



Talking To Your Daughter About... Periods

Preparing for your daughter's periods can seem like an age old rite of passage, both for her *and* for you. Not only are you facing the fact that your 'little girl' is no longer quite so little, you may also be feeling that you're not such a young mum after all.

But it's time to put such finer feelings aside. After all, there's no denying it. Her hormones are hotting up and the tell tale signs may begin to show. She's grumpy. She's tearful. Before you know it, so are you. At times like these knowing what to say can be a delicate affair...

It's still good to talk

Given her tender age, it's a good idea to talk about periods with her sooner, rather than later. By the time your daughter actually starts her menstrual cycle, she's probably more in the mood for a hug and a hot water bottle than a long talk about the link between her womb lining and a panty liner.

They grow up so soon...

There's another very good reason for talking to your daughter earlier than you might instinctively prefer. Although there are no definitive answers as to why¹, it does seem that girls these days are tending to hit puberty earlier than their mothers' generation². Beginning puberty earlier could also mean that your daughter may start her periods younger than you did, perhaps even as early as nine.

Whether your daughter is an early developer or a late starter, it's wise not to assume she'll be just like you either, in terms of her cycle length or hormonal side-effects. She also needs to know that there's a wide range of 'normal', both so that she's mentally prepared for her own menstrual cycles and so that she's aware that her friends' experiences may well be different.

How much detail is enough?

If you're reluctant to get into the details with her, remember that encouraging your daughter to be well-informed about her menstrual cycle is also an early precaution against unwanted pregnancy later on down the line. If you're embarrassed and confused she may be too – and therefore less likely to understand her own body.

The trick is to impart the biological facts in a way that's neither alarming nor hilariously misleading. Talk of "having the painters in" is not going to get you, nor her, anywhere useful. But then, neither is a blood and guts drama.

Be clear about the facts

Perhaps the easiest way to explain the menstrual cycle is that it's a sign that she is starting to develop into a woman. This means that the lining of her womb thickens each month so that it could support a fertilised egg. But unless a woman is pregnant, the womb lining breaks away about every 28 days, and is released as a flow of blood and tissue through the opening of the vagina.

Of course, you'll want to put it into your own words and exactly how you broach the topic will be influenced by the closeness of your relationship. But if you can keep it personal and real (without wanting to sound like an American shrink) then you're more likely to get your daughter really listening.

That's not to say that an informative diagram or two isn't a good idea, especially to make sure that you've got your own facts right. It's just that your daughter has probably seen (and sniggered at) all that at school. Body changes are discussed initially in Year Five within the national curriculum, with more detail being introduced in Years Six and Seven. So it's already a topic for public (i.e. playground) consumption.

How to handle it at home

Perhaps the difference between what a school offers (the facts, the polite discussion about feelings in class, the fits of the giggles afterwards) and what you as a mum can offer is the benefit of your experience. Some honest insights. A bit of humour. The all-important reassurance she needs.

A relaxed attitude towards the reality of having periods — including the aches and pains, the mishaps and the mortifications — will help her realise that she's not alone in her anxieties. The point is not to scare the pants off her, but to let her know that even the things that worry her aren't really that bad.

Honesty is the best policy

She needs to know that yes, one day your tampons will fall out of your handbag. Yes, you might get caught short without pads when your period starts. She might be secretly tickled or even horrified to hear your own tales of woe, but surely she's best getting the inside story from you rather than thinking that she's the first girl in the world to have ever got it wrong.

Similarly, she'll appreciate your insights into period pains and the hormonal feelings she's likely to be having. Your daughter might be lucky enough to sail through her monthly cycle without a niggle, but painful periods are very common among teenagers.

Period pains

As well as cramps, she may feel tired or faint, suffer from headaches, sore breasts, or even sickness and diarrhoea³. If so, don't just dismiss her moans. Whether you run her a hot bath, suggest a hot water bottle or offer painkillers, she's learning that there are positive ways to soothe herself, rather than feeling helpless and miserable.

If you can establish a frank and open communication between you from the start, it will make it all the easier to offer guidance on personal hygiene once her periods become a regular event.

Woman to woman advice

Particularly if your daughter starts her periods when she's quite young, say at 10 rather than as a teenager, you might be taken aback by her unconcern for 'pantyliner etiquette'. This is when you need to offer a quick tip, woman to woman, on how to dispose of used pads and wrappers discretely.

Promoting the pleasures of showering and bathing as a pampering activity is a more positive way of encouraging cleanliness than marching her to the bathroom, tempting as that may be. Even providing a cute makeup case or purse in which to carry her pads or tampons will help her feel fashionable and feminine, rather than hormonal and horrible.

All these little things count — and make her feel loved when she needs it most. And perhaps that is the most important message of all, however you express it. As she's embarking on one of the biggest physical changes in her life, she needs to feel safe, accepted and understood. It's one of the greatest gifts any mother can give her daughter.

Summary:

1. Talk to her about periods early on when puberty begins
2. Give her the facts in a way that's easy to understand
3. Be relaxed about the subject and share your insights
4. Recognise if she gets period pains and show her how to ease them
5. Encourage personal hygiene and pampering

References:

1. <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11307-childhood-obesity-brings-early-puberty-for-girls.html>
2. <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6005459>
3. http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/html/Dysmenorrhoea.html

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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