



# Puberty for girls with an intellectual disability



A Parents Guide to teaching  
valuable sex education



## + Sex education... It's important

It is a common perception in society that individuals with an intellectual disability are seen as asexual beings. Parents that have a child with an intellectual disability sometimes believe that sex education will not be beneficial for their child because they don't think they will understand, they may think they are too young or that teaching them sex education will give them the wrong ideas or encourage them to experiment.

In reality, those with an intellectual disability are just like us. They share the same sexual thoughts and desires, present the same sexual responses and express their sexuality in the same we do. Therefore it is vitally important that intellectually disabled individuals are given valuable sex education from a young age.

Some parents may find it hard to talk to their intellectually disabled child about sexual matters and may not be very knowledgeable in the area of sex education. This is where a relationship with your child's school is vital. A lot of parents

feel as though they are more comfortable in having conversations with their child about sexual matters at home if they are receiving sex education at school. This means that delivering sex education to your child will be most valuable when you develop a good relationship with your child's school. It is therefore vital to find out what sex education program your child's school is offering so that you can continue to expand on and discuss the information that they have learnt at home.

This is where this resource guide comes in handy. This booklet will tell you all need to know about the physical, social, emotional and intellectual changes that your daughter will go through as she enters puberty. It not only gives you resources that will aid you in delivering information to your daughter, but it provides you with all the factual information you need to know, not only about the changes your daughter will go through but also information about menstruation, reproduction and the menstrual cycle. Having this information will ensure you are giving them the correct information.

### Delivering sex education to your child. Here are some tips:

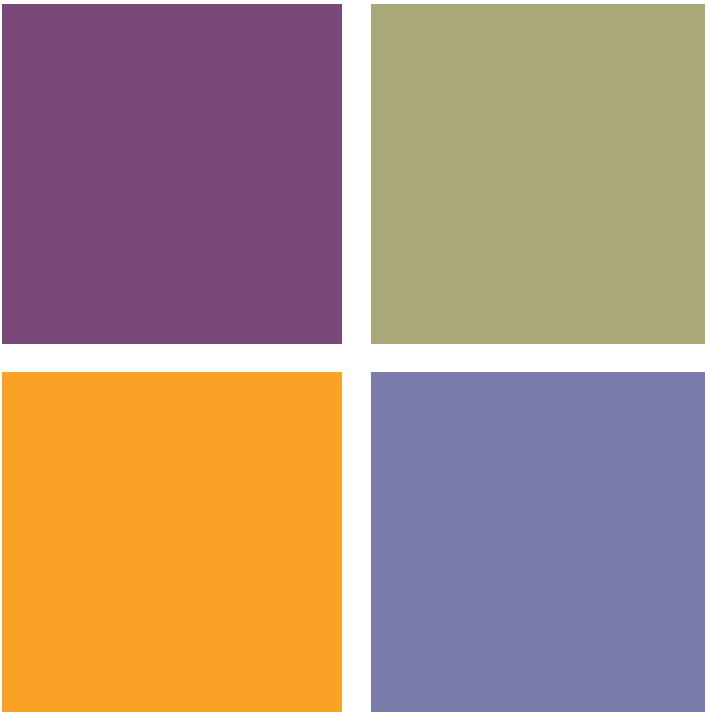
Due to your child's intellectual disability, her physical development will occur faster than her intellectual development. This means the way in which you deliver information will be simple and repetitive. This includes using simple statements and simple words.

It is important that you use correct terminology rather than slang words. Start with simple words such as 'period' and bring in more complicated words as they develop such as 'menstruation'.

Use a variety of teaching methods and resources when you are delivering information to your child. This includes the use of visual aids (stick drawings, pictures, diagrams, slides, videos, models, dolls), roleplaying and backwards chaining. If you are discussing physical items such as a sanitary pad, get your child to handle it so they can become familiar with it.

Help is always around. If you need any help you could talk to your child's teacher, your GP, disability association or search the web (see additional resources)

Remember keep it light and fun!



+So....

## What is Puberty?

Puberty is a period of time in early adolescence when a young person undergoes physical, social and emotional changes that will lead to sexual maturity and allow them to reproduce.

Hormones cause the physical changes that are undertaken during this time. For girls, hormones from the pituitary gland trigger the production of oestrogen in the ovaries and the release of eggs, which prepares a girls body for pregnancy.

Girls with an intellectual disability go through puberty at the same time as non-disabled girls, however depending on her disability; her experience of puberty may be affected. The onset of puberty can be anywhere between ages 8-15 with the average age being around 12-14. Some girls may develop later than others.

Too many times intellectually disabled girls are unprepared for their first period and when they see blood on their underwear for the first time this can be very confusing and frightening for them. It is therefore important to note that talking to your child about puberty should start before changes start to occur so that both you and your daughter are fully prepared and avoid these harmful situations. It is also a good idea to talk to your daughter about the changes that boys go through as well so that your child knows that boys and girls share a similar experience.



Changes	Useful information	Talking to your child
<b>Breast development</b>	Breast development is usually the first sign of puberty in girls. Initially girls will have small tender bumps under her nipples and over the next two years the breast tissue will get larger and soften out	<p>It is important to let your daughter know that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She will grow breasts just like you</li> <li>• It is normal that her breasts may feel “sore” or “itchy” while they are growing</li> <li>• It is normal that one breast may be bigger than the other, but will even out</li> </ul>
<b>Pubic and underarm hair</b>	Dark coarse, curly hair appears on the folds of skin around the vagina (labia) and similar hair will grow under her arm pits	Let your daughter know that it is normal that hair will grow around her vagina and under her arms. Let her know that this means she is growing up.
<b>Growth</b>	During puberty girls will have a rapid growth spurt as well as develop increases in weight	Let your daughter know that she will grow taller and heavier but reassure her that this is her bones and muscles growing
<b>Hips widen</b>	During growth, your daughter’s hips will start to widen and become curvier. This is so she can bear a child later in life.	In simple terms let your daughter know that her hips will get bigger so that she can carry a baby one day.

(The Nemours Foundation 2013; Health Direct Australia 2013; Kimberley-Clark Worldwide 2013; Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, pp. 23-24.)

Changes	Useful information	Talking to your child
<b>Hair on legs and arms</b>	The hair on your daughter's legs and arms become darker and longer	Let your daughter know that the hair on her arms and legs will become darker. Let her know that some girls like to shave their legs.
<b>Oily skin</b>	Due to hormone production your daughter's oil-producing (sebaceous) glands over produce sebum, our skins natural oil. This thick sebum is what clogs pores and causes pimples.	Let your daughter know that her skin will become oilier and that this will cause red bumps, called pimples to appear on her face as well as other parts of her body. Encourage her to wash her to keep her face clean (see hygiene)
<b>Vaginal discharge</b>	During the menstrual cycle when your daughter is not bleeding, the vagina will produce a creamy yellow discharge, which keeps the walls of the vagina clean. This is perfectly normal and health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let your daughter know that is it normal to see a white or yellow fluid on her underwear.</li> <li>• Explain that this is a different fluid to period blood or to urine</li> <li>• Let her know that this is normal and healthy</li> </ul>
<b>Increased sweating</b>	Due to hormone production your daughter's sweat glands will produce a lot more sweat, which may cause body odour.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let your daughter know that her body may feel very wet at times, especially under her arms or around her vagina.</li> <li>• Explain to her that this is called sweat.</li> <li>• Let her know that this is normal and that it is important to stay clean (See hygiene)</li> </ul>

When talking to your child about the physical changes that she will undertake during puberty make sure you aid this discussion with the use of diagrams, dolls, videos and activities. Getting diagrams of the female and male body at various stages of the lifespan can help your daughter distinguish different physical features at different age groups. Asking her questions such as 'do they get taller?' helps address these physical changes.

(The Nemours Foundation 2013; Health Direct Australia 2013; Kimberley-Clark Worldwide 2013; Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, p. 19)



One of the biggest physical changes your daughter will undertake is menstruation. Puberty is a very anxious time for girls with an intellectual disability and if they are unprepared for the changes that occur such as seeing blood from their period for the first time, this can be very frightening and confusing.

It is therefore important for you to prepare your daughter for menstruation well before her first period so that she is ready and can effectively manage it through her adolescence.

When beginning your discussion about menstruation, it may be better to start with simple terms such as “period” rather than “menstruation” as it may be a hard word to comprehend. Simple statements such as “soon you will see blood coming out of your vagina- this is your period”, allows your child to gain a basic understanding, which can be expanded on as she develops both physically and intellectually.

It is important to make your daughter feel positive about her first period. Let her know that all girls get their period and that menstruation is a sign of her growing up and becoming a health young woman. Give your daughter signs to look for such as “first your breasts will grow bigger and you will grow hair under your arms and on your genital area that is between your legs”. This will reassure her that her first period is coming.

It is also important that your daughter knows that there are people around her that she can trust and go to when she needs help. This means that when your daughter sees blood on her pants for the first time she should know to tell a family member or teacher straight away. (Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, pp. 23-24 and 31-36)

## THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE AND REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS

In order for you to give your daughter valuable sex education, it is important to be knowledgeable in all topics and therefore if you are teaching your daughter all about menstruation it important that you are giving her accurate information about what is happening from a reproductive point of view. This means you need be aware of both the menstrual cycle and the female reproductive organs.

### **The menstrual cycle:**

The average menstrual cycle lasts around 28-30 days however due to differences some menstrual cycles can last anywhere between 21-35 days.

### **Phase one**

The first day of a woman’s period is considered to be the first day of her menstrual cycle. This means the blood and tissue lining that has been built up, has been broken down and released as it is no longer needed. The bleeding on the first day of a girl’s period won’t be very heavy, however on days 2 and 3 it will be the heaviest. During the first few days girls may experience mild to severe cramps. Towards the last days of a girl’s period the flow will become light again.

## Phase two

+ The bleeding has now stopped and the reproductive organs prepare for a new menstrual cycle. More oestrogen is produced during this time and causes a bubble to form on the outside of an ovary, which contains a ripe egg. During this time the uterine lining will begin to rebuild and get thicker with lots of red blood cells and nutrients.

## Phase three

A high level of oestrogen causes the brain to send a signal to the ovary in order to release the ripe egg into the Fallopian tube. This stage is called ovulation. Progesterone production starts to occur in the ovaries, which causes the uterine lining to become soft and full of glandular tissue and blood vessels.

## Phase four

When the egg is in the Fallopian tube it can take 5-7 days to travel to the uterus. In this time fertilisation can take place. If the egg does become fertilised it will become embedded in the uterine lining and a baby will develop for the next 9 months. In this time, a woman's period will stop until after she has had her baby.

If the egg is not fertilised there will be a drop in oestrogen and progesterone and the egg will disappear. The uterine lining will begin to break down and be released from the uterus. This is when a girl will get her period again and a new cycle will start.

It is important that when you are talking to your daughter about menstruation that you do go over what occurs in a menstrual cycle. Again you can start with basic information and then expand on this as your daughter develops through adolescence. The flowchart named 'Your Menstrual cycle' (pg.) is a helpful resource you can use with your daughter in order to go over the basic phases of the menstrual cycle and help her develop a basic understanding.

(Libra; Girl Talk 200-?, pp.7-9)

## The Female Reproductive Organs



When discussing menstruation with your daughter, it is a good time to bring in other topics such as the female reproductive organs, fertility and sexual intercourse as they all interrelate. For example, when talking about sexual intercourse you could discuss with your daughter that there is a sensitive spot above her vagina called a clitoris that make her feel good when it is touched. Remember to break the information down into simple statements and use correct terminology. It is also helpful to have various resources such as diagrams, anatomically correct dolls and videos in order to distinguish features and organs. (Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, pp. 28, 32; Kempton 1988, pp. 95-96.)

Our reproductive organs are present at birth but it is not until they reach puberty that these organs mature and become ready for sexual reproduction.

### Ovary

For girls, the hormone Oestrogen is produced in each ovary. There are two ovaries about the size of almonds on each side of the body. Each Ovary contains about 200,000 tiny eggs called ova. The eggs develop here before they travel through the Fallopian tubes into the uterus. If fertilised by sperm, one ovum will develop into a baby.

### Fallopian tube

The Fallopian tubes extend from the upper part of the uterus. Every month these tubes carry an ovum to the uterus. Fertilisation (conception) usually occurs in the fallopian tubes. It will then move in the uterus and embed itself in the uterine wall

### Uterus

The uterus, which is thought to be the shape of an upside down pear is where the ovum, if fertilised will develop into a baby.

### Uterine lining

Each month the uterus develops a lining made up of blood and tissue. Every month this lining will shed if the ovum is not fertilised. This is what a woman see's as her period or menstruation.

### Cervix

The cervix is towards the bottom of the uterus. It therefore connects the lower part of the uterus with the upper part of the vagina.

### Hymen

The hymen is the entrance to the vagina. It is know to be elastic and stretchy. The Hymen has a hole in it that allows the blood from a girl's period to drip through. It is a common myth that the hymen can break, but it never does. Some women just have a more elastic hymen than others.

### The Vulva

The vulva contains the clitoris. This is a very sensitive organ as it is made up of tiny nerve endings. These nerve endings are very sensitive to stimulation especially during sexual intercourse of masturbation. Because the clitoris is so sensitive it contain a cover called the prepuce or clitoral hood.

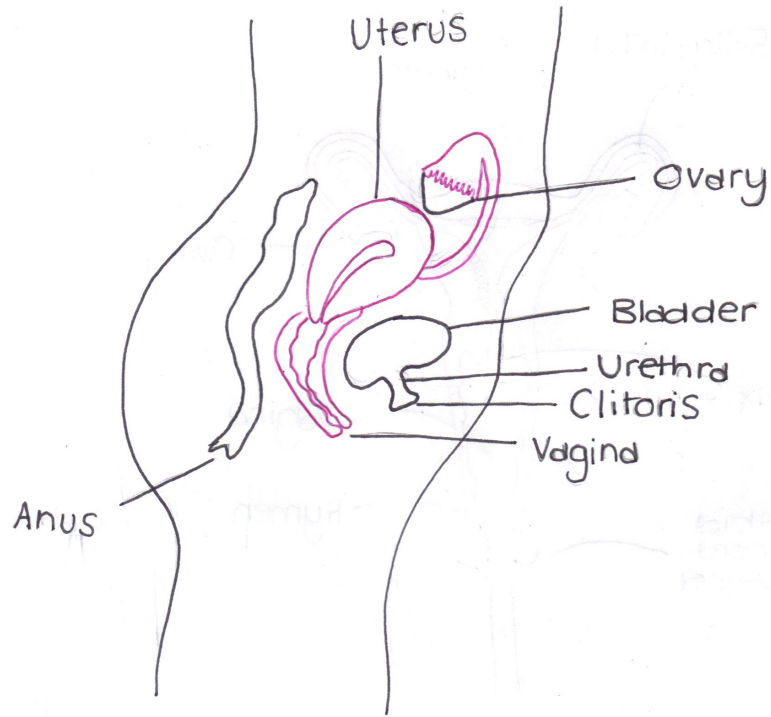
### The Labia Minora and Majora

These are the inner and outer lips that protect the vaginal opening. The Labia Majora is large and fleshy and this is what protects the external reproductive organs. They also contain oil and sweat secreting glands and this is where pubic hair grows during puberty. The Labia Minora lie inside the Labia Majora and surround the opening of the vagina and urethra.

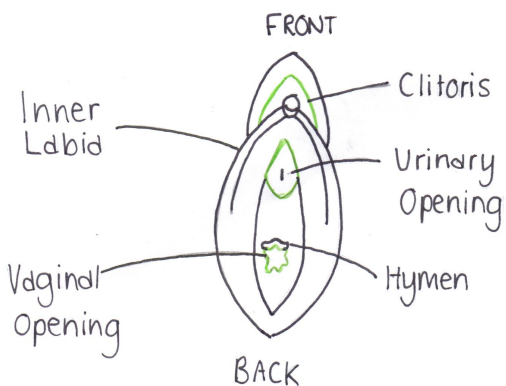
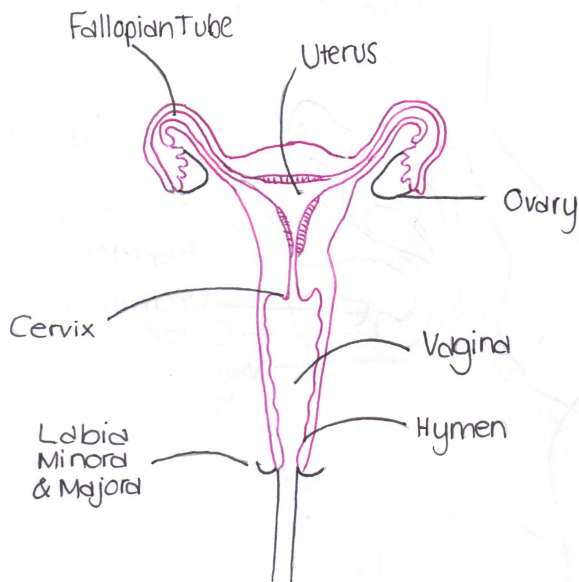




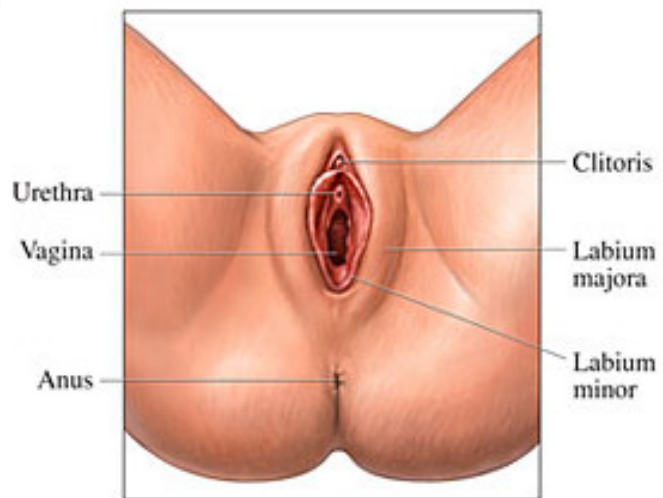
Diagrams like these can be used on conjunction with the resource 'Your Menstrual Cycle' to discuss various topics with your daughter



(Libra: Girl Talk 200-?, p.3)



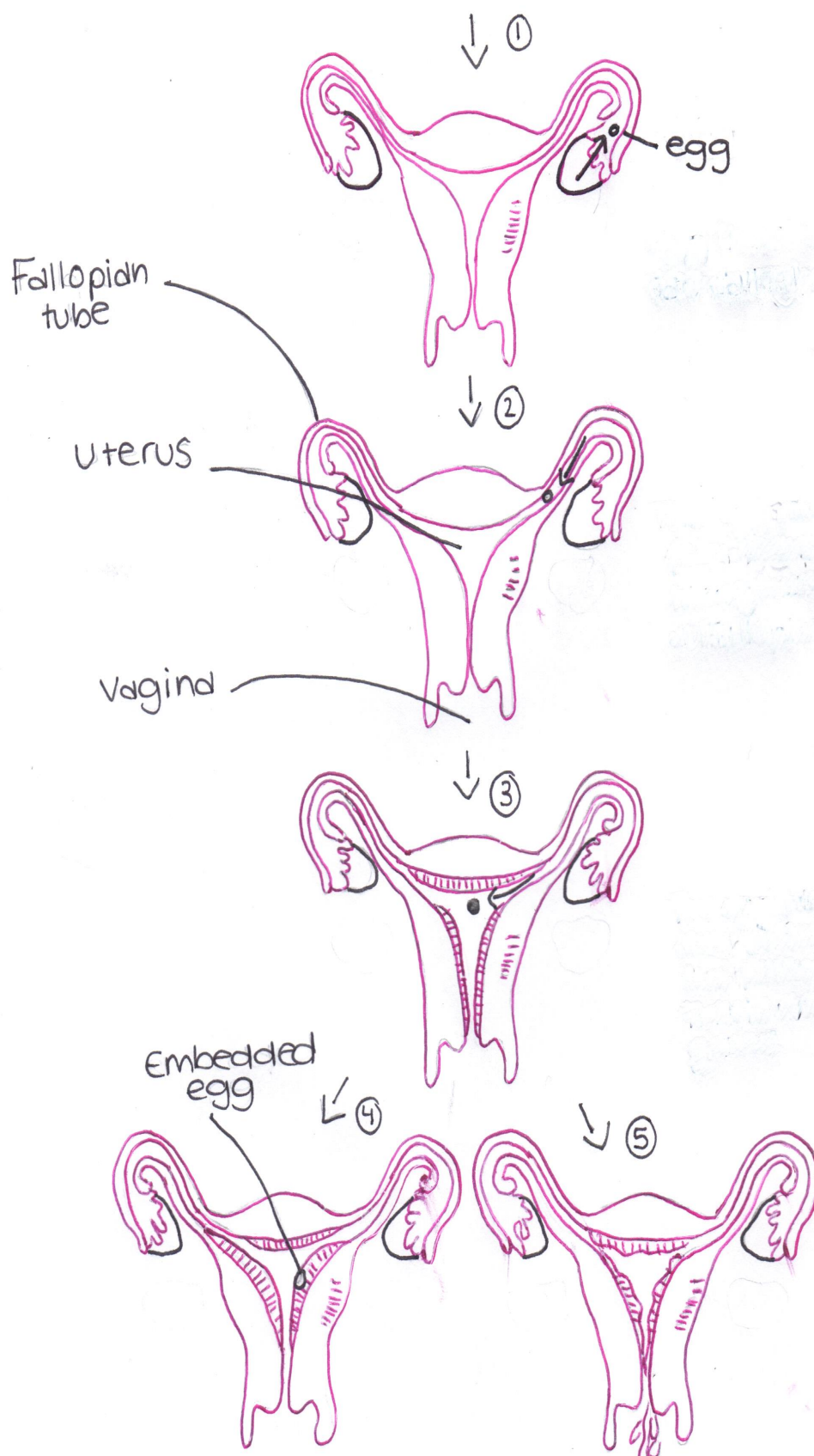
(Libra: Girl Talk 200-?, p.3)



(Kimberley-Clark Worldwide 2013)

# Your Menstrual Cycle

1. A Sac contains many eggs. This sac is called an ovary. Each month an egg is released from one of your ovaries.
2. The egg will travel down a tube. This tube is called a Fallopian tube.
3. The egg will travel from the Fallopian tube into your uterus. The Uterus is where a baby grows
4. One day if you decide to have a family you will have sexual intercourse with a man. A man will put his penis into your vagina between your legs. Sperm will come out of his penis into your vagina. If the man's sperm meets the tiny egg, a baby will grow in your uterus.
5. If the man's sperm does not meet the egg, the blood that was building up as a lining will be released. This blood will come out of your vagina. This is your period. You will still get your period even if you do not have sexual intercourse.



(Libra: Girl Talk, pp.7-9; Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, p. 13.)



## USING PADS AND TAMPONS

In order or to effectively manage menstruation, your daughter will need to learn the process of how to use a sanitary pad and when they should be used or changed. This can be done by breaking down the task into a series of steps and teach each step one at a time. It is ideal that your daughter watches how you would change a sanitary pad and then imitate the sequence after you. It is important that this is always done in a private bathroom or toilet and should reinforced to your child that this is a private task and that it should be done with the door closed. It is also useful to reinforce this information through a variety of other resources such as videos or picture sequences such as the 'Changing my pad' picture sequence on the following page. Another teaching method that can be used is "backwards chaining". This means that you start with the last step first and move backwards once that step has been mastered.

Your daughter may also wish to use tampons, which can be an advantage for those girls who may like to swim regularly. It is best to alternate between both sanitary pads and tampons. Changing a tampon is similar tot hat of a sanitary pad and again you should break this down into a series of steps until the task is mastered.

(Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, pp. 31-35.)

(Image: Kidspot 2013.)

## TOXIC SHOCK SYNDROME (TSS)

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS) is a very rare condition that may cause death. It is caused by a toxin, which is produced by the bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*. It is usually exists in the air but if it gets into a person's bloodstream it can be fatal. TSS is linked with incorrect usage of tampons. For example, leaving a tampon in for an extended period of time. Symptoms associated with this condition appear quickly and include:

- Fever
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Headache
- A rash that looks similar to sunburn

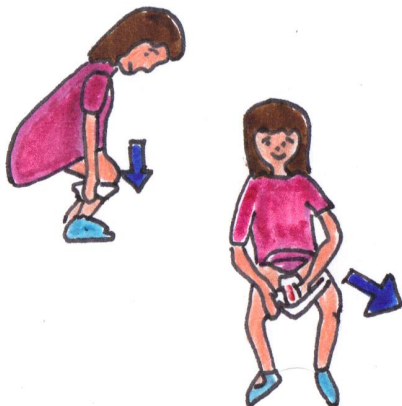
If your daughter wishes to use tampons, it is important that they are changed regularly. If your daughter shows signs of these symptoms it is important to see a doctor straight away and stop using tampons.

(Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, p. 35; Kimberley Worldwide 2013.)

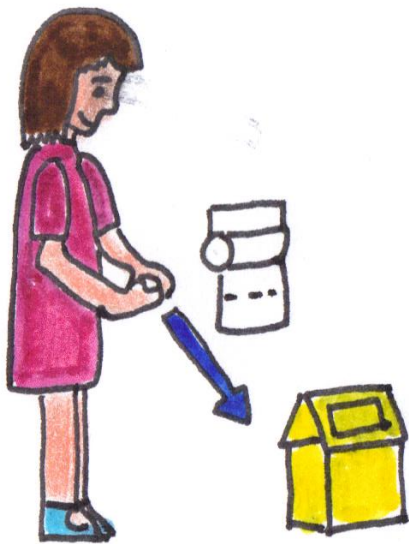
# Changing my pad



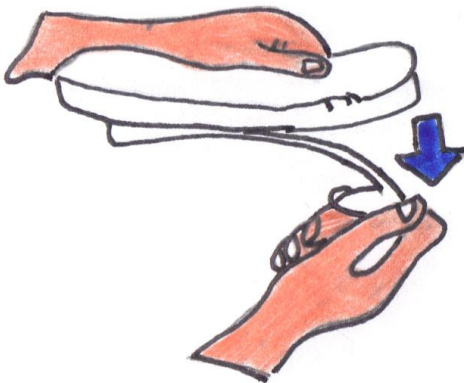
1. Go to the toilet. This is a private place. Make sure you close the door.



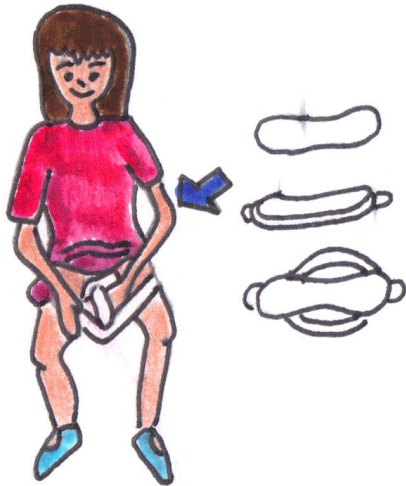
2. Pull your pants and underwear down.  
You might like to sit on the toilet.  
Locate your dirty pad.  
Take it out.



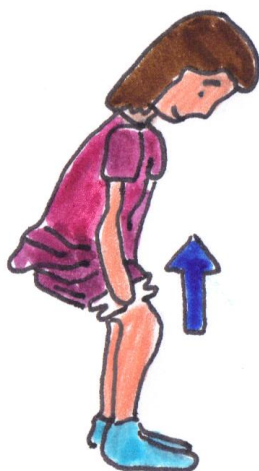
3. Fold the dirty pad inwards and wrap the pad in toilet paper. Put the dirty pad in the bin.



4. Get a clean pad out. Pull the sticky back off.



5. Stick the clean pad in the middle of your underwear. Make sure the sticky side is on the underwear.



6. Pull underwear up.



7. Pull dress  
down or pants  
up.



9. Wash your hands.

You should change your pad every 3-4 hours.  
Remember to stay clean and shower everyday



## PRE-MENSTRUAL SYNDROME (PMS)



Pre-menstrual syndrome is the discomfort that your daughter may feel a few days before her period is about to start. Symptoms associated with pre-menstrual syndrome may include:

- Tender breasts
- Binge eating or food cravings
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Irritability
- Back aches
- Constipation or diarrhea

Some women experience period pain or cramps just before or in the first couple of days of their period. In order to ease this pain, medicines can be purchased from a supermarket or pharmacy or home remedies such as a hot water bottle or hot bath can be helpful. Other simple methods such as relaxation, exercise or changing your daughters diet can help ease PMS.

## MENSTRUAL CYCLE CHARTING

When your daughter gets her first periods they can be quite irregular and therefore a menstrual chart (pg.) is useful in determining your daughter's menstrual pattern including the length of the cycle, how long her period lasts, how heavy her periods will be, what pre-menstrual symptoms occur and how they should be treated. Intellectually disabled girls may find it hard to express the pre-menstrual pain that they feel and may act out. By charting these occurrences you will become attuned to how to effectively treat these symptoms. If irregular periods continue to occur it is important to see a doctor.

(Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, pp. 35-36.)

## PRIVACY

It is important to let your daughter know that talking about your period is a private matter. It is important that she only discusses her period with people that she knows and trusts such as family members or her teacher.

Talking about reproductive organs is also a good time to reinforce private body parts. Reinforce to your daughter that no one should touch her private parts with out her permission and she should not touch anyone's private parts without their consent. Roleplaying various scenarios will help reinforce this and your daughter can practice saying 'no'. It is also important that she know that she should not display her private parts (breasts, anus and genitals) in public.

If inappropriate behaviour occurs, discuss with your daughter why that is and praise her when she displays appropriate behaviour.

(Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, p. 31-34; SHine SA 2010)





## Menstrual cycle chart

[illegible]

## MASTURBATION

It is very common for girls to explore their bodies through masturbation and it is a very healthy aspect of sexual development. It is important that you help your intellectually disabled child to have a positive attitude towards their sexuality by condoning masturbation and discussing masturbation with them, as they may not know how to engage in it. You can use the same teaching methods used to teach your child about menstruation such as diagrams, videos and anatomically correct dolls. Simple statements such as 'all boys and girls masturbate' or 'girls can masturbate by rubbing the very sensitive spot above their vagina called the clitoris', allows your daughter to learn how to masturbate and understand that it is normal behaviour.

It is once again important to remind your daughter that masturbation must be a private task undertaken in a private place, such as a bathroom or her bedroom with the door closed. A simple statement such as 'It is good to masturbate, but you must do it in a private place' will help remind your child of privacy. To reinforce private and public, use a variety of photos or diagrams that represent both public (i.e. shopping centre) and private places (i.e. toilet) in order for your child to understand that certain tasks need to be undertaken in a private place.

(Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, p. 26-28.)

## HYGEINE

When your daughter reaches puberty the importance of hygiene needs to be addressed. Due to all the physical changes that are occurring to your daughter there will be increased sweating and oil production and this can lead to unpleasant things such as acne and body odour. When discussing these physical changes with your child, you need to remind your daughter that it is important to shower everyday and wear clean clothes. In order to combat the acne and body odour you should encourage your daughter to use underarm deodorant and wash her face with soap or a face wash. In order to get your child into these hygienic habits, it may be helpful to revise a schedule with various diagrams so that they rely on this to remember what to do and gain independence. The use of 'backward chaining' could also be a useful way to get your daughter to learn more complex tasks such as shaving her legs.

(Fegan, Rauch and McCarthy 1993, pp. 18-20, 34.)



(Image Panda cubs 2013)

# Emotional changes

As your daughter goes through puberty she not only undergoes physical changes but also emotional changes. These emotional changes can affect the way your daughter feels and acts and sometimes she may be quite confused about how she is feeling. It is important to discuss these emotional changes with your daughter so that she knows that her feelings and thoughts are normal and something every girl and boy experiences during puberty. The following emotion cards are a useful resource to help guide this discussion with your daughter. It is important that you openly discuss your family values and beliefs but also hear your daughter's point of view. If disagreements occur, make sure you are patient with your daughter and try to compromise. Remember patience is the key.

The emotional changes that your daughter may undertake include:

- Wanting to be more independent
- Wanting to socialise more with friends
- Being attracted to men, women or both
- Mood swings
- Becoming more sensitive or aggressive
- Wanting to rebel against her parents.

# + Emotion cards

The following emotion cards can be used to help discuss the emotional changes that your daughter will undertake during puberty. The use of visual aids and simple statements allow girls to grasp a basic understanding of the emotional changes that may happen and that these emotions are perfectly normal.

## **MOOD SWINGS**

Sometimes you might feel happy and then other times you might feel angry or sad.

These are called mood swings.

Mood swings happen to girls and boys during puberty.

Mood swings are normal.

Sometimes you get mood swings before you get your period.



(Image: Menstrupedia 2012)

# + Emotion cards

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## **INDEPENDANCE**

When you go through puberty you might want to start doing things by yourself.

This is called being independent.

This is a normal part of growing up.

When you are independent you might want to do independent things like making your own lunch for school.

It is ok to have a private place of your own, like your bedroom where you can have alone time.



(Image: SheKnows 2013)

# + Emotion cards

The following emotion cards can be used to help discuss the emotional changes that your daughter will undertake during puberty. The use of visual aids and simple statements allow girls to grasp a basic understanding of the emotional changes that may happen and that these emotions are perfectly normal.

## **SPEND TIME WITH FRIENDS**

As you get older you might want to spend more time with your friends rather than your family.

It is good to meet new people and socialise with friends.

Spending time with friends might mean you may go shopping or see a movie.

A friend should be someone you can trust and tell private things to.



(Image: Menstrupedia 2012)



# + Emotion cards

The following emotion cards can be used to help discuss the emotional changes that your daughter will undertake during puberty. The use of visual aids and simple statements allow girls to grasp a basic understanding of the emotional changes that may happen and that these emotions are perfectly normal.

## **BE ATTRACTED TO OTHER PEOPLE**

It is normal to have sexy feelings about another person.

Sometimes you might get sexy feelings for another boy.

Sometimes you might get sexy feelings for another girl.

Sometime you might get sexy feelings for boys and girls.

Sexy feelings are normal and are part of growing up.



(Images: Menstrupedia 2012; Wikihow 2013)



# + Emotion cards

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## **SENSITIVE OR AGGRESSIVE**

Sometimes you might be very sensitive or angry. This is normal.

Sometimes you might feel uncomfortable with the way that you look

This might make you feel angry about what you look like or how you feel.

When you feel sensitive or angry it is important to say how you feel.

Make sure you tell someone when you are sensitive or angry. This should be someone you trust such as a family member, teacher or friend.



(Images: Menstrupedia 2012; Fmv.magazine 2013.)

# + Emotion cards

The following emotion cards can be used to help discuss the emotional changes that your daughter will undertake during puberty. The use of visual aids and simple statements allow girls to grasp a basic understanding of the emotional changes that may happen and that these emotions are perfectly normal.

## **WANT TO CHALLENGE ADULTS**

It is common for girls and boys to feel like their parents control them.

Sometimes you might not want to do what your parents tell you to do.

It is important to tell your parents how you feel.

Talking to your parents will show them that you are growing up and becoming a woman.



(Image: Menstrupedia 2012)

# Additional resources

Family Planning Victoria

<http://www.fpv.org.au/>

Family Planning Queensland

<http://www.fpq.com.au/education/disability.php>

Family Planning NSW

<http://www.fpnsw.org.au/index.html>

The better health channel

<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/>

Women and Children's Health Network

<http://www.cyh.com/SubDefault.aspx?p=159>

Sexuality and disability

<http://www.sexualityanddisability.org/body/knowning-Your-body.aspx>

Shine SA

<http://www.shinesa.org.au/>

Sexuality and U

<http://www.sexualityandu.ca/>

Here are some useful websites you can use to gain additional resources and well as information and advice. Remember, you can always go to your child's teacher and local GP, for information and support

# References

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