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Sanitary towel provision and disposal in primary schools

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Abstract

This study was designed to look at arrangements for menstruating girls in primary schools. We report the results of a questionnaire sent to the head teachers of 344 randomly selected primary schools throughout the UK. Although sanitary towels were available in 90% of schools, most girls had to ask an adult for a towel. Almost 60% of schools had disposal facilities, but in only 43% were facilities situated within individual toilet cubicles. The deficiencies identified in provision for girls in primary schools should be addressed.

Introduction

Some teachers perceive that the average age of menarche is getting younger, with more girls starting their periods while they are still at primary school (Thompson 1997; Coleman 1998). This study was designed to look at practical arrangements for menstruating girls in primary schools, in particular the provision of sanitary towels in schools and the disposal facilities available.

Paediatricians are frequently asked to see young girls in outpatient clinics that are judged by themselves, their parents, or their general practitioner, to be developing signs of early puberty, or indeed who are already menstruating at a young age. Contact with several young girls showed us that provision of sanitary facilities is very variable for primary school girls, and that lack of provision can cause significant distress, anxiety and embarrassment.

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A local study on facilities in primary schools in Wiltshire showed that 70% had sanitary towels available to girls and 78% had disposal facilities. This study was designed to look at the national picture in relation to sanitary provision as well as disposal of sanitary products.

Method

A questionnaire on sanitary towel provision and disposal was sent to the head teachers of 344 randomly selected primary schools in the UK. Full names and addresses of the schools were obtained from the Yellow Pages telephone directories.

The schools were picked using a stratified random sampling technique. This method relies on schools being listed in the 'Yellow Pages' directory. Some very small, private, or new schools might be missing from the directory. An alternative method would be to purchase lists of schools from each local education authority, but the lists are extremely expensive, and in this study, the cost was considered prohibitive. The head teachers were asked to complete six questions (see Appendix) and then return the completed form in a prepaid envelope. One reminder was sent to schools who had not replied 3 weeks after the initial mailing.

Data was entered into Microsoft Access 97 and analysed using SPSS software.

Results

Three hundred and forty-four questionnaires were sent out and 282 replies were received, giving a response rate of 82%. We did not identify any particular characteristic of non-responders. The mean number of girls in each school in years 5 and 6 combined was 28.3 (see Table 1).

Sanitary towels were available in 90.1% (254) of the schools who replied to

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Table 1 Information on schools participating in the survey

Mean no. of year 5 girls per school	14.7 (range 1-30, SD 13.6)
Mean no. of year 6 girls per school	13.7 (range 3-23, SD 10.1)
Mean no. of year 7 girls per school	28.3 (range 1-53, SD 23.2)

the survey (see Fig. 1). Where sanitary towels were available girls usually had to ask someone if they could have one—in 58.7% (149) of schools they could be obtained from a teacher and in 58.3% (148) from the school secretary (some schools gave more than one answer therefore totals appear > 100%). In only 1.6% (four) of schools supplying sanitary towels were they available from a machine in the girls' toilets. In 1.6% (four) they were available from machine in the teachers' toilet.

The results for disposal facilities (see Fig. 2) show that of those schools replying to the questionnaire 57.1% (161) had disposal facilities within the girls' toilets, of which 75.1% (121) were within individual toilet cubicles (i.e. only 42.9% of the total replies had disposal facilities within individual toilet cubicles). In 42.9% (121) there were no disposal facilities in the girls toilets but in 67.8% (82) of these schools the girls were specifically told that they could use the teachers' toilets. However, in many cases they had to ask a teacher before using their facilities. We did not ask for information about whether the teachers in each school had facilities for their *own* use. However, some respondents in the 'free text' section commented that in their particular case there were no facilities.

'Free text' comments were given in 21.3% (60) replies, and some of these are recorded in Table 2. Similar comments have been summarized together.

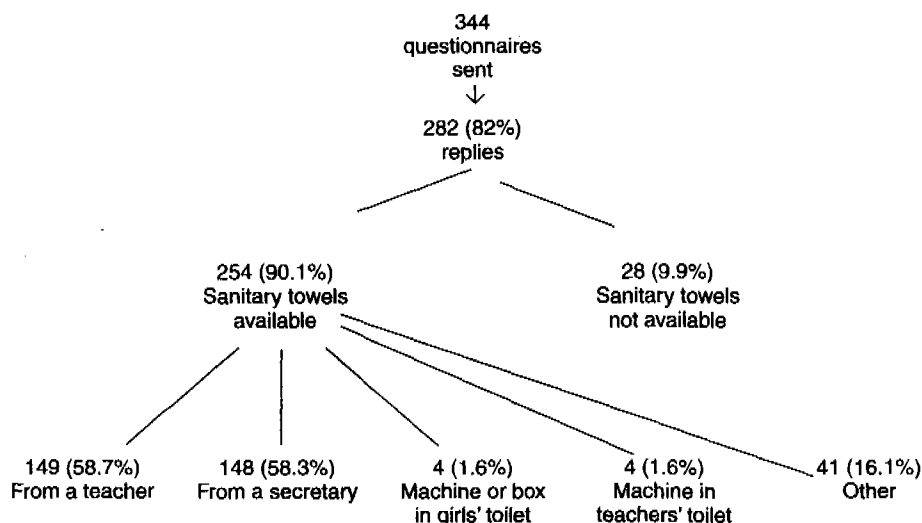


Figure 1 Sanitary towel availability.

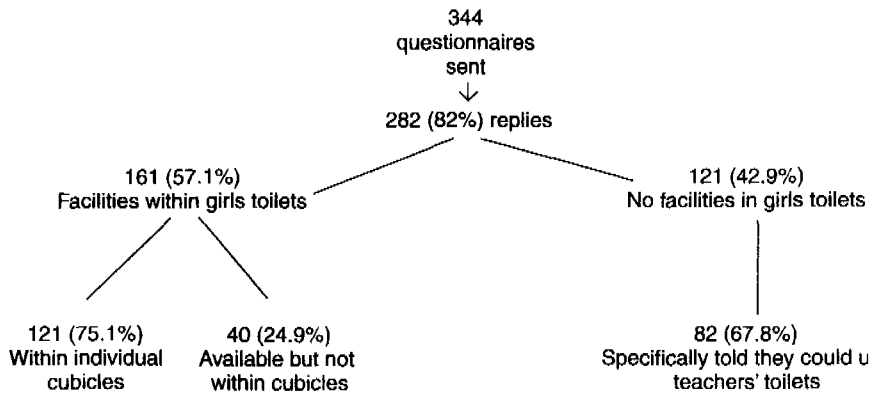


Figure 2 Disposal facilities.

Table 2 'Free text' comments made by teachers

- Sex education now takes place in year 5 as puberty has come earlier
- We ask parents and girls to inform us when they have started their periods so that we can help them
- As I've been at school for many years, the girls know me well and come to me freely for help advice
- Our family atmosphere in school allows for girls to feel free to discuss things with the staff; they are keen to let us know that they have started their periods as they are quite proud
- Once we know that they need to use a bin, they can use a staff toilet
- During year 6 all girls receive a sanitary towel pack as part of our sex education course
- All our girls are given a letter in year 5 explaining our facilities once they begin menstruating
- Year 5/6 girls have a talk with the female deputy head at the beginning of each year to clarify procedure disposal bags are provided
- Year 5/6 girls are given a talk at the beginning of the year to explain facilities available and names of teachers are given, to be approached if they need help or advice
- This is a sensitive issue: girls in year 5 and 6 are shown the availability of sanitary towels and disposal health education
- Girls are allowed to use the visitors' toilet
- We are very unhappy about the lack of provision
- We have desperately neglected the girls' needs: we'll address it. Thanks for the questionnaire
- So far this hasn't been an issue as the number of girls is very small. However, the questionnaire has made us think a bit more about it
- I am aware that this is one of the issues which need addressing
- I am ashamed to say I have not addressed this since I was appointed recently
- There is a lack of sanitary disposal facilities for staff which considering the high proportion of female teachers is unacceptable

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Discussion

Many teachers made interesting comments. Several stated that girls appeared to be starting their periods at an earlier age, for example, 'With girls now apparently starting periods earlier it is essential that we make their lives as straight forward as possible in this respect'. There is anecdotal evidence that menarche is occurring earlier, but no large-scale studies on the average age at menarche in the UK have been done since Marshall and Tanner's work was published in the 1960s (Marshall & Tanner 1969). At that time the average age of menarche was approximately 13.4 years. A more recent American study by Marcia Herman Giddens (Herman Giddens *et al.* 1997) showed that the average age of menarche had reduced from 12.52 years in 1970 to 12.16 years in 1993, in White and African-American girls. Larger and heavier girls were showing signs of puberty earlier than smaller girls (Cooper *et al.* 1996; Hauspie, Vercautren & Susanne 1997; Matkovic *et al.* 1997). Research is needed in the UK to determine whether the anecdotal evidence is an accurate reflection of a reduction in the average age of menarche. If the average age of menarche is indeed falling, it follows that more girls will start their periods whilst at primary school.

Young people learn about menstruation from a variety of formal and informal sources (Cumming & Kieran 1991). Some girls first start their periods (while at school or otherwise) without knowing about menstruation and this must be very frightening (Kreitman 1999). Previous work has shown that some girls who mature early have higher levels of distress when studied in year 10, compared with their peers (Ge, Conger & Elder 1996). Some parents will not (or indeed feel that they *cannot*) discuss the matter with their children, and it is therefore important that children are taught about menstruation while they are at primary school. This means that teachers need to feel comfortable when discussing menstruation with their pupils. We believe that the topics of puberty and menstruation should be on the teacher-training syllabus, to enable all teachers to feel informed and able to discuss this subject. Teaching obviously has to take into account cultural, ethnic, racial and religious variations in development and attitudes, be appropriately timed, and should provide suitable information for both girls and boys (Koff & Pierdan 1995). Many schools now offer residential trips to children in years 5 and 6, and again, it is important that the topic of menstruation is covered prior to such trips being taken.

Several teachers mentioned their 'sex education sessions' in schools and some said that school nurses came in to talk about 'practical aspects' of men-

situation. Numerous visual aids are available including videos, slides, charts, books, leaflets, three-dimensional models, and sanitary towels and tampons (Davies 1991). Girls want details about sanitary protection—what to use, when and how to use it, and for how long. They also want to know about volume of blood, absorbency of towels and methods of disposal (Kreitman 1999). Some schools said that they tried to give all girls sample packs of sanitary towels but, 'Companies are not so generous these days'. Some teachers said that girls who were menstruating could use the disabled toilet: 'We have a disabled toilet that has disposal facilities; girls have access to this without asking'; and 'We have a disabled toilet/shower/first aid room made available as required'. Is this really promoting menstruation as a 'normal' process?

Several teachers identified financial constraints in relation to dispensing and disposal facilities: 'If it were not for financial constraints, we would place a bin in each of the year 5 and 6 girls' toilets'; and 'Dispensing and disposal machines must be bought and not hired, and are too expensive for small schools'. Primary school pupils are not encouraged to take money into school. Unless sanitary supplies are provided free to pupils, the reality for many children will be that they will continue to be unable to obtain towels or pads from school.

We show that facilities for girls who menstruate in primary schools are far from ideal. This was acknowledged by some teachers: 'I am a newly appointed head teacher and was horrified to discover that there were no facilities of this nature for pupils or staff'. Other teachers had simply not considered the issue previously: 'This questionnaire has raised some issues which we are now dealing with more directly'; 'Your survey was extremely valuable in that it made us think about the issue and we will now take time to address this'; and 'Thank you—we had not done some of this, but we have now. A timely reminder'. Hopefully, as a result of this survey, some changes will occur.

Conclusion

Current provision for girls who begin to menstruate whilst still at primary school is inadequate. There should be national and local guidelines on sanitary towel provision and disposal in schools, including primary schools. Individual schools should review their policies on a regular basis. Sanitary towels should be readily available, without a girl having to approach a member of staff, and disposal bins should be within cubicles, to allow disposal in an easy and unobtrusive manner.

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Menstruation should be taught in all primary schools. Although the subject is often first broached at school with girls aged 10–11, this will be too late for some. Coping with menstruation at school is more difficult than coping at home. Schools need to provide sensitive and practical advice to help young girls manage the situation discreetly. In addition to helping schools to prepare such advice, as part of each school's personal and social education programme, school health staff, in particular, school nurses, could play an active role in encouraging schools to address the current lack of provision.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

1. How many year 5 girls are there in your school?
2. How many year 6 girls are there in your school?
3. Are sanitary towels available in school?
Please tick appropriate response YES NO
If YES, where are they available?
From a machine in the girls' toilets? YES NO
From a machine in the teachers' toilets? YES NO
From a teacher? YES NO
From the school secretary? YES NO
Other source
4. Are there sanitary towel disposal facilities in the girls' (not teachers') toilets?
Please tick appropriate response YES NO
If you ticked YES please answer question 5
If you ticked NO please go on to question 6
5. Are the disposal bins within individual toilet cubicles?
Please tick appropriate response YES NO
If the answer is NO, where are they?
6. Are girls told that they can use the teachers' toilets when their periods start?
Please tick appropriate response YES NO
If YES, do they have to ask a teacher specifically each time they want to use them?
Please tick appropriate response YES NO
Any other comments?

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