

TALKING TO YOUR PUBERTY GIRL

Well before your daughter has her menarche (first period) you might have already noticed some ‘Puberty Signposts.’ These include fine hairs growing around her pubic area and under her arms, oilier skin and little pimples around her nose and chin, and the start of breast buds. Girls can start showing these signs as early as 8 or 9. Your daughter may be blithely unaware of these changes happening to her body. For example one parent recalls how her fairly developed 11 year old stripped down and joined her father and younger sister in the bath, splashing away happily. Or she may be extremely sensitive and self-conscious and any mention of the ‘P’ word (periods and puberty) may send her running into her room screaming “No way!”

Equally for many parents or carers¹ having to talk about breasts, vaginas and menstrual blood can feel highly embarrassing and have them back peddling into the nearest closet. It does require honestly bringing in ourselves, and a certain level of comfort around talking about our bodies and our experiences of growing up. Before you plunge into the ‘big girl talk’ with your daughter, it might be helpful to pause and take some time to reflect on your own experiences as a preteen. Understanding what has shaped your feelings and beliefs around your body and periods will ultimately influence the sort of messages your daughter may receive around this from you. Here are a few questions to get you thinking about this:

- Who told you about periods and puberty? If this was a positive experience for you what made it so? Equally if it wasn’t how come?
- What was getting your first period like? Who did you tell? How did they respond?
- What direct or indirect messages did you get about menstruation? Was the general feeling that it was a normal, healthy, natural part of growing up? Or did you get the message that puberty and periods were somehow unclean, painful or a burden?
- How do you feel about your body? Are you comfortable in it or do you find yourself pointing out all the things you aren’t happy with?

Girls have generally said they’ve felt more comfortable talking to their mums, an older sister or a female carer about some of this stuff rather than their dads. But there are households where dad may be a sole parent. In these cases it may be useful for dad to suggest having a female relative or even a female family friend with him when initially talking about puberty with his daughter.

Let’s Start At The Very Beginning, A Very Good Place To Start...

- ❖ It’s good to be a little prepared in terms of knowing what you’d like to say and how much of yourself you are willing to share. Preparation includes getting your facts straight, maybe having a book ready for any curly questions – but don’t rely too much on the book. Speaking from your experience is often best and it’s more personal. You might go out somewhere nice together or sit somewhere cosy like the back garden with a hot drink and something yummy to eat. Sometimes it can help if a supportive big sister or close friend is there too. This needs to be checked out beforehand.
- ❖ Nurture a home environment that’s open to questions and curiosity. Earlier is better than later since some girls can get their periods as early as 8 or 9. If your daughter is beginning to develop breasts and pubic hair, menstruation is probably coming within the next year. This includes straightforward, honest answers, even if the answer is “I don’t know the answer”. Some questions you might get asked include: What was happening for you through your puberty? What age did you get your first period? How did you feel about the changes you were

¹ I want to acknowledge that in some families girls don’t have a mother and/or father and that parenting/caring comes in many forms.

going through? What did your parents tell you about puberty and menstruation? What sort of stuff was going around in the playground? What did you read about it?

- ❖ If you're feeling stressed out about talking with your daughter - take a few breaths. If you are feeling a little nervous then I suggest you include that in the conversation. For example: "Wow, I really want to talk about this with you because it's so important and I'm also feeling a little nervous. Do you feel a little nervous too?" Throwing in a little humour can go a long way.
- ❖ Let your daughter know that menstruating, or getting her period, is a natural, positive step toward becoming a woman. Encourage her to learn more about her anatomy – the internal changes as well as the external by using correct terms and language. Using terms like nipples, breasts and vagina rather than boobs and 'down there'. The latter can appear a little like sugar coating or baby talk. You'd be surprised at how much girls know and can grasp by the age of 8 or 9. Language that is straightforward and open is easier to hear – back these up with concrete examples. For example: when describing the uterus I talk about it being a hollow stretchy muscle about the size of our closed fists.
- ❖ A drawing exercise can bring in some fun and is a great way to learn together. You can draw an outline of your daughter on butcher's paper and using coloured pens, together fill in the changes that are happening around puberty. This is a great way of describing the menstrual cycle and showing how pads and tampons are used. You can also include feelings and emotions.
- ❖ Go for a shop together and check out the smorgasbord of period pads and tampons. Talk about the pros and cons of both. Talk about the sort of things that help you when you get any premenstrual symptoms or cramps.
- ❖ All preteens need to hear explicitly: "It's going to be okay, it might be scary right now, but you'll be okay." This might seem like you are stating the obvious but they need validation and to hear that they're loved – especially through this heightened time of physical and emotional change. Equally their experience needs to be heard and validated. If they're feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable, unhappy, revolted about getting their periods they need to be able to express that. Perhaps you were going through a similar experience as a child. Let her know you've been there and balance out the things you're proud about being a woman with the sort of things you've found difficult.

I recommend treating this as an ongoing piece of work rather than something you tick from your 'to do' list. Be open to follow up questions and time for continued discussions. If your daughter hasn't got her periods, a one off explanation of the menstrual cycle can still be somewhat abstract to her until she actually has the experience. It is helpful when talking to bring in your personal experiences (without inundating her with too many gory details) as initially she'll be relating to herself through you.

Good luck and keep smiling
Warm wishes
Shushann Movsessian

RECOMMENDED READING –

For Daughters:

Gravelle K and J (1996)	The Period Book , Walker and Co, New York
Harris Robie and Emberley M. (1994)	Let's Talk About Sex , Walker Books, London
Movsessian, Shushann (2004)	Puberty Girl , Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest

For Mothers:

Bennett, Jane (2002)	A Blessing Not A Curse , A Mother Daughter Guide to the Transition from Child to Woman. Sally Milner Publishing, Bowral
Pope, Alexandra (2001)	The Wild Genie , The Healing Power of Menstruation, Sally Milner Publishing, Bowral
Pipher, M (1994)	Reviving Ophelia, Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls , Ballantine Publishing, New York

WHERE TO NEXT Resources

- **Eating Disorders Support Network Inc** <http://www.edsn.asn.au> Phone: 02 9412 4499
- **Kids Helpline** <http://www.kidshelp.com.au> Help service for children and teens up to 18, 24 hour service. Free call Phone: 1800 551 800
- **About Face** - <http://www.about-face.org> - Facts on Body Image, Eating Disorders and the media
- **Body Positive** – <http://www.bodypositive.com> Looks at ways we can feel good in the bodies that we have. No matter what size or shape we are. Diversity Counts! Remember your body hears everything you think!
- **Ananova** www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_905522.html Story on a firm that is using 'real women' in its beauty product promotion because it says stick-thin airbrushed models make women feel bad about themselves.