

"Boys can make you feel that periods are something awful, especially as they only happen to girls."

Pauline Maskell

## 'Period pains' in a mixed school

In response to concern expressed by the Health Education Authority at the lack of knowledge and therefore confidence about the details of menstruation in both young people and adults, Hinchingsbrooke School carried out a survey of girls in years 7-9 by means of discussion and a questionnaire in their PE lessons.

However, this formed just one strand of a review of our Personal, Social and Health Education programme, and before describing the survey and its outcome I should like to place it in context.

Hinchingsbrooke has had a 70-minute/week PSHE programme in year 10 and year 11 for ten years. This year it was extended to a one-hour lesson in years 7-11, in addition to the tutorial programme. The programme was planned by the members of staff that had been working in this area of the curriculum for several years.

I shall say a few words about the work being carried out in each year group.

### Year 7

The topics chosen for each group, many of which — such as *sex education* — are built on further in each year group, were based on what we felt were the needs of each year group in our school.

This belief was, and still is, based on national trends and on information from several Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire surveys. For example, as a result of the review, material on *looking after yourself, relationships, and abuse* was introduced into the year 7 programme. This material was at one time not started until year 10.

### Year 8

Detail on physiological and emotional changes in the body, risk factors associated with sexually-transmitted diseases, and an outline of contraception, continues in year 8 Science. This is taught emphasising the importance of pupils' own concerns and experiences. Year 8 PSHE extends discussion and more personal aspects of the sex education course.

### Year 9

As the age of sexual experience and experimentation seems to be decreasing and the number of pregnancies in under-16s is a cause for concern, the most detailed work in all aspects of sex education is now done in year 9 instead of year 10. This does not mean that sex education is done in isolated lessons; it permeates many other topics. In year 9, *sexual relationships and coping with sexuality* form a base for information, discussion and research into *sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, sexual orientation, abuse, and coping with loss* including separation, divorce and bereavement.

A group of year 12 and 13 students have been training to be peer group supporters for year 9 pupils. As a pilot scheme they are working with four or five pupils from PSHE groups, answering questions and discussing points that might not be brought up in a class situation. They receive regular supervision and support for feedback. As this scheme has become more popular, 6th-form peer-group supporters are working with single pupils, or groups of them, by appointment.

### Years 10 & 11

In years 10 and 11 sex education continues and is updated. Year 10 work on *leisure* and year 11 work on *counselling skills* also aims to develop skills in sexual aspects of personal relationships. In each year group there is a core of work on *self-esteem* and developing *assertion skills*.

### Evaluating the courses

Pupil evaluation, by means of interview and questionnaire, has always formed an essential part of PSHE courses, and this is the way they are developed and adapted to individual groups' needs. The PSHE course has always been based on a pupil-centred approach, and the staff that

Percentage responses to some of the questions posed in the survey. The numbers of girls were as follows: year 7, 57; year 8, 48; year 9, 63.

#### Is it easy to get to toilets?

	In breaks		In lessons	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Year 7	56	44	12	88
Year 8	52	48	6	94
Year 9	78	22	13	87

#### Do you feel you have enough privacy in toilets?

	Yes	No
Year 7	7	93
Year 8	12	88
Year 9	25	75

#### Are you able to wash and dry your hands in all toilets easily?

	Yes	No
Year 7	56	44
Year 8	81	19
Year 9	57	43

#### Do you feel sufficient attention is paid to how your period might affect your behaviour or school work?

	Yes	No
Year 7	21	79
Year 8	12	88
Year 9	10	90

have volunteered to teach it are usually committed to both active and pupil-centred methods.

In this way, we discovered the pupils' concern that some needs were not being met, and that although sex education as a topic could be openly discussed, *menstruation* could not. This reflected the findings of the HEA survey. The results of our own survey have resulted in some changes to facilities in school and the approach to teaching this topic.

### Planning the menstruation survey

The initial planning was carried out by the Health Education steering group. This group consists of several volunteers interested in health education issues. They have different subject specialisms representative of different parts of the school: lower, middle, 6th form and management. The group has existed, with different members, since 1985.

The plan was discussed by the PSHE team at departmental meetings, and various practical amendments were made. The resulting suggestions were then discussed with the deputy Headteacher that had a responsibility for PSHE. The final plan, and copies of the questionnaire, were circulated to Heads of House and school nurses for comment, and discussed at meetings with all Heads of Department, the Headteacher, and deputies.

The final plan involved an introduction to the topic and confidential discussion with roughly equal numbers of girls in years 7, 8 and 9. We thought they would discuss the topic more freely in a single-sex group that had worked together for a long time. These were carried out in their normal PE teaching groups with the Head of Girls' Physical Education, Ann Duff.

We had previously had full consultation on the wording of the questionnaire, recognising that the comments made and the free response question at the end would be the most valuable source of information, and we thought that this would be most effective in a relaxed atmosphere of girls only, where they felt free to express their ideas without ridicule.

The circumstances were confidential, because both written and oral responses were anonymous, and all the questionnaires were completed in the same week before pupils had a chance of discussing them with each other. I analysed the scripts and passed on the results to all those involved in the consultation process. The results were discussed with the girls in-

volved in the survey, and, in more general terms, with all mixed groups in Science and PSHE.

### What the pupils told us

On analysis, the main points brought up by the pupils were:

- The majority found out about periods at home or at Junior School.
- They found out about using pads or tampons for protection at home or at Junior School. Year 9 had a larger proportion that also mentioned Science lessons.
- The majority would prefer to keep pads or tampons with them.
- All thought there should be vending machines in girls' toilets.
- It was thought to be fairly easy to get to toilets at breaks, but most thought it was very difficult in lessons.
- Many thought that privacy in toilets was limited (you can see under doors, over partitions, or doors don't always lock), and that a disposal bin in each cubicle would ensure better hygiene and more privacy.
- Opinion was equally divided about what they would like to do if they felt ill or in pain during a period — lie down, take a tablet, relax for a while, or go home. Not very many thought they would be able to carry out their choice.
- Few felt that sufficient attention was paid to how periods might affect school work or behaviour.
- All year groups felt that boys and teachers, particularly male teachers, were insufficiently aware or understanding. They also felt that people did not realise that most girls now begin periods in Junior School or Year 7 and that the age of first period continues to decrease. They also felt that it was difficult to get to the toilet during a lesson in case of emergency without a detailed and embarrassing explanation to the teacher.

Two examples of comments from the space provided at the end of the questionnaire were as follows:

- *Sometimes boys try and put you down by discussing periods, making comments such as "Oh, you're a baby, you haven't started your periods yet".*

- *They [boys] can make you feel that periods are something awful, especially as they only happen to girls.*

### What we did about it...

The deputy Headteacher responsible for PSHE, in consultation with the site manager, arranged for toilet locks to be checked and repaired where necessary, and for dispensing machines to be checked. Soft toilet paper is now available in all locations.

Bins are collected and emptied by a sanitary disposal firm, and the frequency depends upon their arrangements. It is too expensive for dispensers to be placed in each cubicle, but each has its own bin. It is also too expensive to change the cubicle design and install doors which meet the floor.

Another top issue concerned pupils being allowed to go to the toilet during lessons, and the need for a sympathetic awareness on the part of teachers. This was brought up at individual departmental meetings. Staff felt that some record needed to be kept of pupils leaving the lesson for this purpose, although questions were not necessary.

#### *The top issues raised by the 63 year 9 girls surveyed*

- 37 Varieties and different sorts and size of pads/tampons should be available.
- 34 Bins should be emptied more often/more bins/a bin in each toilet.
- 29 Teachers should be more sympathetic and aware (especially male teachers).
- 27 Machines should be checked and refilled more often.
- 24 Teachers should let you go to the toilet without hassle.
- 23 More machines needed in more private places, e.g. in every cubicle.
- 23 Some toilets don't lock/doors should reach the floor for more privacy.
- 23 Boys should be more sympathetic and aware, and given more information.
- 21 More toilet paper/better toilet paper should be available.
- 18 Pads/tampons should be available if you have no money or machines are empty.
- 12 There should be more people to talk to and get things from.
- 9 More information and leaflets, e.g. on toxic shock syndrome, should be available.

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General changes in attitude towards menstruation are being brought about gradually by an 'open discussion' approach in year 8 Science groups, and in PSHE lessons in all year groups. Different types of sanitary protection are shown, and information booklets for boys, girls and parents are provided. Details of toxic shock syndrome are now part of the sex education programme.

Recently a group of year 9 PSHE pupils and

I were part of Anglia Television's *Tonight* programme, where the pupils carried out some of their usual active small-group work in menstruation and toxic shock.

Pupils generally feel that we have raised the level of awareness of menstruation, and have begun to bring about some changes in attitude and circumstances. I hope that this account of our work will be of interest to teachers in other schools.