



## **Title: Let's talk about periods**

Overview: An examination of Irish menstrual education and its impact on an individual's preparedness for their first period.

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## Summary

After hearing anecdotal stories from friends about their experience with menstrual education in Ireland and how inadequate they felt it was, we decided to examine this issue in more detail. Our goals were to understand the strengths and weaknesses of menstrual education in Ireland and to understand how it could improve.

We felt it was important to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, so we distributed a survey (which has 390 responses) and carried out three focus groups.

We used focus groups as part of our project as we wanted to delve deeper into people's individual experiences that they couldn't express in depth through our survey. Although the survey gave us excellent data we needed the experiences, opinions and stories behind those statistics

The survey was distributed to as many places as possible in order to secure a large and diverse sample. Students in both mixed and single-sex schools, as well as students in both rural and urban schools completed our survey. In addition to this the survey was distributed to some young people attending Belong To Youth Service's youth groups.

Respondents were asked a minimum of seven questions. Those who responded that they had had a period were asked a further six questions.

Each focus group covered different topics and questions discussing the biological and practical side to periods, education and preparedness.

Some of our most significant results are as follows:

- Only 27% of respondents felt prepared for their first period, with 28% feeling unprepared.
- A majority (60%) of respondents had received misinformation.
- A majority (59%) of participants were only comfortable talking to two or fewer groups of people.

We had five research questions which we answered successfully:

**Is the timing of an individual's menstrual education correlated with comfort in discussing periods?**

Yes. The earlier an individual receives their menstrual education, the higher the likelihood is that they are comfortable talking to more groups of people about periods.

**Does the source of an individual's menstrual education impact how prepared they are for their first period?**

Yes. Those whose first/main source was school were less likely to be prepared for their first period. Those whose main source was their mother were most likely to be prepared.

**Does comfort discussing periods correlate with preparedness?**

Yes. The higher an individual's comfort score the more likely they were to be prepared for their first period.

**Does preparedness correlate with the timing of an individual's menstrual education?**

Yes. The earlier an individual first heard of periods the more likely they were to be prepared for their period and vice versa.

**What were the first/main sources of information for those who had received misinformation?**

Individuals' mothers, friends, and the internet were more likely to be the first/main source for respondents who had received misinformation while schools were more likely to be the first/main source for those who had not.

From our results we were able to create several proposed solutions to the problems we had identified. The focus of menstrual education in Irish schools should no longer be a cold clinical talk where girls "get kind of embarrassed" and boys feel "you don't want to be interested". Periods are a practical element of life, and these practicalities need to be taught. How to cope with cramps, how to use a tampon, how to track your period etc. We would also propose that this education move to an earlier age to help increase people's preparedness and comfort.

# Introduction

After hearing anecdotal stories from friends about their experience with menstrual education in Ireland and how inadequate they felt it was, we decided to examine this issue in more detail. Our goals were to understand the strengths and weaknesses of menstrual education in Ireland and to understand how it could improve.

Our project focussed on the experiences of all teenagers in Ireland today, regardless of sex. Before starting our project, we conducted some background research. In doing so we discovered that there were very few recent studies into the effectiveness of Irish menstrual education.

A 2018 survey from Plan International had the following findings. Nearly 50% of menstruating teenagers in Ireland struggled to afford menstrual products. 50% of participants did not believe school adequately prepared them for their period. 55% were embarrassed by their periods. 61% of girls surveyed had missed school as a direct result of their period and 88% felt less able to pay attention during class.

We could not find any research specific to Ireland that included boys in the research design.

We had five research questions:

- Is the timing of an individual's menstrual education correlated with comfort in discussing periods?
- Does the source of an individual's menstrual education impact how prepared they are for their first period?
- Does comfort discussing periods correlate with preparedness?
- Does preparedness correlate with the timing of an individual's menstrual education?
- What were the first/main sources of information for those who had received misinformation?

We felt it was crucial to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, so we distributed a survey (which has now collected 390 responses) and carried out three focus groups.

# Method

Our research methods were a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection.

## Equipment

- Jotform (survey software)
- Stata (data analysis)
- Excel (graph production)
- Voice memos (focus group recording)
- Notes app (focus group transcription)

## Survey distribution and data collection

All survey respondents were teenagers in Ireland.

According to the Central Statistics Office, there are just over 487,000 people in Ireland aged between 12 and 18 inclusive. To have a low enough margin of error we determined that we would need a sample size of around 400.

The survey was distributed to as many places as possible in order to secure a large and diverse sample. Students in both mixed and single-sex schools, as well as students in both rural and urban schools completed our survey. In addition to this the survey was distributed to some young people attending Belong To Youth Service's youth groups.

Respondents were asked a minimum of seven questions. Those who responded that they had had a period were asked a further five questions.

We received 390 responses.

The survey is included in the appendices.

## Survey data analysis

We used Stata to cross tabulate variables to explore relationships between them in an attempt to answer our original research questions.

For each category of people an individual was comfortable talking to about periods, we aggregated the binary responses into an overall score designed to capture the individual's general comfort when talking about periods with a broad range of people in their lives.

We then transferred the above statistical outputs to excel to express cross tabulations as charts.

## Focus groups

We used focus groups as part of our project as we wanted to delve deeper into people's individual experiences that they couldn't express in depth through our survey. Although the survey gave us excellent data we needed the experiences, opinions and stories behind those statistics.

Each focus group covered different topics and questions ensuring to discuss the biological and practical side to periods, education and preparedness. While all students involved in the focus groups were from the same school, we ensured that we included students from a diverse range of ages, and students of both sexes. We had a group of 3 girls aged 12-14, a group of 5 boys aged 15-17 and a group of 4 girls aged 16-17.

We took great care to ensure everyone felt safe enough to share their opinions honestly while participating the focus groups. We used circular seating for an open environment and before we started recording or asking any questions we encouraged general conversation to put participants at ease.

We started each focus group by asking the survey questions again but this time asking for more detailed responses and encouraging conversations. For example; if the question was "where did you first learn about periods?" We would then ask follow up questions such as; How did you feel in that moment? What exactly did you learn? How comfortable did you feel thinking about periods during that time? Do you think that first learning experience was positive or negative? These questions allowed us to understand how an individual's attitude around discussing and understanding periods was first formed and how we could work to change that if it was negative or insufficient.

By listening to peoples responses we could then ask them follow up questions that were more specific. Every focus group was recorded using voice memos so we could concentrate on the conversation without worrying about recording results in the moment.

After the focus groups took place we went back to the recordings to extract the information needed.

To ensure our focus groups ran smoothly and were effective we researched focus groups using information from:

Forbes.com "Top Pitfalls In Planning And Executing Effective Focus Groups"  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2021/02/01/top-pitfalls-in-planning-and-executing-effective-focus-groups/>

CitizensAdvice.org.uk “How to run focus groups”  
<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Equalities/How%20to%20run%20focus%20groups%20guide.pdf>

Eiu.edu “Designing and conducting focus group interviews”  
<https://www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf>

# Results

## Survey Responses

### Had respondents had their period?

- 69% of respondents had had their period
- 31% of respondents had not

### Age at which respondents first heard of periods:

- 49% of respondents first heard of periods between the ages of 8-10
- 28% of respondents first heard of periods between the ages of 11-12
- 17% of respondents first heard of periods before the age of 8
- 6% of respondents first heard of periods when they were over the age of 13

### First source of an individual's information about periods:

- 44% of respondents' first source of information was their mother
- 22% of respondents' first source of information was school
- 14% of respondents' first source of information was their friends
- 12% of respondents' first source of information was the internet or media
- 8% of respondents' first source of information was other, such as their father or other relatives

### Main source of most of an individual's information about periods:

- 33% of respondents' main source of information was their mother
- 28% of respondents' main source of information was school
- 26% of respondents' main source of information was the internet or media
- 8% of respondents' main source of information was their friends
- 5% of respondents' main source of information was their other, such as their father or other relatives

### Did a respondent think they received enough information about periods from school?

- 52% of respondents thought that they had received enough information from school
- 48% of respondents thought that they had not received enough information from school

### **Who are respondents comfortable talking about periods with?**

- 67% of respondents are comfortable talking to their mothers
- 18% of respondents are comfortable talking to their fathers
- 31% of respondents are comfortable talking to their other female relatives
- 9% of respondents are comfortable talking to their other male relatives
- 71% of respondents are comfortable talking to their female friends
- 22% of respondents are comfortable talking to their male friends
- 28% of respondents are comfortable talking to female teacher
- 8% of respondents are comfortable talking to male teachers

### **Had respondents ever received misinformation?**

- 60% of respondents had
- 40% had not

### **Did respondents feel prepared for their first period?**

- 27% of respondents felt prepared
- 45% of respondents felt somewhat prepared
- 28% of respondents did not feel prepared

### **Were respondents able to access period products at school?**

- 16% were always able to access period products at school
- 19% were able to access period products at school most of the time
- 33% were sometimes able to access period products at school
- 32% were never able to access period products at school

### **Had respondents ever missed school because of their period?**

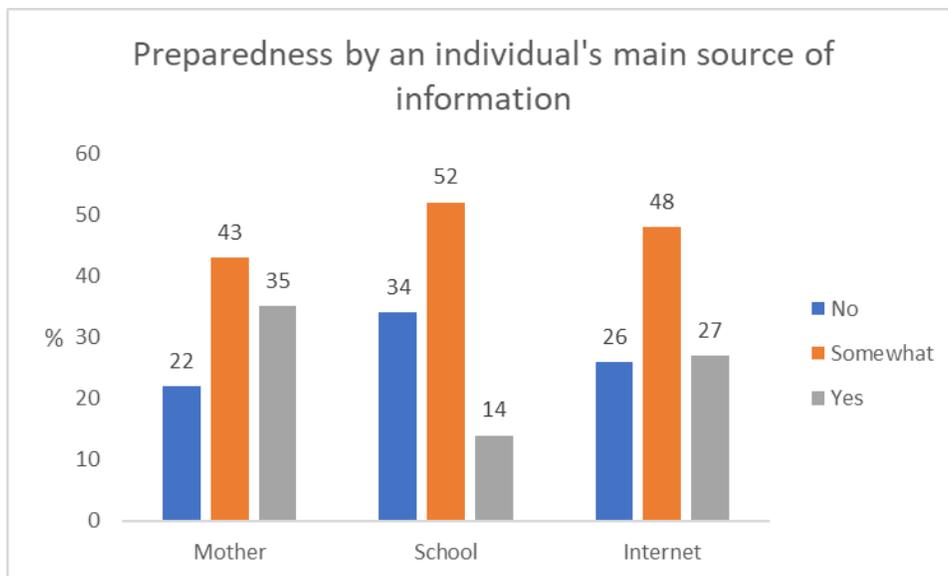
- 51% of respondents had never missed school
- 26% of respondents had once missed school
- 19% of respondents missed school multiple times a year
- 5% of respondent missed school monthly

## Survey analysis

Our focus when it came to analysis was to cross tabulate our different variables in order to explore the relationships between them. To do this we used Stata, a piece of statistical software. When we had done a piece of analysis with Stata, we transferred the statistical outputs to Excel to produce graphs.

The first five graphs cross tabulate an individual's preparedness for their first period to several other variables.

Figure 1 shows that an individual is more likely to be prepared for their first period if their main source of information is their mother, and less likely to be prepared if it is school. The other significant thing to take away from this chart is that respondents whose main source of information was the internet were better prepared than those whose main source of information was school. We only compared the three most common sources of an individual's information as there was insufficient data on the other sources.



**Figure 1: Preparedness by an individual's main source of information**

Figure 2 shows that an individual is more likely to be prepared and less likely to not be prepared for their first period if they learnt about periods at a younger age.

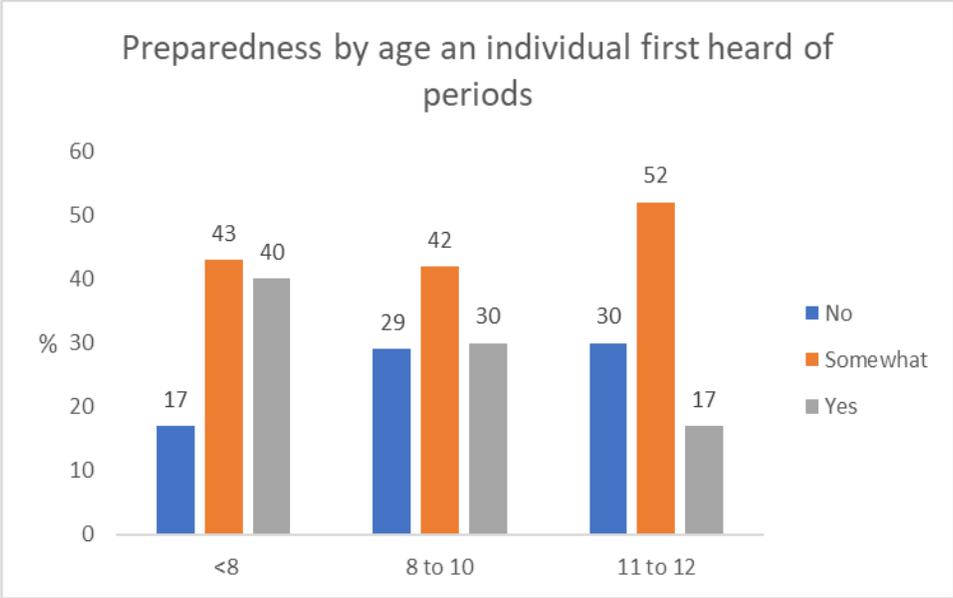


Figure 2: Preparedness by age an individual first heard of periods

According to figure 3 an individual was more likely to be prepared for their first period if they got their first period at a later age.

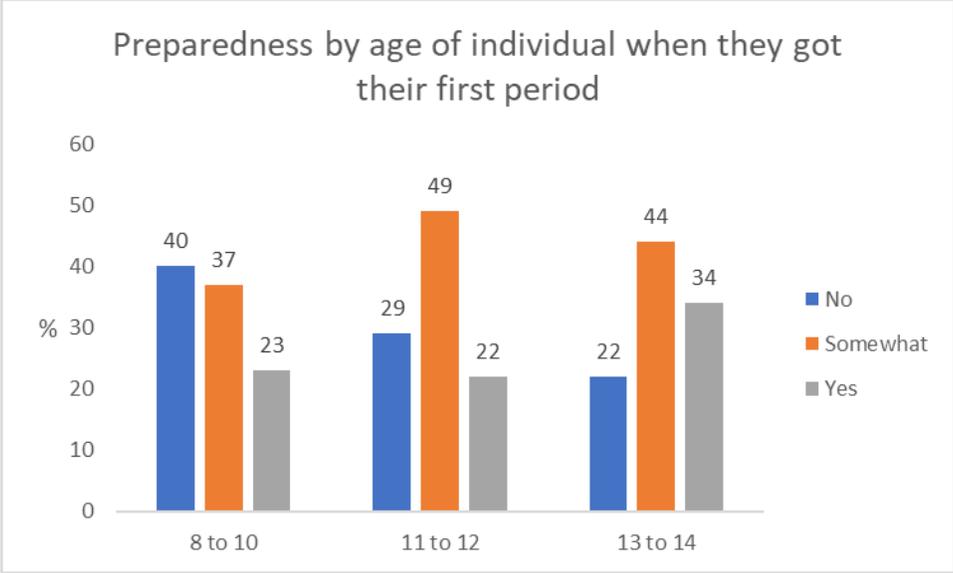


Figure 3: Preparedness by age of individual when they got their first period

Figure 4 shows us that individuals who were not prepared for their first period were more likely to say that they did not receive enough information about periods from school.

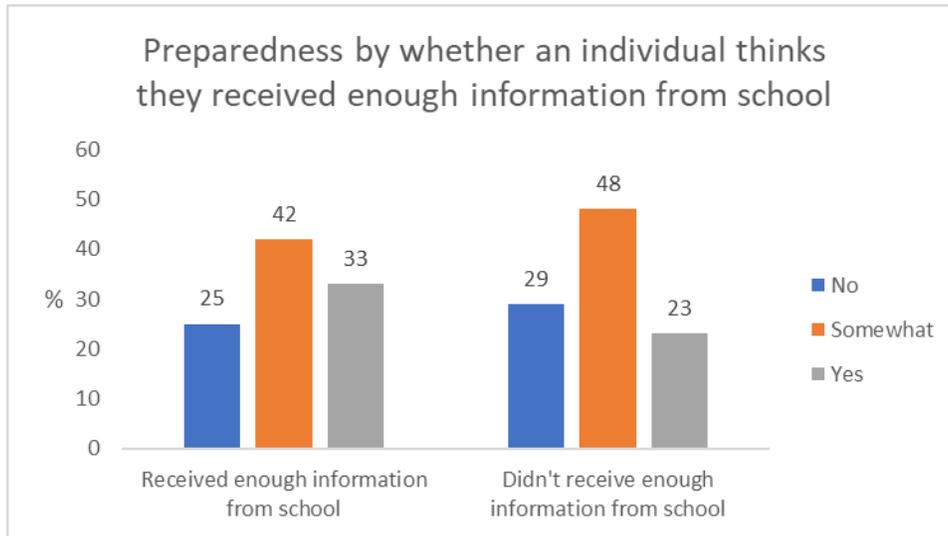


Figure 4: Preparedness by whether an individual thinks they received enough information from school

We can see from figure 5 that respondents were more likely to be prepared if their first source of information was the internet/media, friends, or their mother, and less likely to be prepared if their first source was school. We only compared the four most common first sources of an individual's information as there was insufficient data on the other sources.

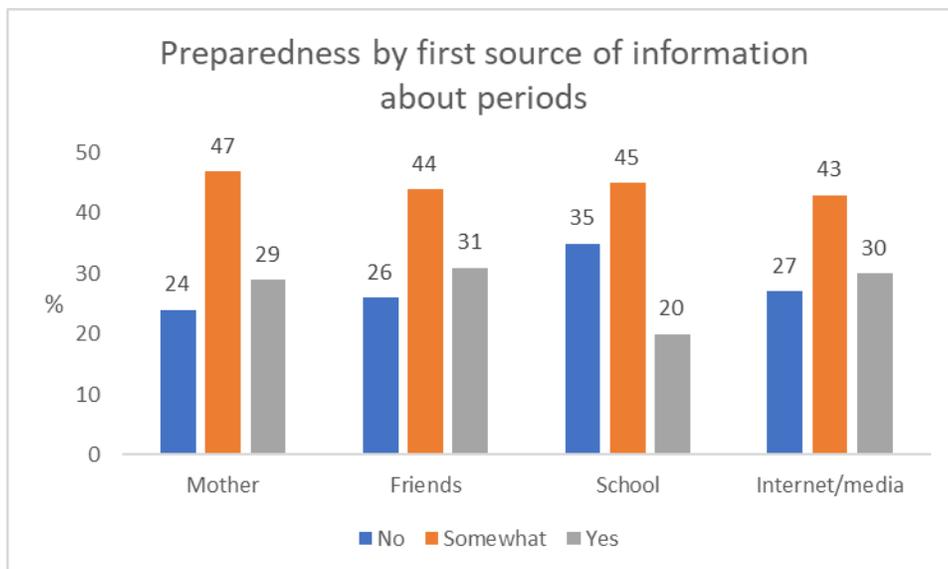


Figure 5: Preparedness by first source of information about periods

From figures 1-5 we can see that there is a clear correlation between preparedness and an individual's menstrual education. Those who first learnt about periods from a source other than school were substantially more prepared than those whose first source was school.

Figures 6-7 explore correlations between receiving misinformation to their first/main source of information about periods.

According to figure 6 Respondents whose main source of information was the internet were more likely to report receiving misinformation about periods, while those whose main source was school were less likely to report receiving misinformation. We only compared the three most common sources of an individual's information as there was insufficient data on the other sources.

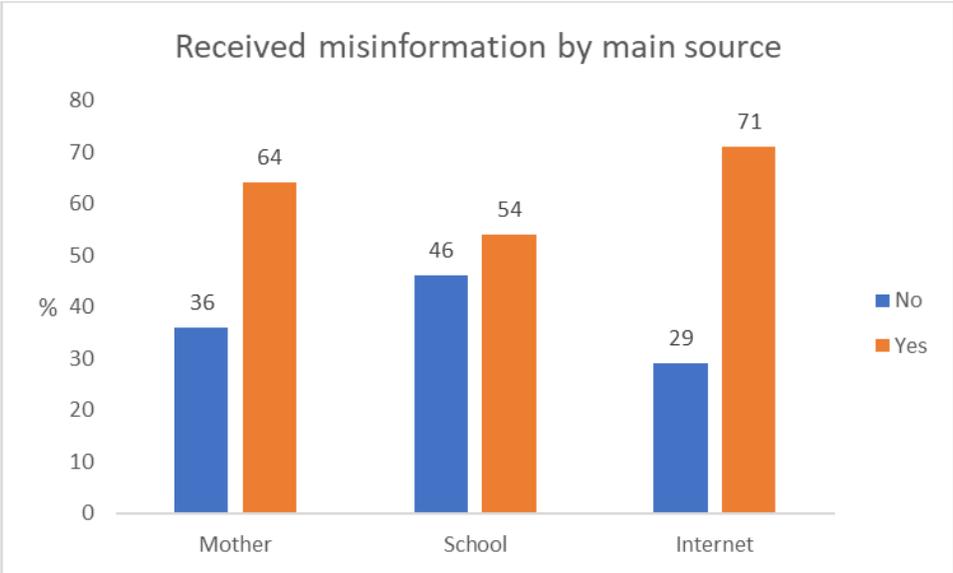


Figure 6: Whether an individual had received information by main source

From figure 7 we can see respondents whose first source of information about periods was the internet were the most likely to report receiving misinformation, followed by friends and then an individual's mother, while those whose first source was school were the least likely to report receiving misinformation. We only compared the four most common first sources of an individual's information as there was insufficient data on the other sources.

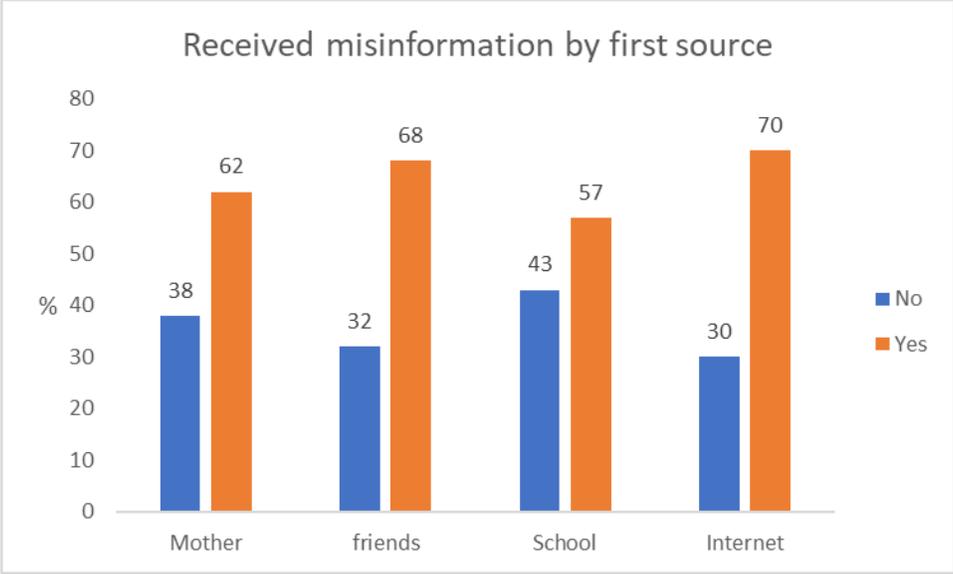
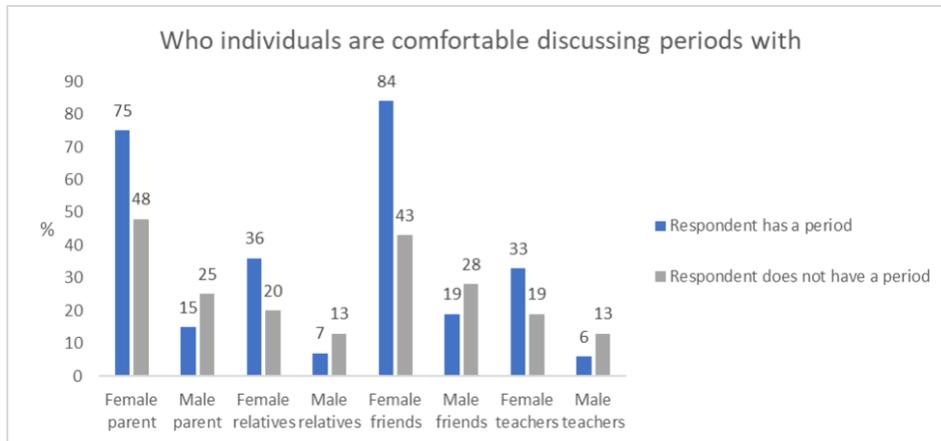


Figure 7: Whether an individual had received information by first source

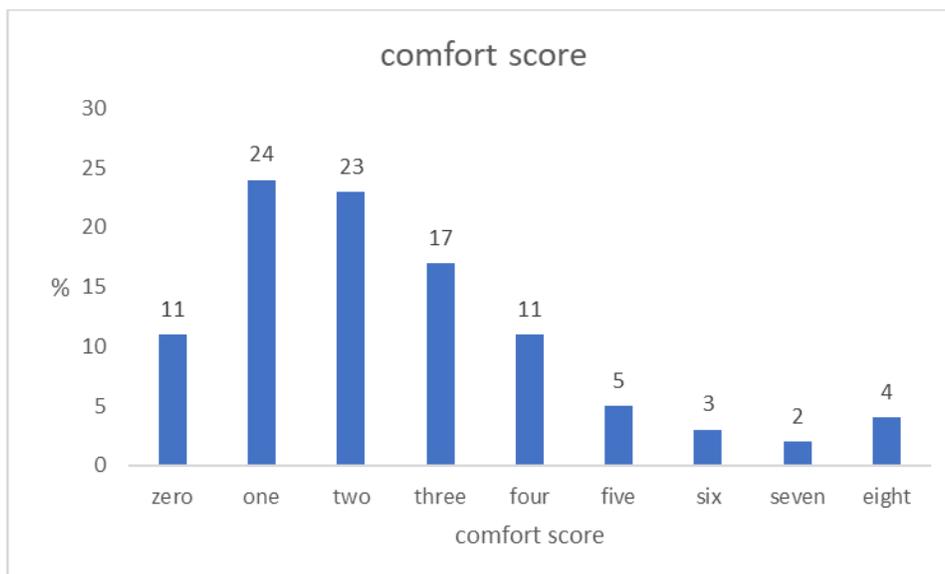
Figure 8 shows the different types of people respondents were comfortable discussing periods with, broken down by whether or not the respondent has a period. Respondents who had a period were significantly more comfortable talking about periods with women, while those who do not have periods were much more comfortable talking to men. This group includes both males and females who had not yet had their first period.



**Figure 8: Who individuals are comfortable discussing periods with**

Figures 9-13 were created by assigning each respondent a ‘comfort score’ based on how many categories of people they were comfortable discussing periods with. While this is an imperfect measure of an individual’s comfort discussing periods, it is a good indicator of an individual’s general comfort discussing periods. The scores ranged from zero to eight.

As we can see from figure 9, only 14% of respondents were comfortable talking to five or more categories of people about periods, with over half of respondents only being comfortable talking to two or fewer categories of people about periods. In other words, almost all young people surveyed felt some level of discomfort talking about periods.



**Figure 9: comfort score distribution**

Figure 10 tells us that the younger an individual was when they first heard of periods, the more categories of people they were comfortable talking to about them.

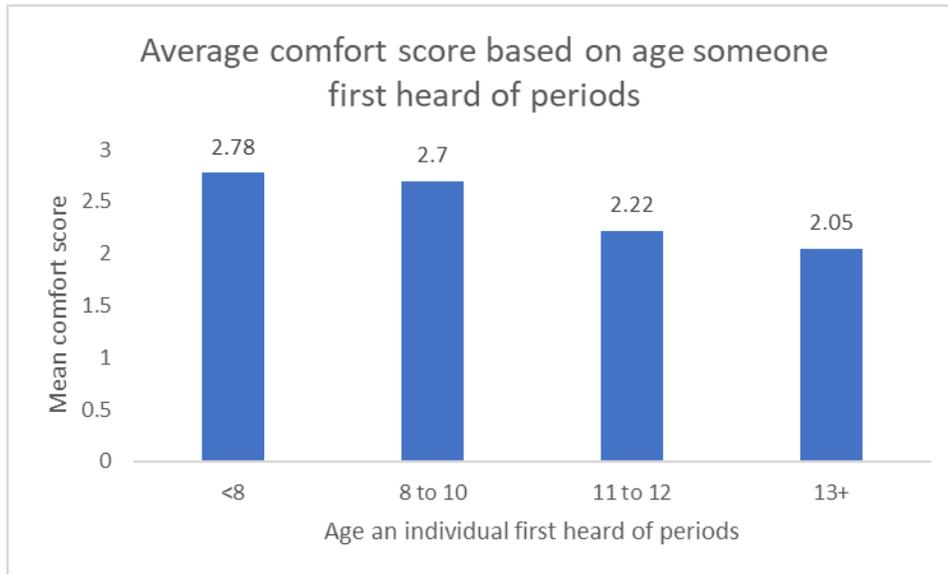


Figure 10: average comfort score by age an individual first heard of periods

The effect from figure 10 is further exacerbated in figure 11 when the information is broken down by whether or not the individual had a period. This group includes both males and females who had not yet had their first period.

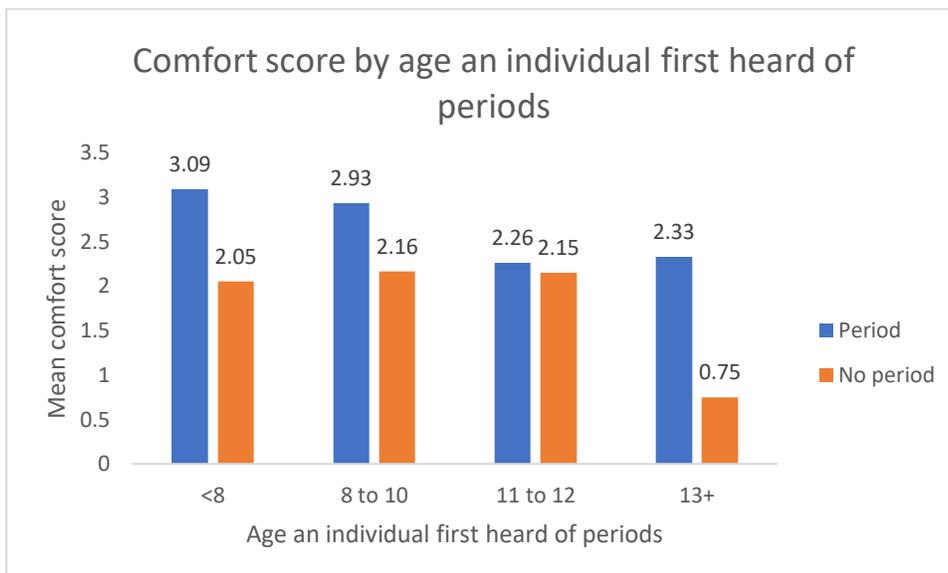


Figure 11: Comfort score by age an individual first heard of periods

We can see from figure 12 that individuals who had a higher comfort score were more likely to be prepared for their first period, while those with a lower comfort score were less likely to be prepared.

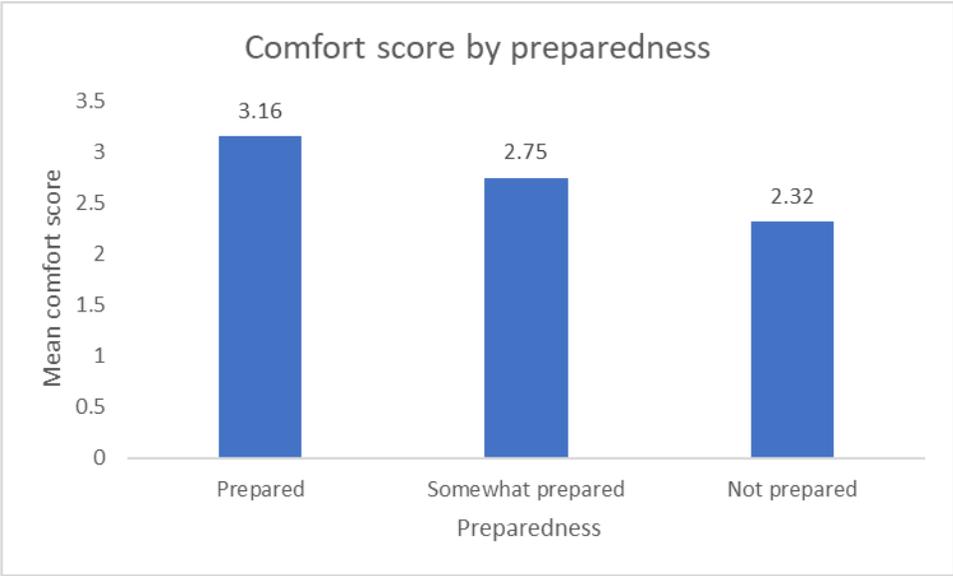


Figure 12: Comfort score by preparedness

The comfort score of individuals is also correlated with their age when they completed the survey, with the comfort score increasing with age, this can be seen in figure 13.

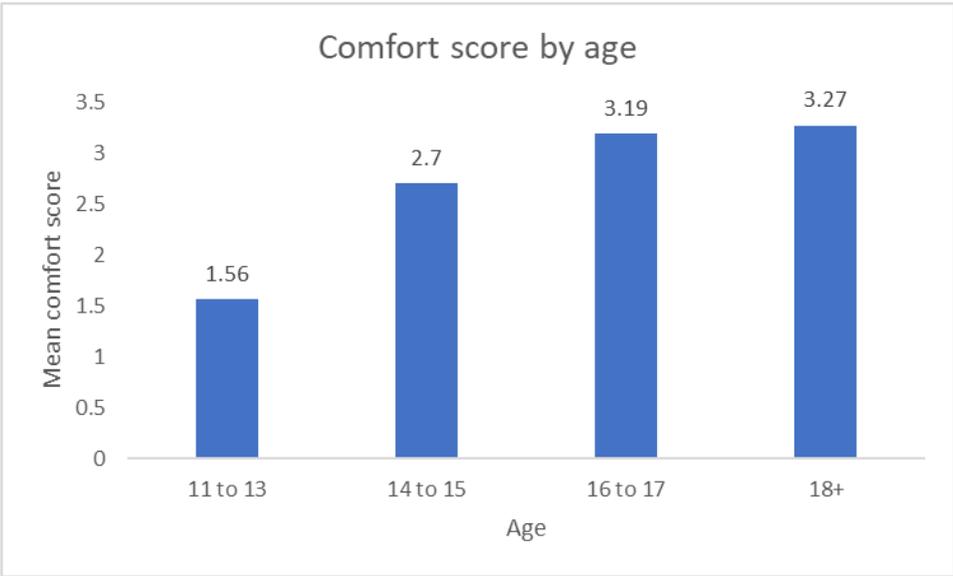


Figure 13: Comfort score by age

## Focus Group Analysis:

The results and analysis of results from the focus groups were enlightening as they provided us with detail and anecdotal evidence that matched with the survey results. Each group showed us the real stories and people behind our statistics.

The main purpose of focus groups was to understand attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions of people in relation to discussing menstrual education. Participants described their experience of menstrual education in school as “People getting kind of embarrassed” and in particular boys outlined how they felt they “Didn’t want to be interested” and this prevented them from asking questions.

This then directly impacted the level and quality of menstrual education. During our conversations with girls we discovered there was a huge lack of basic information from menstrual education in school, parents, social media but they reported low levels of misinformation. However, during our conversations with boys we found there was both a lack of basic information and a high volume of misinformation.

We found girls were more concerned with the practical elements and wanted their education to be focused more around using menstrual products, coping with cramps/mood changed/fatigue etc. “They never warned us about cramps”, “I tried pads and I hated them because no one taught me how to use one”. “I was just sitting there confused” and “I didn’t know how to do it” were two ways using a tampon were described to us.

We found participants who had started their period earlier grew up to be more comfortable talking about periods; because they were younger and they didn’t feel they had a fear of asking questions. Participants who learnt about periods at a younger age (7-9) described themselves as “innocently inquiring” about periods without feeling any discomfort whereas participants who learnt about periods at an older age (10-12) described feeling “awkward” “uncomfortable” and “weird” when first talking about periods.

Participants who felt they could openly and comfortably discuss periods with someone or during school felt more prepared when they had their period while those who felt “uncomfortable” or “weird” talking about their period were less prepared and faced uncertainty when it came to dealing with practical elements of their period such as using tampons. This unpreparedness came as a result feeling as if they could not ask questions or discuss any issues they were facing. Participants who felt their school education was inadequate and they didn’t feel comfortable talking to a friend or family member reported turning to “TikTok” “YouTube” and “Reddit” for help.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

## Research questions

**Is the timing of an individual's menstrual education correlated with comfort in discussing periods?**

Yes. The earlier an individual receives their menstrual education, the higher the likelihood is that they are comfortable talking to more groups of people about periods.

**Does the source of an individual's menstrual education impact how prepared they are for their first period?**

Yes. Those whose first/main source was school were less likely to be prepared for their first period. Those whose main source was their mother were most likely to be prepared.

**Does comfort discussing periods correlate with preparedness?**

Yes. The higher an individual's comfort score the more likely they were to be prepared for their first period.

**Does preparedness correlate with the timing of an individual's menstrual education?**

Yes. The earlier an individual first heard of periods the more likely they were to be prepared for their period and vice versa.

**What were the first/main sources of information for those who had received misinformation?**

Individuals' mothers, friends, and the internet were more likely to be the first/main source for respondents who had received misinformation while schools were more likely to be the first/main source for those who had not.

## Problems we have identified

### Preparedness

Only 27% of respondents felt prepared for their first period, with 28% feeling unprepared. Individuals were more likely to be prepared if: their main source of information was their mother, their first source was their mother, friends or the internet, they first learnt about periods at an earlier age, they had a higher comfort score, and they got their period later.

Individuals were less likely to be prepared if: their main source of information was school, their first source of information was school, they learnt about periods at an older age, they had a

lower comfort score, and they got their period earlier. Those who weren't prepared for their first period were also more likely to respond that school did not adequately prepare them for their period.

From this we can see that school is not adequately preparing young people for their period, with menstrual education being overly brief and taught after many have had their first period.

### **Misinformation**

A majority (60%) of respondents had received misinformation. Those who had not received misinformation were more likely to have first heard of periods from school, and their main source was more likely to be school. This suggests that schools are providing the most accurate information.

### **Comfort**

The modal comfort score was one, with a majority (59%) only being comfortable talking to two or fewer groups of people. This phenomenon seemed significantly correlated with whether or not respondents had a period. Those who had had a period were more likely to be comfortable talking to women about periods, while those who had not had a period were more likely to be comfortable talking to men about periods.

Higher comfort scores were also correlated with the age an individual first heard about periods and the age of the individual. Those who heard of periods at a younger age were more likely to have a higher comfort score, and those who were older were more likely to have a higher comfort score.

## **Proposed solutions**

We can't depend on mothers to prepare their children for their period. Not every mother can or wants to provide this education. Schools need to ensure that as many children as possible are prepared for their period.

We know from both our qualitative and quantitative results that the age at which an individual receives menstrual education appears to effect both preparedness and comfort.

Period education could be introduced at a younger age to ensure young people who get their period earlier are better prepared, and that everyone is more comfortable discussing menstruation.

The education schools are providing is accurate, it just needs to cover the more practical aspects of periods to prepare people.

The focus of menstrual education in Irish schools should no longer be a cold clinical talk where girls “get kind of embarrassed” and boys feel “you don’t want to be interested”. Periods are a practical element of life, and these practicalities need to be taught. How to cope with cramps, how to use a tampon, how to track your period etc.

Schools could teach students how to spot period related misinformation and debunk common myths surrounding menstruation.

## Areas for improvement

If we were to undertake a research project like this again, we would try to further increase our sample size in an attempt to increase our accuracy. We’d undertake further efforts to make our sample more diverse and representative.

We would also try to expand our project by lengthening our survey to include more demographic questions, such as inquiring whether or not a participant was in a mixed or single-sex school, or a rural or urban school. It would also have been interesting to explore the family structure of respondents, e.g. whether they have an older sister, whether they live in a single parent household.

When it came to the focus groups there are several changes we would make. We would hold more focus groups comprised of a mix of girls and boys. We would also have held focus groups among teachers surrounding their experiences providing menstrual education.

# Acknowledgements

We want to say a thank you so much to everyone who helped make this project possible. Firstly, thanks to Pete Lunn for teaching us how to use Stata for our data analysis to Conor Maxwell for being our teacher coordinator. And of course thank you to everyone who completed our survey or participated in our focus groups and to all the schools and Belong To who helped us distribute our survey.

# Appendices

## Survey

BT 13

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

### **What's a period?**

We are two students and this part of our project for BT Young Scientist 2023. We are researching the education and preparedness around periods/menstruation in Ireland. Thank you for agreeing to complete this form, as we are researching information around periods (menstruation) and the questions are of a somewhat sensitive nature, you will remain completely anonymous once you have filled in this form and your name/school will not be publicly displayed.

**How old are you?**

**How old were you when you first heard about periods?**

**Where did you first learn about periods?**

**Where did you receive most of your information about periods?**

**Do you think you received enough information about periods from school? (Whether you have a period or not)**

**Who do you feel comfortable talking about periods with:**

**Have you had your period? If you answered no, please skip the next questions and submit the form.**

**How old were you when you got your first period?**

**Did you feel prepared for your first period?**

**Have you been able to access period products (tampons, pads etc.) at school?**

**Have you missed school because of your period?**

**Have you ever received misinformation about periods?**

# Sample response

1 of 13

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

## What's a period?

We are two students and this part of our project for BT Young Scientist 2023. We are researching the education and preparedness around periods/menstruation in Ireland. Thank you for agreeing to complete this form, as we are researching information around periods (menstruation) and the questions are of a somewhat sensitive nature, you will remain completely anonymous once you have filled in this form and your name/school will not be publicly displayed.

**How old are you?**

16-17

**How old were you when you first heard about periods?**

11-12

**Where did you first learn about periods?**

The internet/media (Youtube, TV shows, Books etc.)

**Where did you receive most of your information about periods?**

The internet/media (Youtube, TV shows, Books etc.)

**Do you think you received enough information about periods from school? (Whether you have a period or not)**

No, and I have a period

**Who do you feel comfortable talking about periods with:**

Female friends

**Have you had your period? If you answered no, please skip the next questions and submit the form.**

Yes

**How old were you when you got your first period?**

13-14

**Did you feel prepared for your first period?**

No I did not

**Have you been able to access period products (tampons, pads etc.) at school?**

Sometimes

**Have you missed school because of your period?**

Yes, several times a year

**Have you ever received misinformation about periods?**

Yes

