astonished that her daughter had managed the situation totally on her own. We knew then that we had been successful because we had achieved acceptance of a new and unfamiliar routine.

Finally, I created a simple visual chart with pictures to help Cathy independently manage changing her pads in the school bathroom. The step-by-step directions and a pocket for holding her pad were discreetly contained in a folder, which she took with her to the bathroom. We had also instructed her to change her pads discreetly in the toilet stall with the door closed and not to tell others what she was doing. Once she knew exactly what to do, and no longer needed the folder, she began to carry a small cosmetic bag containing her pads to the bathroom. By the time she entered junior high, she carried a small, fashionable purse to the bathroom and changed her pads just like all the other girls at school.

We have since taught other girls about getting their periods and how to manage the monthly process themselves. These students, even those who are non-verbal and cognitively low but physically capable of managing the process, have learned to do so, discreetly and independently.

Not all girls, of course, are physically or cognitively capable of self-managing their monthly periods. But, I think it's important for instructors and parents to remember to teach as much as they can handle and empower them as much as possible. I have been repeatedly surprised at how well the students I've worked with have been able to meet and even surpass our expectations.

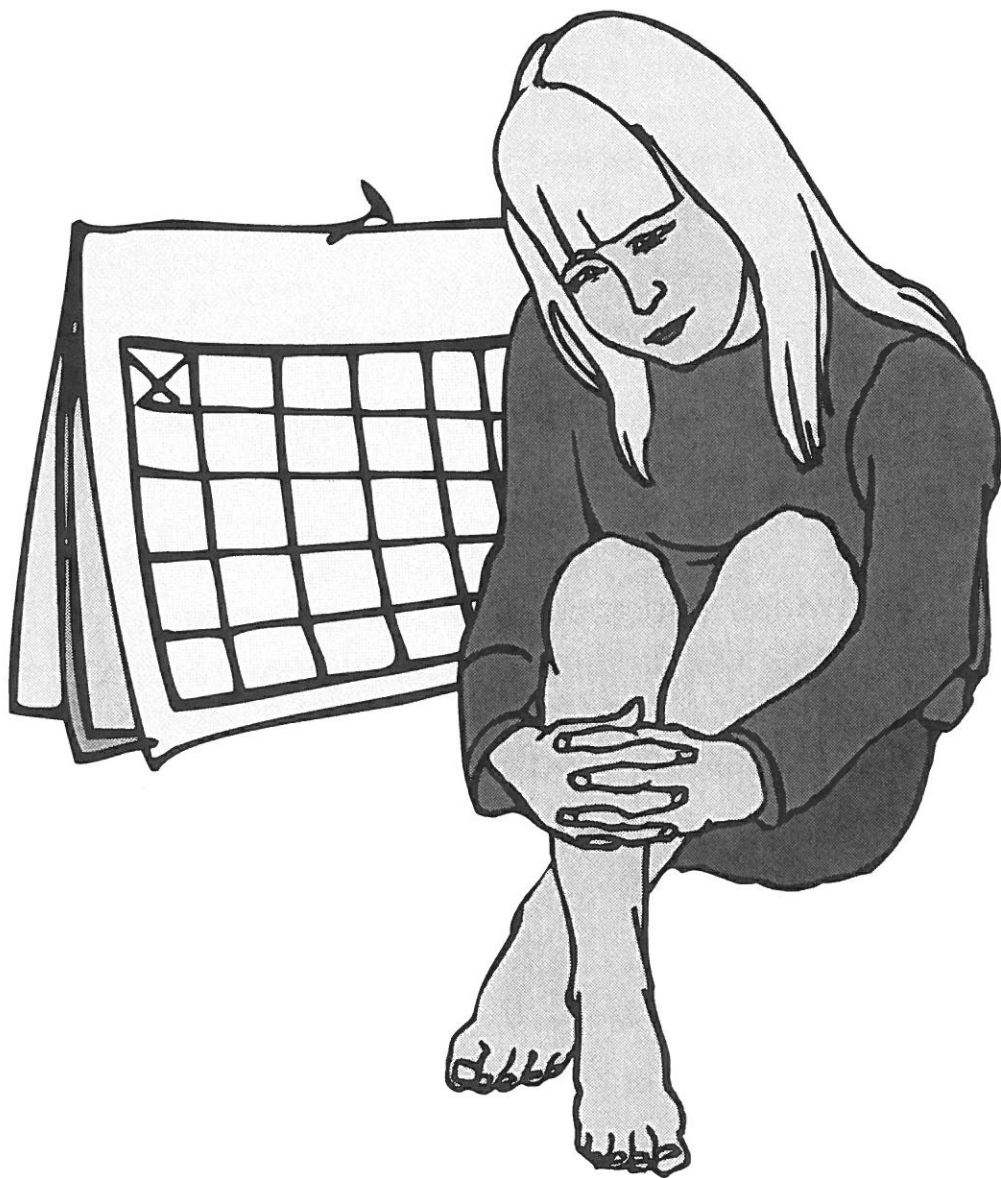
A mother whose daughter had severe disabilities, cognitive as well as physical, once asked me why or if she should even bother instructing her daughter when the girl wore a diaper and could never manage any part of this new process. I told her I believe we have an obligation to teach what we can and try to help them understand to the best of their ability. Even if we aren't sure how much of the curriculum a student can cognitively process, the goal is to facilitate as much independent functioning as they are capable of handling while also helping to reduce the fear and distress that often accompanies menstruation.

The goals and anticipated progression of skills for this unit:

- Student will understand the process of menstruation as a part of her own growth and development.
- Student will identify blood on a pad.
- Student will demonstrate the sequence of changing a pad with prompts.
- Student will tolerate wearing a sanitary pad.
- Student will recognize when blood comes and tell her parent.
- Student will change soiled sanitary napkin independently and dispose of them properly.
- Student will understand menstrual cramping and be able to tell a parent or teacher when cramps occur.
- Student will demonstrate discretion and modesty during her menstrual period.

The following activities and stories were created to help girls of varying cognitive and physical capabilities to understand menstruation and learn to self-manage the process of monthly periods efficiently, discreetly and independently, to the best of their ability.

The following story is a generic, introductory story about getting your period. It is often initially presented to a group of girls who are showing some signs of puberty but are approximately 1 to 2 years away from actually having a period. The menstruation unit typically builds, with more stories and activities added as students get older and closer to the onset of menstruation, and even after menstruation begins. I will often introduce this story to girls in the fourth grade.



Getting My Period

- ↪ My body is changing. My body is growing bigger and taller. My breasts are growing bigger.
- ↪ Hair is growing on my privates and underarms. Soon I will have my period.
- ↪ When I have my period, blood will come from my privates, between my legs. This is okay.
- ↪ Blood will come from my privates for a few days and then it will stop.
- ↪ At first I might be scared and upset to see blood between my legs.
- ↪ But having a period is okay. I am not hurt when the blood comes from my privates.



- ↪ All big girls, mommies and adult women have periods.
- ↪ A period usually happens every month. Blood will come out of my privates for five or six days, and then the blood will stop.
- ↪ A period is messy. Blood might get on my underwear and pants. Wearing pads in my panties will help.
- ↪ During my period, I will wear pads in my panties. Blood from my privates will go on the pads.
- ↪ When the pad becomes dirty with blood, I will take out the yucky, red pad in the bathroom and throw it away.
- ↪ I will put a clean, white pad in my panties. I will fold and wrap the old pad in toilet paper and throw it away.



- ↪ I always need to wash my hands after I change my pads. I will wash my hands after I throw away the yucky, red pad.
- ↪ I will change my pads in the bathroom with the door shut. I will change my pad when I use the toilet.
- ↪ My period will come every month. Mom will know when my period comes. Mom will help me know when I need to wear pads in my panties.
- ↪ Sometimes, I won't like my period. Sometimes, I will feel uncomfortable and sad when the blood comes.
- ↪ Sometimes, women are uncomfortable when they get their period. Mommy will help me when I am sad and uncomfortable with my period.
- ↪ I will feel better soon.



↪ I will be okay when I get my period.

↪ I am a big girl now. I will get my period like Mommy and other big girls.

↪ I will do a good job of wearing my pads. I will do a good job of changing my pads in the bathroom.



I will do a good job when I get my period and the blood comes.