



Preparing for Periods

Girls on the Autistic Spectrum can often find the onset of puberty particularly difficult. The huge numbers of changes that are involved, and the associated sensory issues all contribute to increased stress around this stage in their lives.

Most girls will have their first period around 11 to 14 years, but anywhere from 9 to 16 years is normal. It usually comes along with other physical changes such as pubic hair, change in body shape, and a general growth spurt, but again this is not always the case and children develop at very different rates.

Because of difficulties in coping with change, it is important to start talking about the changes that come with puberty earlier rather than later; from around 8 years old is probably best, depending on the individual girl. It may help to show her products like sanitary towels and tampons so that she can get used to how they look. It will help to try wearing a pad to get used to the feeling before her periods begin.

Teaching your daughter what the different parts of the body involved with her period do - showing her where they are using pictures and diagrams, will help her to understand and to feel more in control of her body.

Practical issues, like how to use pads and how to dispose of them will need to be clearly explained; if the topic is handled in a straightforward way it will help to reduce any fear, embarrassment and anxiety around the subject. Again, use visual supports to show her what pads and tampons look like, how to use them and dispose of them.

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Social stories™ can be very useful in helping young people with Autism deal with change. This is an example that you may find helpful to use or adapt:

I will begin my period*

As I grow, my body changes and I will get my period.

A period is also known as menstruation.

Most girls and women have a period every 28 days. Sometimes it may be earlier or later. This is okay.

When I have my period, blood comes out through my vagina.

A few days before my period, I might feel more upset about things. I might feel angry, I might feel sad, I might feel frustrated or I might feel other emotions.

Feeling this way is normal for most girls and women and will usually stop when the period stops.

My breasts, stomach and the lower part of my back might feel sore at this time. This is normal.

Putting a hot water bottle on my stomach and having some pain relief medication can help me feel less sore.

I might have my period for 4 to 7 days. It might be shorter; this is okay.

If it is longer than 7 days, I will talk to an adult who cares about me.

I will need to use a sanitary pad or tampon so that my clothes don't get stained. I can decide which of these feels most comfortable for me.

*Adapted from raisingchildren.net.au the Australian parenting website

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How Can we Help?

It will be useful for her to feel more in control if she has a calendar in her bedroom or the bathroom with the days that she has menstrual bleeding marked (maybe in red). After a few cycles she should be able to notice a pattern, although this may take longer (some girls can take months before a regular pattern emerges). The more facts that you can let her know the less frightening it will be.

Some parents like to make this growing up time a special time of celebration and mark it by a later bedtime, going out for a treat or maybe moving into her own room, or adding something new and special to her room.

However you choose to introduce the subject of periods, stay positive and try not to let your own feeling about the impact of the monthly cycle affect your communication with your daughter. She will already be anxious about any changes; many girls fear or dread the onset of their periods and the more we can do to reduce this the better.

Giving clear, accurate information, and remaining positive in your communication is vital. Giving opportunity to practice with sanitary towels of different styles, shapes and sizes (practicing with tampons would be difficult before periods start, but it would be helpful for her to see and handle them).

Explain any side effects such as back pain, stomach cramps, changes in emotions and moods in advance, and explain what she can do to relieve these symptoms. If you can, enlist sisters, cousins, aunts etc. to help by sharing their experiences and tips.

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Sensory processing differences can make periods more difficult for girls and women with sensitivities around how things look, feel and smell. This will be vary widely as the impact is very different for each individual.

Listen to what she is saying and consider the sensory aspect to her experience; she may need help to minimise this using practical steps and sensory strategies.

The Family Planning Association have produced a helpful and attractive leaflet about periods for girls; you can download it here:

<http://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/Periods.pdf>

There are also a number of excellent books around with helpful information and clear diagrams such as

“What's Happening to Me? (Girls Edition) (Facts of Life)” by Susan Meredith and

“Girls Growing Up on the Autism Spectrum” by Shana Nichols, Gina Marie Moravcik and Samara Pulver Tetenbaum.

We also have a range of resources for children and young people on various topics, including puberty, on our website available to download.

Finally feel free to ask any questions or discuss any concerns you may have with us at ADDvanced Solutions by dropping in to one of our Community Network Groups, contacting our closed Facebook group or sending a message via our website, emailing or calling us using the contact details below:

Liverpool / Halton / Knowsley / Sefton / Wirral: 0151 486 1788

St Helens: 01744 582172

Warrington: 01925 320863

www.addvancedsolutions.co.uk

Email: info@advancedsolutions.co.uk