



Westend61 / Westend61 via Getty Images

JULY 2026

Toolkit For Portrayals of Periods 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 (like schools, gyms, park bathrooms, or locker rooms) 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 [the full report](#). Long-standing clichés have often framed menstruation as dirty, embarrassing, or a joke, or have used it as an easy explanation for a character's erratic emotions or mood. Such portrayals flatten characters and reinforce outdated assumptions about women and girls. Humor has a place, but it shouldn't always treat periods as an excuse, or a built-in explanation for why a woman is "off" or "not herself."

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 the study's survey analysis 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 identified in the study were brief, with rare integration into subplots or main storylines. Instead, treat menstruation as a nuanced experience that can deepen character development. In addition to relying on quick mentions, expand some 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.

Adolescent storylines about periods we love

While menstruation tropes on screen can be common, they aren't the only way menstruation has been portrayed on screen. The following examples show writers getting it right — treating periods as a normal, sometimes funny, sometimes emotional part of growing up, and pairing that honesty with support rather than shame. Pulled from teen programming, these storylines model the kind of authenticity and care this toolkit encourages.



PEN15 (Season 1, Episode 10, “Dance”)

After Maya (Maya Erskine) gets her period at school, she is overwhelmed with embarrassment and tries to hide it by improvising with a wad of toilet paper, and clogs the toilet. When the school custodian (Diane Delano) realizes what's happened, she discreetly offers Maya a tampon and reassures her that getting a period is normal. Rather than teasing or embarrassing Maya, the custodian responds with quiet compassion, allowing Maya to feel her embarrassment without reinforcing it. The scene captures the shame, denial and vulnerability many adolescents experience around menstruation while modeling how trusted adults can offer practical, nonjudgmental support.



Degrassi: The Next Generation (Season 1, Episode 9, “Coming of Age”)

In this episode, Emma (Miriam McDonald) stains her white skirt and realizes she’s having her first period at school. To help, her friend Manny (Cassie Steele) brings her a pair of oversized gym shorts from the lost and found, but this causes other classmates to poke fun at her during her class presentation. Emma then confidently tells her classmates that menstruation is a normal part of development for at least half of the population. This storyline goes beyond portraying a first period as an embarrassing moment. It depicts the emotional and practical realities of menstruation, features multiple characters offering support rather than judgment, challenges period stigma through open conversation, and ends with Emma advocating for better access to menstrual products at school. This episode shows how storytelling can normalize menstruation and inspire positive change.



Black-ish (Season 4, Episode 6, “First and Last”)

Diane (Marsai Martin) tries to hide the fact that she’s had her first period, knowing that her family will flock to her with life stories and advice. Upon discovering Diane’s secret, Zoey (Yara Shahidi) comes home from college to offer her support, and Rainbow (Tracee Ellis Ross), and Diane’s grandmothers, Ruby (Jenifer Lewis) and Alicia (Anna Deavere Smith), share their own stories of having their first periods. This storyline presents menstruation as a shared life experience rather than a source of shame. By featuring multiple generations discussing their first periods and the differences of how those events were handled, it models honest family conversations, acknowledges that no two experiences are the same, and demonstrates how storytelling can prepare young people for menstruation with empathy, humor, and support.



Baymax! (Season 1, Episode 3, “Sofia”)

Sofia (Lilimar Hernandez) gets her first period before rehearsal for the school talent show and Baymax (Scott Adsit) comes to her rescue, going to buy menstrual products when the restroom dispenser runs out. At the store, Baymax seeks the advice of other customers, including a father shopping for his daughter and a trans man who recommends his favorite kind. Throughout the episode, Sofia deals with complicated emotions about growing up and Baymax reminds her of how natural menstruation is. This episode highlights the importance of access to menstrual products, normalizes asking for help, includes diverse perspectives, and reassures young viewers that getting a period is just one part of growing up, not the end of childhood.

Resources

These organizations are advancing menstrual health, education, and equity globally, and are a resource for writers and creators.

DAYS FOR GIRLS INTERNATIONAL

Days for Girls works to eliminate the stigma and limitations associated with menstruation so that women and girls have improved health, education and livelihoods. To date, they have reached over 3.9 million women and girls with their life-changing menstrual health solutions.

WASH UNITED

WASH United is a Berlin-based non-profit founded in 2011. Over the years, they have shifted their focus from water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) to help address the persisting menstruation-related challenges 500 million women and girls around the world face every month.

THE PAD PROJECT

In 2013, The Pad Project was founded by students and educators in Los Angeles who believed that “a period should end a sentence, not a girl’s education.” In 2019, their film *Period. End of Sentence.* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short. Since 2020, The Pad Project has distributed more than 5,000,000 menstrual products worldwide while expanding access to menstrual health education and advancing menstrual equity across the U.S. and internationally.

THE KWEK SOCIETY

The Kwek Society works to end period poverty in Indigenous communities in the United States while celebrating individual dignity, agency, and success.

THE GLOBAL MENSTRUATION COLLECTIVE

The Global Menstrual Collective includes representatives from UN organizations, academia, government, funders, private sector, existing coalitions, advocacy groups, youth focused organizations, faith-based groups, independent consultants and international non-governmental organizations. Members represent different sectors relevant to menstrual health and hygiene including water, sanitation and hygiene; sexual and reproductive health and rights; youth; gender and those focused on menstrual health and hygiene.

UNICEF WASH (WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE)

UNICEF is a global leader in menstrual health and hygiene activities through development and humanitarian programmes across the world. They commit to building programmes that increase confidence, knowledge, and skills – and improve access to materials and facilities – for adolescent girls, women, transgender and non-binary individuals to manage their menstruation safely and with dignity.

#HAPPYPERIODS

An award-winning organization creating cultural change through decolonized health education, access, and storytelling.

PERIOD.ORG

PERIOD. is a global youth fueled non-profit which strives to eradicate period poverty and stigma through advocacy, education, and service. Powered by hundreds of youth led volunteer PERIOD. Chapters around the world, PERIOD. distributes period products to communities in need, authors menstrual health curriculum, and advocates for change.

HOW TO CITE THE TOOLKIT:

Terán, L., Conroy, M, and Pérez, R. (2026). Toolkit for portrayals of periods on screen. Geena Davis Institute.