



# Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

## Outreach Programs

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### Becoming a Woman

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From time to time I get calls from parents of young women who are deafblind wanting to know what to do about their daughter's first period. They are often somewhat panicked and unsure what they can do to get ready for this big day, especially if their daughter has multiple disabilities. Still many of them have instinctively done exactly the right things to help their daughter be prepared. Here are some of the questions I am asked and some suggestions for what to do.

#### **When Will Her Period Begin?**

Most young women begin their periods in the early teen years though some will begin much earlier and some much later. One factor that may help a mother know when their daughter's first period is approaching is the age when she or an older female sibling(s) experienced their first period. Other signs like budding breasts, growth of underarm or pubic hair or regular changes in mood can be another indicator that the time is approaching. The reality is you probably won't know precisely when it will occur. That is why it is a good idea to start as early as you can to prepare.

#### **When Should I Start Preparing My Daughter for Her Period?**

It is never too early to start teaching critical concepts and vocabulary such as body parts, private versus public behavior, clothing and hygiene related terms. Depending on the child's ability to understand representations, her visual skills, and cognitive skills a doll can be helpful in developing these concepts.

Ask your TVI and/or COMS to include IEP goals that focus on learning critical vocabulary and concepts. Some of these terms may also be taught in health or biology classes depending on the child's program. Either way, talk with your educational team about the importance of building language concepts that focuses on aspects of biology, anatomy, health and hygiene, gender, safety, and sexuality in an age appropriate fashion.

If possible, visit with parents of older children about their experiences. This will give you information to ready yourself for what is coming and how to deal with the challenges. Your DARS-Division of Blind Services Children's Specialist can help you connect with another parent and may also be able to provide ideas and information to you.

There are many materials available to teach young women about their menstruation cycle. Talk to your school's health teacher or nurse to see what they might share. If your child has multiple disabilities, you may want to download a book written by me and my colleague, Robbie Blaha, for DB-Link. It is titled *Introduction to Sexuality Education for individuals Who Are Deafblind and Significantly Developmentally Delayed* and may be downloaded for free. DB-Link also has a list of other articles and materials that can be found at <http://nationaldb.org/ISSelectedTopics.php?topicCatID=20>.

## **What Should I Do? Practical Strategies**

### **1. Provide instruction prior to your daughter's first period.**

By starting in advance of the menses, parents and staff will have the opportunity to prepare the young woman in a positive manner. If your daughter's communication skills are good enough, sit down and talk with her about her period, let her know what to expect. Show her the materials she will use and explain how and when to change. Discuss the physical discomfort she may feel and what she can do to manage it. Help her pack a small supply bag that will fit into her purse or backpack.

If your daughter has multiple disabilities let her become familiar with the pad by wearing one for specific lengths of time on a daily basis. Try out different pads and select the one that is most comfortable for her. Allow her to learn about the pad without experiencing the added discomfort of being in her period for the first time. A young woman's period may bring some physical and emotional discomfort. Dealing with the unusual sensation of a pad may be unacceptable to her, and she may react by pulling off the pad repeatedly when it is first introduced. Should this happen, it will be less stressful for everyone if you are dealing with a dry pad in a private place.

Give your daughter time to practice the new skills involved in changing a pad (e.g. taking the paper strip off the back of the pad, attaching the pad to undergarments, disposing of the pad after it has been used, etc.). If you present these new skills only while your daughter is menstruating, she may not have enough opportunities in those few days each month to learn independence in the routine.

### **2. Stay matter-of-fact when teaching menstruation management.**

It is important to be positive, organized and relaxed. Address menstruation management as if you were teaching tooth brushing and hand washing. This can be a stressful time for your daughter, so try not to make this a big deal.

If your daughter has multiple disabilities take care not to teach negative behaviors with this particular hygiene activity. If changing pads offends you or if you view training your child as a waste of time, your daughter may receive a negative message about the activity. Treating a young woman abruptly while help her or changing pads can make her feel that she has done something wrong. This is not fair to her and certainly not beneficial in developing a good self-concept about her body.

### **3. Help reduce your daughter's confusion.**

Sometimes individuals confuse their period with a toileting accident and become distressed. They may keep insisting they need to use the restroom. If your daughter feels the need to go to the bathroom more often, let her. For a young woman with multiple disabilities this is an

opportunity to practice changing the pad. Let your reassuring manner tell her that she is doing the right thing. Praise her success and be proud of her independence.

Another area of confusion is related to pad disposal. Your daughter may want to flush it down the commode like toilet paper. Take special care to guide her, hand-over-hand if necessary, to dispose of the pad in the proper container near the commode. You may want to consider purchasing a small trash receptacle with a lid that is used exclusively for this purpose or a wall container like those that are found in most public restrooms.

Parents should remember these skills should be practiced exclusively in the bathroom, especially if there are significant developmental delays. If your daughter experiences pad changing in other places at home, she may assume it is appropriate to remove the pad in other places that may not be acceptable. Help her to understand that taking off her sanitary pad is appropriate behavior only in the privacy of the bathroom.

#### **4. Handle menstrual problems in a proactive manner.**

Before your daughter has her first period, make an appointment to talk with your family doctor or nurse about premenstrual stress syndrome, the need for a gynecological examination and how to assist your daughter in going through that examination. Don't assume this examination is not really necessary. These young women are subject to the same health risks in this area as their peers who are nondisabled.

Keep a record of her periods to detect irregularities that may warrant medical attention. Also, following a round of antibiotics, have your daughter checked for yeast infections which can cause discomfort, especially during her period.

A weekly or multi-weekly calendar allows you to schedule her periods on the calendar. Help her to anticipate her period by going to buy pads at a grocery store. Talk about her upcoming period with her as you review the calendar together. If she does not use this type of calendar, use the bag with the pad as a topic of conversation during her usual hygiene activities. Make things easier for yourself by always having extra pads, latex gloves, and a change of clothing on hand. You can help her pack these items into a backpack for outings or trips to and from school.

Your doctor may suggest giving your daughter aspirin or a Tylenol-like product for the first several days of her period. This can help make her more comfortable, and may head off problems if her communication level prevents her from letting you know she has cramps. There are also birth control methods that can reduce the number of periods or make them milder. You may want to discuss these options with your family doctor or gynecologist. Make sure the school nurse has the necessary information she may need to help your daughter at school.

Some young women may need to change their daily routine during her period. Permission to avoid certain physical activities, opportunities to go to the ladies' room or to visit the nurse may be needed. If your child has additional impairments, she may need more time to rest or to complete an activity.

#### **5. Don't expect the day to go as usual.**

If your daughter or one of your students is menstruating, both her schedule and your schedule may have to be adjusted. It is almost impossible to maintain the number of activities in a typical

day and still find time to teach the critical skills of menstruation management, especially if the child has multiple impairments.

If you as a caregiver are too rushed, you will do most of the work yourself. When that happens an opportunity to gain independence has been lost.

## **6. When problems occur, try to see the situation from your daughter's perspective.**

Find out what the problem is without adding to the young woman's stress. Did she forget her supplies? Has she stained her clothing? Is she teary or emotional? Is she in pain? Be kind and supportive, but also somewhat matter-of-fact. Let her know these are problems that occur for most women and can be handled. Help her find strategies for herself.

Some young women who are multiply impaired may not want to participate in the management of their period. Consider whether this is a pattern of behavior she exhibits in other situations. Don't put any more emphasis on this activity than you would other types of hygiene activities. If you do, you may set yourself up for a power struggle. You might understand the cause for her unwillingness to participate by noting other activities she does not like. Are their similarities between those activities and the menstruation management routine? For example, does she dislike touching tape or other adhesive surfaces? Does she show some aversion to handling other things that are damp?

Consider the activity's design. Is she experiencing the same sequence of events every time she changes pads? Check with other caregivers that help her with this activity. If they are having the same problems, you might help each other in finding solutions. If they are not having problems, you may want to adopt their approach.

## **7. Share knowledge of your child and the way you do things at home with the educational staff or other caregivers.**

Probably the most important thing you can do to help your daughter become independent is to communicate with all of those individuals who support her or assist her in this activity throughout her day. The more everyone takes the same approach to menstruation management the better it will be for your daughter.

Work together to build strategies for supporting your daughter during this time. Most importantly, make sure school personnel are committed to making this experience a valuable learning opportunity for your daughter. Don't be shy about asking for their help. They may have experienced this many times before in their teaching career, while it may be your first time.

## **Resources**

Menstruation and Mental Disability: Advice for Parents of Adolescent Girls. About Kid's Health website:

<http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/En/HealthAZ/DevelopmentalStages/Tweens/Pages/Menstruation-and-Mental-Disability-Advice-for-Parents-of-Adolescent-Girls.aspx>

Robbie Blaha and Kate Moss, 2001. [Sexuality Education for Individuals Who Are Deaf-Blind and Significantly Developmentally Delayed](#), published by DB-Link – The National Clearing House on Children Who Are Deaf-Blind, Monmouth, OR.

Schwier, K.M. and Hingsburger, D, 2000. Sexuality: Your sons and daughters with intellectual disabilities. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.

[OHOA Module: Sexuality](#), National Center on Deaf-Blindness.



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