

# Q&A with Children’s Commissioner, Helen Connolly, on ‘Menstruation Matters’

When SA Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly wrote her *Leave No-One Behind* report about poverty from the perspective of South Australia’s children, she didn’t expect period poverty would be such a significant issue. It prompted further research, to establish the depth and breadth of the issue from the point of view of SA young people.

Their responses have been captured in a recently released report: ‘**Menstruation Matters**’.

In it, SA’s youth have told the Commissioner they want the social, economic, cultural and environmental barriers relating to menstruation to stop negatively impacting their lives while they are in school, sport and across society more broadly.

**Menstruation Matters** argues that because of the wide-ranging impact periods have on young people, the onus is on all sectors of society — government, education, business, health, and community — to recognise menstrual wellbeing and dignity as a systemic issue fundamental to children’s rights, central to economic productivity, and crucial to achieving gender equity.

**Q** *Why is menstruation an issue that needs to be addressed?*

**A** Earlier this year, the State Government announced it would provide funding towards free sanitary products in schools, which was great. However, a critical issue as just as pressing is the stigma and taboo associated with menstruation and managing periods.

Menstruation is one of the earliest experiences of systemic gender inequality. A comprehensive menstruation education approach would help address the bullying and teasing about menstruation that young people face at school. Being taught to hide menstruation from an early age was one of the key frustrations children and young people communicated.

**Q** *What prompted the report?*

**A** The issue of period poverty first came up in a project on poverty amongst children and young people that I undertook in 2018. Period poverty referred mainly to the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products amongst young people, many of whom were forced to resort to substitutes that were very inadequate or had to rely on the kindness of a friend or teacher to meet their urgent needs.

I felt there was also a bigger issue at play, so I decided to extend my research into the impact of menstruation on children and young people. To do this, I conducted two online surveys in 2020 with a total of 2,985 young people providing responses. The responses made clear that menstruation is an issue that young people rarely have an opportunity to talk about, despite it having a significant impact on their lives.

Their responses showed too, that there needs to be changes made to the way in which we speak about menstruation in school relationship and sex education lessons, in our interactions with students, and in our policies that affect periods. In short, students want to be supported to manage menstruation in ways that maximise their opportunities to participate in school, sport, and social commitments with family and friends.

**Q** *How does menstruation effect school participation?*

**A** Young people explained that their menstruation-related absence from school was often due to strict rules dictating when students can use the bathroom at school, along with inadequate bathroom and disposal facilities and difficulty of obtaining a period product. They also spoke about the fear of being embarrassed by their classmates; particularly by male students.

While many young people described the general impact period pain has on their wellbeing, many mentioned the impact of adults dismissing their menstrual pain as being 'trivial'. Not being taken seriously by adults, as well as by peers, is one of the key reasons young people feel the need to keep periods secret and discreet.

**Q** *What can schools and teachers do?*

**A** Young people often shared the view that sex education lessons only took a biological approach and were lacking depth. They said it was important for teachers to be supported so that they feel comfortable teaching students about menstruation, regardless of their students' gender. They also want diversity and inclusion to feature in their sex ed lessons so that young LGBTQi+ people can participate in meaningful ways and not remain 'invisible'.

Other suggestions included being taught how to have respectful conversations about menstruation, how to access and how to use products, as well as 'what to do if you don't have any products with you'. They described the need for information to cover what to expect 'other than blood' and suggested discussions around the full range of potential physiological and psychological symptoms such as abdominal pain, cramps, headaches, changes in mood, energy levels and dietary preferences, also be included.

**Q** *What are some of the actions we can take as a society?*

**A** A key finding of the surveys was that young people believe all young people, regardless of gender identity, should receive comprehensive menstruation education. Most young people expressed hope that teaching everyone about menstruation, particularly boys and young men, would normalise menstruation and increase maturity, empathy, kindness, and gender equality overall. Doing so may impact positively on other areas of sex education too, including issues of respect and consent and society's behavioural expectations around boys and young men more broadly.

We also need to stop using slang to describe periods and menstruation as they can reinforce stigma and taboo. We need to make period products more accessible, both inside and outside of school, and generally need to present a much more positive portrayal of menstruation in our conversations and in the media. If we can also raise awareness around endometriosis and other conditions that involve the management of both acute and chronic menstruation pain, we will be helping many young people who suffer from these conditions feel validated and supported. ■

To read the Commissioner's full "Menstruation Matters" report go to: [ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports/](https://ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports/)