

GET IT RIGHT
FOR **GIRLS**

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eis

Distributing period products in schools and colleges

Good practice guidance

December 2017



“Dignity for learners and staff is enhanced if they can more easily access the products they need...”

Purpose of this guidance note

The EIS wishes to enable Reps to assist schools and colleges in supporting learners and staff during menstruation, which is a normal part of life. We know that periods are a taboo subject, which has perhaps inhibited open discussion in learning environments about how best to support learners and staff having periods.

The EIS has broader guidance on how education establishments can 'Get it Right for Girls'¹, and this note should be read alongside that document. This guidance note is informed by data provided in summer 2017 by 23 local authorities and 18 FE colleges, from across Scotland's many and diverse communities, about the cost and availability of sanitary products.

Why does the provision of period products matter?

Schools and colleges will want to get their approach to this issue right because:

Easy access to period products is fundamental to the health and wellbeing of female and some transgender pupils, students and staff.

- Dignity for learners and staff is enhanced if they can more easily access the products they need and can manage their periods more easily when in school or college.
- It can help to avert serious health consequences including infections and Toxic Shock Syndrome, which can be fatal, and which are caused by using the wrong products or using products in the wrong way.
- Learners or staff who have medical conditions which cause erratic periods, such as endometriosis, will be more likely to have their needs met where products are readily available.
- It may mitigate the stress of having erratic periods caused by hunger and malnutrition, which is exacerbated by low-income poverty.
- It can form part of the overall approach to health and wellbeing in educational provision.

Period-related health and wellbeing impacts on educational outcomes.

- There are likely to be attendance impacts of better provision of sanitary products – girls are more likely to attend school/college if they know they can manage their periods whilst present. (In 2017, a safer schools officer working at a school in the UK discovered that a large number of female pupils were truanting because they were unable to buy or access products during their menstrual cycle.)
- There may be attainment impacts - if learners have fewer absences and are not distracted, anxious or uncomfortable when they have their periods.
- Reducing anxiety and stress about how to access period products should enable students and staff to focus more on learning and teaching.

The cost of period products can exacerbate the impact of poverty on education.

- It may improve accessibility of education if products are more widely available, as for some learners who experience low-income poverty, period products can be an expense that is difficult to meet.
- It aligns with other initiatives to reduce the 'cost of the school day'² or the cost of attending college.
- Initiatives to make products more widely available can involve very low costs, especially when bulk buying is used, and generate significant benefits and goodwill.
- It can form part of the overall approach to ensuring equity in educational provision.

Making period products easily accessible can assist in promoting equality and meeting the needs of various groups.

- It contributes to tackling stigmas and normalising periods if products are widely or freely available and this is well advertised.

¹ www.eis.org.uk/Gender_Equality/Get_Right_Girls.htm

² See http://www.eis.org.uk/Campaigns/Child_poverty.htm and <http://www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day>

“I wrapped a sock around my underwear just to stop the bleeding, because I didn’t want to get shouted at. I once Sellotaped tissue to my underwear. I didn’t know what else to do.

I didn’t get any money because my mum was a single parent and she had five mouths to feed, so there wasn’t much leftover money in the pot to be giving to us.”

Female pupil, who started her period aged 11

[source: The Independent, Mar 2017³]

- Taking steps in this area sends out a signal that the establishment cares about getting it right for every child.
- Considered provision shows that establishments care about recognising the needs of female staff and visitors.
- It can assist an educational establishment to better meet the needs of transgender children or staff who may retain female biological functions whilst presenting as male.
- It can help to better meet the needs of peri-menopausal and menopausal staff.⁴
- It can help organisations meet their obligations under the Equality Act to protect people with protected characteristics (which include sex and gender reassignment) from discrimination.
- It can help organisations meet their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty to promote equality.

Socio-economic Context

This guidance is being issued in the context of increasing child and adolescent poverty, which we expect to be exacerbated by changes to social security arrangements, including the roll-out of Universal Credit payments, the increased use of sanctions, delayed payments, and growth in demand for food banks.

We would urge members to be vigilant regarding the impact of poverty within education, and to be aware that access to sanitary products is an important dimension of the wider campaign to mitigate the damage caused by low-income poverty to children’s and young people’s educational outcomes.

³ www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/girls-skipping-school-periods-cant-afford-tampons-sanitary-pads-a7629766.html

⁴ See also EIS guidance on Supporting Older Women members: www.eis.org.uk/Gender_Equality/womenworkplace.htm

How are period products distributed now?

The EIS has identified a wide range of ways in which period products are being distributed in schools and colleges now, some of which may be worth considering, and some which are less desirable. Reps may wish to examine which approaches are in use in their setting as a starting point to raising this issue locally.

Distribution is broadly via one or more of five approaches:

1. Request to non-teaching staff, e.g. at a school office, school or college reception, or school nurse
2. Request to teaching or guidance/support staff
3. Via the Students' Association, in FE colleges
4. Items being sold, either in vending machines or in a campus shop
5. Distributed freely by means of a cost-free vending machine or a drawer or basket in the toilets.

In all but one of these approaches, learners/staff are expected to ask someone for products, rather than having easy, unmoderated access to them. This can be challenging and can cause people embarrassment, especially as Scotland does not yet have a culture of openly discussing periods. Women and girls can experience this as undermining their dignity.

When buying products, learners/staff need to have money available, and also the correct change, which is not always possible. Again, this is a hindrance to people getting the items they need at the time they need them.

The EIS supports free universal provision of period products, as universalism reduces stigma and sends a clear message that everyone deserves to have their health and wellbeing needs met.

It is recommended that more efforts should be made to identify means of giving women and girls (and trans pupils, students and staff, where relevant) unmoderated, free access to the sanitary products that they need in order to fully participate in, and enjoy, work and learning.

Suggested 'do's and 'don't's for schools and colleges

Reps can raise these suggested 'do's and 'don't's in local negotiating fora. You may wish to audit your own establishment's provision before exploring possible changes to its approach.

DO...

- Explore various means of making period products more widely available across the establishment, including free distribution through various mechanisms such as 'help yourself' boxes or no-cost dispensing machines.
- Remember that the average age of starting periods is 12, but some girls can start from age 8, and so ensure that primary as well as secondary schools are well equipped to support girls with period products, sanitary bins etc.
- Maintain stocks of period products in a wide variety of places, not simply the school office; and examine the barriers that might exist to girls accessing period products through the school office, e.g. embarrassment, lack of suitable space for a quiet discussion, and what can be done about these barriers.
- Ensure that support staff who can provide period products make it known to learners that they keep items in stock that can be freely distributed as needed, and think about the best ways of communicating this.
- Remember to make provision for learners and staff going on residential and day trips.
- Make products available in all toilets used by girls and women, including disabled toilets, staff toilets and changing rooms.
- Stock period products in campus or school shops, where these exist.
- Explore ways of sourcing items for free where possible, including promotional packs from large companies which make period products.
- Although free access to products is the EIS position, if vending machines which charge for items are used as a last resort or as an interim measure while a new approach is phased in, we suggest that establishments:
 - » install these in toilets distributed across all buildings/campuses, not just in one location;
 - » examine the affordability of products sold in vending machines, and consider whether it is feasible to reduce the cost⁵;
 - » consider how women and girls might access change for vending machines, if these have a charge; and,
 - » check whether they offer items that are suitable for all girls (e.g. products which are suitable for girls having light periods).
- Consider the needs of transgender learners, e.g. those who are in the process of transitioning from female to male who still experience periods, and may not be able to access vending machines that are in the female toilets.
- Include the needs of peri-menopausal and menopausal staff and adult learners in colleges in your plans to provide period products – menstruation at these times can be more erratic and unpredictable and access to products can alleviate the stress this causes.
- Embed tackling the cost of accessing period products in wider work being undertaken to reduce the 'cost of the school day'⁶ or the cost of attending college.



- Work with students' associations/pupil councils to explore the issues particular to your context and to identify the best solutions.
- Consult staff via trade unions and other fora, on their own experiences and those of their learners, and work with staff to develop your local approach collegiately.
- Have campuses/buildings where there is no provision of period products – it could cause serious distress to a learner or staff member if they urgently need supplies and can't access any.
- Assume that the status quo is working fine if no-one has raised this locally before now – due to the nature of the issue people perhaps felt unable to do so.
- Be afraid to trial a range of new approaches to distributing period products - pilot schemes can identify what approaches work best.
- Be apologetic about discussing this openly – periods are a normal part of life and it is vital to meet learners' and staff needs and tackle any barriers to learning and work.
- Forget that the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty create an obligation on public bodies to actively promote equality and that tackling period poverty can help with fulfilling that obligation.

DON'T...

- Only make period products available through first aid or medical staff, as this suggests that periods are perceived as an illness and not as a normal part of girls' and women's lives.
- Expect girls always to be able to ask for emergency supplies at the school office or from teaching or guidance staff - remember that there is still stigma around discussing periods, and younger girls in particular may find this hard.

⁵Our investigation found that costs of items in vending machines vary widely, from 40p to £2. Often the cost per item from a vending machine is very high compared with the cost when purchased in a supermarket or similar.

⁶See http://www.eis.org.uk/Campaigns/Child_poverty.htm and <http://www.cpag.org.uk/cost-school-day>

Developments elsewhere

Since June 2017, 'Period Poverty' has been high on the public policy agenda, and there have been a number of interesting developments. These include:

- an announcement by North Lanarkshire Council that it decided in September 2017 to commence a pilot project to issue free products across 23 secondary schools, via free dispensing machines, as part of its work to ameliorate poverty
- a Scottish Government pilot scheme enabling free provision for women and girls from low income households in parts of Aberdeen, led by Community Food Initiatives North East, launched in July 2017
- the launch in August 2017 by Monica Lennon MSP of a proposal for a Member's Bill on Ending Period Poverty⁷
- a decision by North Ayrshire Council, following a government-backed pilot scheme which focused on improving health and wellbeing in females, to install two vending machines in the main female pupil toilets in all Secondary Schools from Aug 2017, which vend items free of charge.

As developments unfold nationally the EIS will issue further guidance, as needed.

“In a climate of austerity, with one in four children in Scotland living in poverty, the cost of essential sanitary products during menstruation is yet another expense that low-income families struggle to meet.

When you can't afford the products you need, this creates a huge amount of stress and violates your dignity.

Girls should be able to focus on learning when they're in an educational environment, and staff should be able to focus on teaching. That's why we support measures to destigmatise periods, and make products freely available.”

Nicola Fisher, EIS President 2017-18

More information and links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/periods/

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/puberty/Pages/Startingperiods.aspx

www.eis.org.uk/Equality/equality_act2010.htm

www.eis.org.uk/Equality/Gender.htm

Contact details

Please contact National Officer Jenny Kemp with questions or comments on this guidance.

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⁷<http://periodpovertyscotland.weebly.com/>