



# Research briefing: Are periods still taboo?

Girls' and young women's attitudes to period stigma and shame

## Introduction

At Girlguiding, we believe that no one should feel embarrassed or ashamed about periods and that language is important in breaking down stigma. That's why in 2018 we launched a campaign led by our young members to help end period poverty and to encourage people to tackle the shame and stigma connected to periods. As part of this campaign, we asked people to pledge to talk openly about periods so no one feels embarrassed or ashamed. We worked with WaterAid to develop activities to get girls and young women in guiding talking openly about periods, the stigma connected to them, how girls can deal with them and poverty.

Our 2018 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed over half (52%) of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 said boys had made insulting jokes about girls and their periods. And that a fifth (21%) of girls and young women have been made to feel ashamed or embarrassed about their period. And over a quarter (26%) have felt embarrassed talking about their period with others.

To build on our previous work in this area we carried out a poll with almost 600 girls and young women aged 11 to 17. We asked them about their views on period stigma and what would help them to feel comfortable talking about their periods more openly.

## Girls' and young women's views

This research briefing shows that a significant number of girls and young women still feel embarrassed and self-conscious talking openly about their periods. Some use euphemisms to talk about periods in a discreet way, or feel the need to hide their period products and conceal their pain. To feel more comfortable and to have pride in their periods, girls and young women tell us they would like more people to talk openly about periods, including at school.

### Are periods stigmatised?

Two in five (39%) girls and young women aged 11 to 17 think that periods are no longer thought of as taboo or are a stigmatised subject to talk about. However, there's a similar number (36%) who think they are. Girls are more likely to agree this is the case as they get older, rising from three in ten (29%) for ages 11 to 13 to almost half (45%) aged 15 to 17.

Just under three in five (56%) girls disagree that they feel pressured to hide their period. Disagreement rises steadily with age, from one in five (44%) 11- to 13-year-olds, to more than half aged 13 to 15 (52%) and peaking with three in four girls aged 15 to 17 (73%). However, a quarter of girls and young women aged 11 to 17 still feel pressured to hide their period, peaking with three in ten girls aged 13 to 15 (28%).

The majority of girls say they hide their period products when they're in public (72%). This rises with age starting at two thirds (64%) for 11- to 13-year-olds to three quarters (76%) for those aged 13 to 17.

### Do girls and young women feel comfortable talking about periods?

Three in five (61%) say they feel comfortable talking to their parent/guardian about their period, rising from six in ten (58%) for those aged 11 to 15 to seven in ten (68%) for those aged 15 to 17. However, a quarter (25%) don't feel comfortable talking about their period.

A fifth (19%) of girls aged 11 to 13 say this, and three in ten (30%) of the oldest age group (15- to 17-year-olds).

60% of girls and young women aged 11 to 17 say they have period pain that affects their daily lives. Of those who suffer period pain, two in five (42%) say they feel comfortable talking to their parents/guardian about the pain. This rises steadily with age, peaking at more than half of girls (55%) aged 15 to 17. Only one in seven (14%) aged 11 to 15 say they feel comfortable talking to a doctor about their period pain, but this doubles amongst girls aged 15 to 17 (31%). One in three girls (33%) who experience pain tend to tell people they have a headache or stomach-ache instead of period pains or cramps, rising to almost two in five (37%) for those aged 15 to 17.

When asked how they refer to their period, the vast majority of girls and young women aged 11 to 17 said they call it their period. However, a number of girls and young women who use euphemisms to refer to their period more discreetly, such as 'code red', 'time of the month', 'girl problems', 'the blob' and 'being on'.

### **What impact does this have on girls and young women?**

Just under two in five (38%) girls and young women aged 11 to 17 feel self-conscious about their period. This peaks amongst young women aged 15 to 17 (40%, compared to 33% of girls aged 11 to 13). A similar number (38%) say they've felt they're not taken seriously or dismissed because of their period, rising with age from three in ten (30%) aged 11 to 13 to more than two in five (43%) aged 15 to 17. One in three (32%) girls aged 11 to 17 say that being embarrassed about their periods has stopped them from doing the things they enjoy, rising steadily with age.

### **What would reduce the stigma?**

More than two thirds (69%) of girls aged 11 to 17 agree that talking about periods more openly and there being more coverage in the media, would help girls to have pride in their periods. Amongst those aged 11 to 13, three in five agree with this statement (58%), rising to around two in three aged 13 to 15 (64%) and peaking at almost nine in ten young women aged 15-17 (86%).

Three in five (61%) girls agree that having more open conversations about periods at school would help to make girls feel more comfortable talking about their periods. This peaks at three in four (75%) young women aged 15 to 17.

## **Methodology**

583 girls and young women aged 11 to 17 were surveyed via the CHILDWISE Schools Panel between 24 February and 2 April 2020. Research was carried out online in schools, although from 20 March children completed their surveys online from home, after schools were closed and the country went into lockdown. Data is weighted to ensure equal representation by age (11 to 13, 13 to 15, 15 to 17).

# About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with almost 500,000 members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run *Rainbows* (4-7 years), *Brownies* (7-10 years), *Guides* (10-14 years) and *Rangers* (14-18 years).

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