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Puberty Blues : Helping Girls to Weather the Storm

Words Fran Molloy

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Puberty and adolescence can be a wild ride for girls, especially when their first period arrives.

In many cultures, the onset of puberty is a hugely significant life transition and a focus for all sorts of celebrations and rituals. In Australian society, however, a girl's first period is cause for mixed emotions, not least of which are shame and embarrassment.

For many girls, menstruation is a bewildering secret to be hidden from fathers and brothers, classmates and teachers. Moods and bodies are in turmoil. Pool parties and trips to the beach present a social nightmare. And all the while advertisers push the bright and shiny nobody-will-ever-know advantages of using this or that sanitary product.

"For boys, the transition into manhood involves going outside into the world and finding their mission," says Maree Lipschitz, a trainer and facilitator with the **Pathways Foundation**, a community-based organisation dedicated to helping young people through puberty and adolescence.

"For girls, it is an inner journey governed by their bodies. Menarche and sexuality get mixed up together in most mainstream discussions of puberty, but the onset of menstruation is a significant moment that is not connected to sexuality in itself."

Pathways began in 1995 with father-son camps to provide a rite of passage for adolescent boys. The five-day camps provide a coming-of-age ritual involving robust physical challenges and solid male mentoring in a girl-free bush setting - and results have been impressive, with participants reporting huge steps in maturity and self-confidence.

This year, Lipschitz has worked on a new program that provides a rite of passage for girls, with groups of up to 10 mother-daughter pairs exploring a girl's journey into womanhood.

Menstruation is a large part of this transition but by no means the sole focus of the workshops; the women learn to deepen the connections between mother and daughter, to build on female intergenerational knowledge and to understand their bodies.

"The way that we handle a girl's first experience of menstruation can have a huge impact on her self-esteem," Lipschitz says.

Research suggests she has a point; psychologist Daniel Goleman reports that the depression rate for girls doubles at puberty, with many studies - including one at the University of Melbourne's centre for adolescent health - confirming this trend.

The workshops involve mothers and daughters working on their relationships, with mothers sharing stories about their own journeys through puberty.

All the women attending get to know each other very well in a safe environment and by the end of the workshop, the young girls' intrinsic qualities are recognised by all of the participants in an honouring ceremony.

"This sort of recognition is often left until an 18th birthday and even then it can be done in a sarcastic sort of way," Lipschitz says.

"But what a positive impact it has on young girls, when their qualities are reflected back at them and other women tell what they see in the girl - whether it is her gentleness, her feistiness, perhaps her sense of humour."

Adolescence is a dangerous time for young girls, Lipschitz says. Often they engage in risky and rebellious behaviour because they are struggling with issues around body image, societal expectations and their own self-esteem.

Lipschitz runs these workshops with two other experienced facilitators, Shushann Movsessian and Alexandra Pope. Movsessian is the author of *Puberty Girl* and has been conducting classes for girls entering puberty at the Royal Hospital for Women in Randwick for about 15 years.

When Lipschitz was assisting Movsessian with these classes, some of the girls' mothers asked advice on what their own role could be in facilitating their daughters' entry to puberty.

"Many of these [women] remember drawing away from their own mothers at puberty because they weren't encouraged to ask questions or pass on knowledge," Lipschitz says.

She says that in recent generations there has been a lot of shame around a girl's first experience of bleeding - and these reactions are being passed down.

Movsessian says that as an adult, she discovered that her own negative experiences of menarche were common to many other women.

"The lack of adequate information, acceptance and support created an experience of anxiety and isolation," she says.

"Menarche is the first significant rite of passage our daughters go through in their entry into womanhood. It heralds their sexual, emotional and psychological maturation," she adds.

She believes that the experience that girls have at this time - and the reaction of their mother and other adult women in their lives - has a long-term impact.

"The transgenerational experiences and knowledge girls receive from their mothers will be the ones they will eventually pass on to their daughters, granddaughters, sisters, nieces and cousins," she says.

Psychotherapist Alexandra Pope, the third workshop facilitator, wrote *The Wild Genie: the Healing Power of Menstruation* and is a frequent guest lecturer on menstrual health for various universities and colleges.

She says that the menstrual cycle is a stress-sensitive early-warning system and women who are in tune with their body can use it as an inner guide to match their activities to their body's needs and abilities.

Pope says that in our culture, girls are educated about puberty through scientific explanations of their body's processes, which is just a small part of the story.

"Science separates and analyses - but it is not emotionally intelligent," she says.

"We are standing for emotional intelligence, for listening intently to our own profound experiences and when we teach this information, women light up - it really makes sense to them."

Pope says the menstrual cycle has had a lot of bad press over the past few thousand years. "We can safely assume something very interesting is going on when it has been blamed for so much mischief and so many subversive events," she says.

Pope's experience of painful periods in her early 30s focused her attention on the menstrual cycle and she realised her problems were not purely personal.

"I suffered in part because of the cultural devaluation of the feminine, the lack of respect for woman's ways of accessing and expressing knowledge and power."

Pope says: "To heal, I had to lift the curse on the menstrual cycle."

Pathways into Womanhood (for girls aged 13 to 15 and their mothers) will be held at Kangaroo Valley, Tuesday to Saturday, September 25-29.

Inquiries, admin@pathwaysfoundation.com.au, phone 6684 3392 or see pathwaysfoundation.com.au.

Let's Talk Growing Up (for girls aged nine to 12 and their mothers) will be held in Randwick on Saturday and Sunday, October 27-28. Inquiries, 9130 7283 or menright@bigpond.com.

'I can let go of being the perfect mum and relax'

Kylie Ann Scott had always been close to her eldest daughter, Chantelle, so she was shocked to find that when Chantelle started showing early signs of puberty, she felt uncomfortable hugging her.

"I didn't know how to talk to her about it and I didn't want to repeat what had happened in my relationship with my mother," Kylie Ann says.

Her teenage years had been very lonely, Kylie Ann says, recalling a strong sense of alienation from her mother, who was unable to discuss puberty or sex.

She heard about the Pathways program for young women and enrolled Chantelle and herself in the pilot, held last November.

"It was life-changing, it really strengthened my relationship with Chantelle," Kylie Ann says.

"I was reluctant to tell Chantelle about my story, I wanted to protect her. But you share your own experiences with your daughter in a facilitated way and we were able to open up to each other."

Kylie Ann is full of praise about the program, the facilitators - and the opportunity to celebrate her daughter.

"[Chantelle] has learned skills that have really helped her in school and she has become so much more compassionate and gained insight into why other girls behave in the way that they do."

Chantelle now has no hesitation in asking her mother questions about sex that come up following playground discussions and she has forged strong friendships in her second year of high school.

And Kylie Ann says she is now far more comfortable with her daughter than she has ever been. "I feel like I have been given permission to enjoy my daughter; I can let go of being the perfect mum and just relax with her."

Where to find out more

Pathways Foundation, www.pathwaysfoundation.com.au

The Museum of Menstruation, www.mum.org

RadPads, www.radpads.com.au

Menstruation information, www.menstruation.com.au

Wild Genie, www.wildgenie.com/homepage.html

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