

Why poor menstrual health knowledge and barriers to accessing period products damage educational attainment – and how to fix it

Dr. Maria Tomlinson & Irise International

Summary

Menstrual education is not meeting the needs of young people, both in its content and delivery. Furthermore, despite free provision through the [Period Product Scheme](#), pupils are still struggling to access period products throughout the school day. Schools rarely take into consideration the location of products during exam time. As pupils cannot bring period products into exam halls, they are anxious about leaking and this can affect their attainment. Combined, poor menstrual health knowledge and barriers to accessing period products are negatively impacting pupils' wellbeing, attendance, and attainment.

This brief recommends that the £1 million investment in menstrual education (as part of the renewed women's health strategy) is used to train teachers to deliver menstrual education that is non-stigmatising, inclusive, engaging, and sensitive to diverse faith and cultural backgrounds. This education should form part of a whole-school approach which not only ensures access to period products but also actively dismantles menstrual stigma so that pupils can feel empowered to raise concerns.

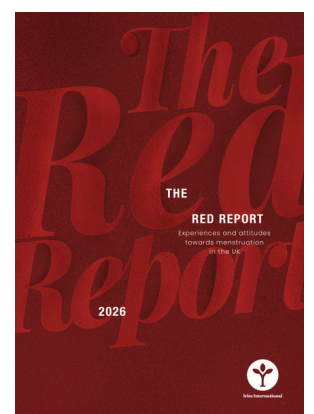
We have already evidenced the success of combining education and school-wide pupil-led menstrual health policies in the [Period Confident Schools](#) Programme. This programme, which is a collaboration between Irise and Dr. Tomlinson (Irise's academic partner) supports schools to deliver a curriculum for years 4-7 and implement Irise's UK Schools Toilet Policy Toolkit.

About the Research

Echoing the Department for Education's Opportunity Mission and areas of research interest in pupil wellbeing, attainment, and attendance, Dr. Tomlinson has led research which has examined pupils' experiences of menstrual health education, managing menstruation, and communicating about menstruation in school. This research identified barriers young people faced to accessing period products as well as inclusive, accurate, and appropriate menstrual health information.

Dr. Tomlinson conducted and analysed focus groups with 77 teenage girls, boys, and non-binary pupils in schools and colleges in England (The Menstrual Movement, 2025). She also interviewed 32 activists, charities, and community leaders who support young people with their menstrual health. This research, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, explored how young people communicate about menstruation and how this is shaped by factors such as stigma, education, and social media. It is the first study to explore the impact of social media, menstrual advocacy, and education on young people's menstrual experiences, knowledge about menstruation, and ability to ask for support with their menstrual health.

Irise's consultations with young people have also examined menstrual stigma, menstrual literacy, and barriers to menstrual management. Consultations include the [Every Period Counts](#) campaign (2023) and a [roundtable](#), hosted by the Lord Mayor and Sheffield City Council (2024), that brought together pupils, teachers, and sector allies. Irise also surveyed 2000 adults about their menstrual health knowledge, menstrual stigma, and discrimination for their [Red Report](#) (2026).



Research Findings

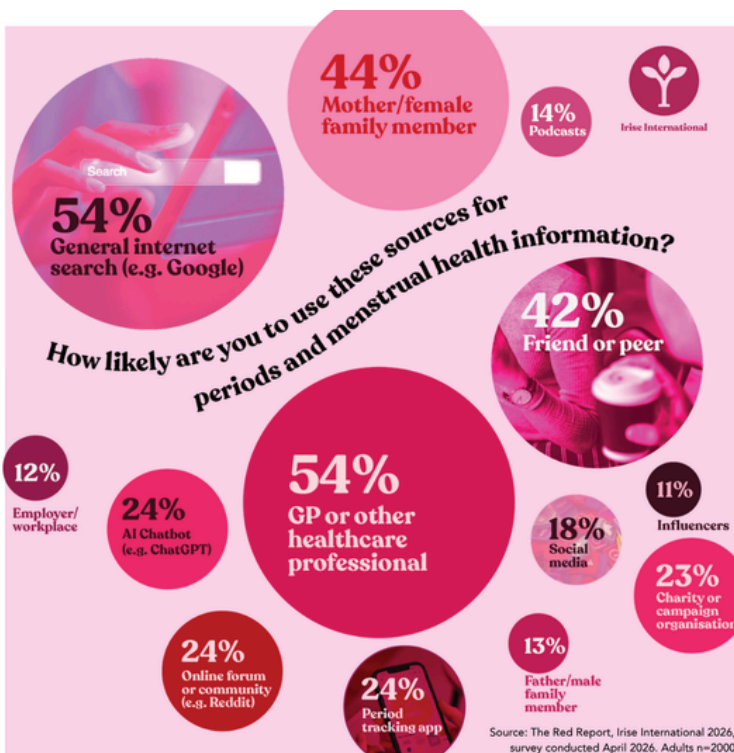
Dr. Tomlinson's focus groups with 77 boys, girls and non-binary pupils (aged 16-19) revealed that menstrual health education and period product provision in schools is not meeting the needs of young people.

Menstrual Education

- Pupils are relying on social media to fill gaps in their knowledge about menstruation. This leads to their absorbing misinformation.
- When teachers show a lack of confidence or embarrassment when communicating about menstruation, this reinforces menstrual stigma and negatively impacts learning.
- Young people believed that their primary school education did not sufficiently prepare them to manage their first period. Young men and women in the research called for more comprehensive, non-stigmatising, practical, and engaging primary level education. This includes recognising if pain or bleeding are typical or require medical support.
- Young people are keen to try reusable period products. However, written and verbal guidance is not always sufficient to teach them how to use them. This is a particular barrier for pupils with Special Educational Needs.
- Young people from the global majority, especially those from faith groups, feel the most underserved and marginalised by their menstrual education in school.

Young people wished that their menstrual education had...

- Included guidance on how to identify if menstrual symptoms such as pain and bleeding are typical, and how to communicate about these symptoms
- Included real life examples of menstrual experience, so they can learn about how others experience periods
- Taken into account the influence of faith and culture on experiences of periods and choice of period products. This would help girls from the global majority feel included and heard in lessons about menstruation
- Included content on how boys and men can communicate about menstruation in a non-stigmatising way and how they can support their family and friends who menstruate. This was suggested by male participants and echoed by girls.
- Been more engaging, interactive, and tactile, especially at primary school level. This could include practicing folding a cup or testing the absorbency of period pants with water
- Been delivered by teachers who normalised open conversations about periods and were confident to talk about menstruation



“Most information we get on periods is from social media... it educates young people more than their school”

- participant in Dr. Tomlinson's research

Implementation of the Period Product Scheme for Schools and Colleges

Dr. Tomlinson's focus groups with teenagers and Irise's consultations revealed that the Period Product Scheme is vital for removing barriers to accessing education and is deeply appreciated by young people. Pupils are, however, experiencing the following barriers:

- Products are not always stored in bathrooms or other locations that are convenient to access during class, break times, and examinations. In many schools, products are **locked away** or available only on request. Menstrual stigma and time spent walking to other areas of the school to find products are barriers to access.
- Pupils are struggling to access their school's free period products during **exams**. Pupils cannot bring period products into exams. They often take place in a different location from where period products are stored. As pupils are experiencing anxiety about leaking, this is affecting their concentration and is likely to affect their attainment.
- Pupils with Special Educational Needs, disabilities, and those who do not wish to use internal products for cultural reasons face added barriers to accessing the scheme. For example, some pupils shared that they could sometimes only access thin or internal products.
- Many pupils are reluctant to try their school's free reusable products because they do not know how to use them and there are no sinks in cubicles in which they can wash these products. These barriers prevent pupils from trying products that are better for the environment and may be better for their health than single-use products.

Irise's Red Report (2026) provides further evidence of the findings above. This report reveals that increased menstrual knowledge is strongly associated with greater comfort, confidence, and everyday engagement with menstruation.

- 46% of respondents that expressed an opinion about menstrual stigma in school indicated that it had increased menstrual stigma
- Only 41% felt comfortable talking about menstruation with children and young people
- People who feel knowledgeable about menstruation are three times more likely to talk about it (this increase to five times for men)

“In exams you can't really bring anything in. They're just going to think you're cheating but you're not, you just need to change yourself.”

- participant in Dr. Tomlinson's research



Most UK adults are not comfortable talking about menstruation in day to day situations.



I would feel comfortable talking about menstruation

with my family (47%)



with children or young people (41%)



with colleagues (37%)



at a social gathering (30%)



Source: The Red Report, Irise International 2026, survey conducted April 2026. Adults n=2000



A whole-school approach to education, menstrual stigma, and period product provision

To address the issues around menstrual education and period product provision that were identified in Dr. Tomlinson's research and Irise's consultations, we established the [Period Confident Schools Programme](#) which is currently being piloted in 12 schools in England and Wales. Via this programme, Irise is delivering effective training for 152 teachers and members of senior leadership teams to create a school culture that dismantles menstrual stigma and removes barriers to attendance and attainment that can be caused by menstrual inequities.

This programme, funded by the University of Sheffield and Flintshire county council, combines:

- An engaging, interactive, and comprehensive **menstrual health curriculum for years 4-7**. Created by a primary school teacher in 2024 (Belszki) and shaped by Dr. Tomlinson's research, this includes four lessons that teach pupils about the menstrual cycle, symptoms, how to manage menstruation, how to navigate period pain, how to identify if pain is too severe, how to use a range of reusable and single-use period products, and how boys can support peers and family who menstruate.
- Irise's [UK Schools Toilet Policy Toolkit](#) which was developed in consultation with pupils and teachers and draws on evidence from Dr. Tomlinson's research. This toolkit allows pupils and staff to develop toilet policies and period product provision that works for everyone in the school (including pupils with Special Educational Needs).

Feedback from pupils

- "Many of the girls have felt more comfortable detailing their struggles to members of staff... rather than covering it up."
- "I used to think that it was awkward talking about periods and when I had these lessons I felt more confident, and I can speak to other people about it"
- "We now know why periods happen. Now when we have it, we won't get scared."
- 'If my friend is on her period, because I've learned about it, I know what to do and how to help her' (boy)
- 'It was more fun than seeing a picture of it and someone pointing to it. It's more fun experiencing it' (a pupil sharing her experiences of learning about the menstrual cycle through balls, tents, and tunnels that represent eggs, ovaries, the uterus, and fallopian tubes).

Feedback from teachers

- "The initiative has ensured that students do not miss lessons, extracurricular activities, or social opportunities due to lack of access."
- "Students feel more confident and informed, not only about their own bodies but also in supporting peers. Students feel encouraged to talk about periods without embarrassment or fear of judgment, which has contributed to a significant reduction in stigma, helping to normalise conversations about menstrual health and wellbeing."
- "There were really hands-on activities - I learned things through that. Seeing it actually happen, especially for the lower ability children who might learn visually rather than just words on a powerpoint, it was really helpful"
- "The boys have really surprised me in terms of how engaged they have been. I've spoken to them about it from a male perspective about what we can do, and why we are learning about it. The "be an ally thing" is really helpful. Now they're getting a head start and they won't grow up with that stigma".

Recommendations

1. The Department for Education, Women's Health Policy team in the Department of Health and Social Care and Wellbeing of Women (as the main contact for the funding) should work together with Dr Maria Tomlinson & Irise International to ensure that the £1million investment in menstrual education is used to its full potential. This is necessary so that the investment achieves its maximum impact on pupils' knowledge, wellbeing, attendance, and attainment.
2. The £1million investment in menstrual education should include improving both primary and secondary school education. This must include support and training for teachers so that they can deliver lessons in a way which does not reinforce menstrual stigma. At secondary school level, we recommend that menstrual health education also supports young people to challenge the misinformation and menstrual shame they can absorb from social media.
3. We are also calling for the Department for Education to enhance the latest RSE guidance by adding guidance for primary education that goes beyond facts about the menstrual cycle. This should include teaching children how to manage menstrual symptoms, how to use a range of reusable and single-use products as well as understand their benefits/disadvantages, and how to communicate about periods in a non-stigmatising way. We recommend that primary education begins in year 4, and includes interactive, age-appropriate, and destigmatising class activities that benefit all pupils, taking into account cultural diversity and pupils with special educational needs.
4. The £1million investment in menstrual education should not be limited to lessons but should also support schools to adapt a whole-school approach to menstrual health and toilet access. This should include training for staff in schools so that they can dismantle menstrual stigma, empower pupils to raise concerns, ensure toilet access, and effectively implement the government's period product scheme. Lessons and menstrual policies must take into account pupils with Special Educational Needs and be delivered sensitively to diverse faith and cultural backgrounds. The Period Confident schools programme has evidenced the benefits to pupils' wellbeing, knowledge, and menstrual health management when effective inclusive education is combined with pupil-led Toilet & Period policies.
5. Schools should be mandated to ensure period products are within immediate reach of pupils undertaking exams. We recommend that the period product scheme guidance is also updated to emphasise the need to make special arrangements for product provision

Work with us

Dr. Maria Tomlinson is a lecturer in public communication and gender at the University of Sheffield. She is Irise International's academic partner. She researches health communication and its impact on social inequalities. Dr. Tomlinson collaborates with a variety of menstrual health organisations and with teachers to improve menstrual health education and dismantle menstrual stigma. She chaired the committee which created the ground-breaking British Standard "BS30416: Menstruation, Menstrual Health and Menopause in the Workplace". Besides the standard, her research has been used in guides, toolkits, and policy documents by organisations such as The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, The Women's Environmental Network, and Phs.

Irise International is an award winning, global leader in menstrual justice programming, policy and research. Irise amplifies the power of youth-led activism by fostering collaboration and peer learning. Irise's mission is simple: equip young people with the tools, resources, and networks they need to drive the social transformation needed to realise menstrual justice for all. Their work includes period provision, youth-led workshops, in-schools programming, national advocacy and global movement building.

We are available to support the Department for Education, Women's Health Strategy team and Wellbeing of Women who hold the £1 million investment in menstrual education, to enhance menstrual health education, toilet access, and the implementation of the period product scheme in schools.

Further Info

- Irise International and University of Sheffield (2026) [Period Confident Schools](#)
- Irise International (2026) [The Red Report](#)
- Irise International (2025) [UK Schools Toilet Policy Toolkit](#)
- Phs. (2025) ['Best practice guide on how to facilitate period equality at your school, college or university'](#)
- Sawyer, G., et al., (2025). [Associations of adolescent menstrual symptoms with school absences and educational attainment: analysis of a prospective cohort study. Science of Learning.](#)
- Tomlinson, M. (2025) [The Menstrual Movement in the Media: Reducing Stigma and Tackling Social Inequalities \(Palgrave\)](#)
- Women's Environmental Network and Pesticide Action Network (2025) [Blood, Sweat and Tears: A closer look at Toxic Chemicals in period products](#)