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Toolkit For Portrayals of Menstruation On Screen



The Geena Davis Institute's report, *Period Pieces: How TV Shapes Teens' Understanding of Menstruation*, examines how real-world teens and parents perceive menstruation, how often it occurs in television scripts from 1950 to 2018, and the nature of how it appears in teen programs in 2018 and 2024. The samples under investigation include 423 parent-teen pairs in the United States who completed a survey, 59,313 television scripts from 1950-2018, and 313 teen television episodes. This report illustrates that television portrayals of menstruation can act as a catalyst for parent-teen conversations about the topic. Yet, the topic itself is rare across television programs.

These recommendations are based on findings from the study:

Use period products as authentic props. Consider bathrooms at home or in public spaces, locker rooms, or bedrooms as key settings where period products can be seamlessly integrated. Similarly, consider the placement of period products in backpacks, handbags, purses, lockers, drawers, or a suitcase for travel. This adds a subtle layer of relatability and can make characters feel more authentic.

Ensure menstruation feels like a natural part of the storyline. When menstruation appears on screen, it should feel natural rather than forced or performative. Audiences engage most with a topic when it is woven into the storytelling, not presented as a public service announcement. Identify moments in your scripts where menstruation could enrich the story; key opportunities include plots involving sports, sex, or puberty. By adding menstruation subplots to these existing storylines, creators can normalize menstrual experiences while enhancing character depth and narrative authenticity.

Understand menstrual tropes so stories reflect real experiences, not myths. Writers should be mindful of the period tropes outlined in this report. These long-standing clichés have often framed menstruation as dirty, embarrassing, or a joke, and have used it as an easy explanation for a character's emotions or mood. Such portrayals flatten characters and reinforce outdated assumptions about women and girls. Humor can have a place in menstruation stories, but it should avoid positioning women as the punchline.

Diversify menstruation storylines. Menstruation is a long-term part of many women's lives, and its relevance extends far beyond pregnancy. Portray it as a broader health and life experience by exploring its role in relationships, stress, health concerns, and everyday responsibilities in school, work, and social settings. Broadening these contexts leads to more accurate and authentic on-screen stories. And as our survey data shows, these storylines can lead to more direct conversations about this topic between teens and their parents.

Go beyond one-liners when portraying menstruation. Many of the menstruation references we identified were brief, with almost no integration into subplots or main storylines. Treat menstruation as a nuanced experience that can deepen character development. Rather than relying on quick mentions, expand these moments into scenes or exchanges that allow characters to respond with resonance, empathy, or meaningful acknowledgment.

Stereotypical storylines about menstruation to avoid

Menstruation as a marker of female hysteria

Does this piece of media employ the “menstruation as a marker of female hysteria” storyline?

- A prominent female character is portrayed as sad, depressed, angry, or unreasonable.
- Another character, or that same character, blames the behavior on menstruation.

Menstruation as an insult

Does this piece of media employ the “menstruation as an insult” storyline?

- Menstruation is referenced.
- In a way that puts a character down.

Notably, men often insult one another by asking if they are on their period.

Menstruation comes with myths

Menstruation myths are reinforced through media. Common myths include cycle synching, being unable to swim while on your period, the belief that menstruation blood is magical, or the belief that it is unsafe to sleep with a tampon in.

Does this piece of media employ the “menstruation comes with myths” storyline?

- Menstruation myths are referenced.
- Characters fail to correct the myths.

HOW TO CITE THIS STUDY:

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