

Puberty in Girls with Disabilities

“Caterpillar: ‘...and who are you?’

“Alice: ‘I...I hardly know, Sir, just at present. At least I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I am not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle.’”

-Lewis Carroll

Alice in Wonderland

Sometime between the ages of about 9 to 15, the pituitary gland at the base of the brain signals the ovaries in girls, and testicles in boys, to release a surge of hormones into the blood stream. Hormones cause rapid changes in the body. They also play a part in the mood swings that young teens have.

Most girls enter puberty about two years ahead of boys. Breasts begin to develop, pubic and underarm hair appears, and then menstruation begins. Fifty years ago, first menstruation occurred at about 16. Now the average age is 11 or 12! So girls need to be prepared for their periods around the age of ten. Periods usually start about two years after breasts begin to develop and are often irregular for the first two years.

Learning About Periods

Many mothers and fathers ask anxiously how they can prepare their daughters for menstruation. The reasons for the anxiety are many.

“She’s afraid of blood and I’m sure we’ll have an awful time every month.”

“She won’t understand what it’s about and I’m not sure she’ll be able to learn how to take care of herself.”

What does she absolutely need to know? Not really very much to start with. She needs to know that her periods are normal and part of being a woman; that it is good for women to have periods.

How you talk to her can make a difference in the way she reacts when her periods start. She also needs to know how to put on a pad and take it off, how and where to throw it away and how to clean herself. She also needs to know how to behave in public when she is having her period.

Have her practice putting on and taking off a pad. She can wear one sometimes to get used to it. Let her know that when she notices blood on her panties, she should tell you or her teacher, if she starts in school. Tell her that:

Having a period is special and private. Who can you talk to about private things? Mom, Dad, or your teacher. Perhaps the school nurse, as well. No one else. We do not show anyone else our pads. We keep our dresses down and our pants up.

You may want to have your daughter watch you go through the steps of self care when you have a period. This can be very positive modeling for her.

”Long before Megan started, I had her practice putting on a pad and taking it off. To get her used to them, she wore them while I was having a period. I kept repeating this every month. I had to teach her the process of putting on and taking off a pad in small steps. She had difficulty using her hands, so it took a long time and a lot of patience.

“At first, I guided her hands, placing my hands over hers, as she picked up the pad, took off the strip and placed the pad in her panties. After awhile, she could do each step just with telling her, ‘Now pick up the pad, tear off the strip...’ and so on. After finishing each step, I would praise her. When she did start her period, we had a few problems. Sometimes she refused to wear the pads and would take them off. That was pretty frustrating. I solved the problem by sewing the ends of the pads into her panties. We changed the panties until she got used to the pads.”

-Robin

Robin used a process called task analysis to help her daughter learn to take care of herself. Task analysis means breaking the task into small parts and teaching on part at a time, until each step is mastered. If you need assistance with this look for someone through your school or perhaps a child development program that can help you with this.

You may have a daughter that is not toilet trained or cannot care for herself in other ways. This young woman will need more constant hygiene care during menstruation and you may need some extra help with her care.

These diagrams may help with explaining to your daughter the process of menstruation. Using a hand mirror to show her where these body parts are located on herself may help her to understand her self and her body functions more easily.

Giving Information about Sexual Topics

Start with what is absolutely necessary and add information bit by bit, as much as your daughter can understand.

Start with the simple basics; what your daughter absolutely needs to know so she is not afraid of what is happening, can look after herself properly and can behave properly in public.

Tell your daughter what is happening inside her body, if she can understand it. For instance, to continue with the example of menstruation:

The bleeding comes from the uterus, inside your body, right about here (point to the location on your own body and on her body). It happens for a few days each month and is called menstruation.

Talk to her about the emotions that happen in connection with what is going on in her body. Discuss as much as you think she’ll understand. If she is moody just before her period, you can explain that sometimes when a girl is having her period, she may feel sad or in a bad mood. If

she is experiencing cramps, you can say that this is the uterus squeezing to let the blood out. In some situations, medication may be necessary for cramps.

Let her know about the relationship between periods and babies, again as much as she can understand.

If you would like more material on teaching your daughter about menstruation, the Bureau has some literature and teaching tools for families to use. Please call your Care Coordinator:

at 1-800-852-3345 ext 4488 or 1-603-271-4525 ext. 4488

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