



Hey Parents — Let's Talk Periods!

It's not always easy for parents to talk about periods. We talk to Phyllis Fagell — a certified professional school counselor and author of [Middle School Matters](#) — about how to start that conversation, and what pitfalls to avoid.

Narration: Welcome to Feeling My Flo, a podcast where we see menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm Kamilah Kashanie. My pronouns are she and her.

On Feeling My Flo, we usually make our episodes with younger people like you in mind. But this time, we want to talk to your parents because they might have questions, too. We invited a pro for that. And, of course, we'd also be happy if you listened together.

Phyllis: My name is Phyllis Fagell. I am a school counselor and a therapist and I work with kids in, both in elementary and in middle school. And I also teach sex ed and health and wellness.

Narration: Phyllis's pronouns are she and her. Over the years, she's had a lot of conversations with pre-teens and their parents about periods.

Phyllis: I have rarely met a parent, a mother or a father, who is not uncomfortable having this conversation with their child. It's awkward by design.

Narration: Awkward as it may be, Phyllis says the biggest mistake a parent can make is to not have a conversation about periods at all.

We also talked to a few parents for this episode. And one of the questions that came up over and over was about timing.

Phyllis: You either want to bring it up when they ask you, and there's no such thing as too early if they initiate the conversation. And that's when you definitely want to seize the moment. And be prepared for it now, so that

when it comes, you're ready and can respond without any shock and you can be nonreactive...and you can stay calm because they'll be looking to you to see how they should be feeling about disclosing their fears to you.

Narration: But what about if your kids don't bring it up on their own? I definitely wasn't dying to bring this up with my parents when I was younger.

Phyllis: Ideally, third or fourth grade is when you want to start having the conversation with them.

Narration: Kids' questions sometimes come when parents least expect them. So Phyllis says: Be ready when they are.

Michael, one of the parents we talked to, is a gay cis man. His pronouns are he and him. Michael has a nine-year-old daughter, and he told us he worries that periods never come up naturally between them so he's unsure of how to bring them up.

Phyllis: One of the first things I would do is be honest and authentic and admit that you're uncomfortable and then say, 'But I'd love to have the conversation anyway.'

Narration: If starting the conversation still feels uncomfortable for you or your child, Phyllis recommends getting some books.

She told us about [The Care and Keeping of You](#). There's also [Sex, Puberty, and All That Stuff](#), and [Will Puberty Last My Whole Life?](#) If you're online, [Amaze.org](#) and [Clue.org](#) are great resources.

Bottom line: parents have lots of help, but you need to reach out for it. A book can give you and your child information that they're too embarrassed to ask for directly.

Phyllis: I 100% promise you that even if she's telling you she's too embarrassed or can't get beyond that section, if you leave it in her room, it will get read.

Narration: Once you've covered the basics...

Phyllis: You can ask questions that are slightly more comfortable for you to get the conversation rolling. It might be a question like, "Was there anything in there that surprised you?" or 'Is there any information that they didn't talk about that you think they should have, given what you're hearing your friends talk about or be curious about?'

Narration: When you sit down to talk to your child about periods, it's possible they've already heard something about it. Instead of worrying too much about where they're getting their information, use that as an opportunity to get a conversation started.

Phyllis: One of the things I've discovered with kids is that they tend to have more

information than parents think they have. And it's always helpful to start from a place of curiosity and you could ask your daughter, 'Do you think you know more or less about periods than I think you know?' And see where that conversation goes. You can ask questions like, 'What do you think other kids in your class are curious about?' or 'What do you think that they would like to know?' or 'Do you know if any of your classmates have gotten their period?' And what you're really trying to do is give a little emotional distance, especially if they are uncomfortable with the topic.

Narration: Okay, so maybe you like to over prepare. You've got all the tools and you've practiced your side of the conversation. And then...nothing goes as planned.

Phyllis: I think sometimes parents feel that they have to be able to do everything perfectly on their own and they forget that it is okay to, to use whatever resources you have at hand.

Narration: Sometimes the best resources are other people who care about your child, like school counselors.

Phyllis: Don't take it personally if your child would rather talk about this with somebody else.

Narration: At school, Phyllis uses Google documents and a system of sticky notes and shoe boxes to receive and answer anonymous questions from her students.

Phyllis: The kinds of questions kids ask when they know that no one will know who asked it...are very different than the kinds of questions they're willing to ask a person directly.

Narration: Preteens may feel more comfortable talking to an adult who's not their parent. When I was younger, it was so much easier to talk to my older cousins and my aunts instead of my mom.

Phyllis: There's going to be information that they need that they won't ask you. It doesn't mean they don't trust you, it doesn't mean they can't confide in you about anything. It doesn't say anything about you as a parent. It just has to do with the age and often when kids are pulling away from parents, it becomes even more awkward for them to have these kinds of conversations.

Narration: Most of the questions these parents had were about navigating a conversation about menstruation with cis girls, but there were also parents who wanted to know how to talk about periods with boys.

Say you're a mom of young boys. Maybe they saw some menstrual blood, and they asked you about it.

Phyllis: You definitely don't want to use metaphorical language. You definitely don't want to brush them off. I would treat it very much the same as you would treat it if it was a daughter who is asking you these questions.

Narration: Phyllis says it's not good for boys to grow up thinking there's something abnormal or strange about menstruation.

Phyllis: You want to demystify it as much as possible and when I do lessons for kids in the school setting, I give the boys the exact same information as the girls. And boys are just as interested as girls in opening a tampon and taking a look and getting a sense of how they work and what's happening with girls' bodies.

Narration: One mom we talked to, Margaret, has an eleven-year-old daughter and a nine-year-old daughter. She wondered if and how she should talk to them about sex, which can often come up during discussions about periods.

Phyllis: So what you can do is explain what periods have to do with reproduction. It might elicit some questions naturally on its own. You can bring it up if there's a movie, if there's a news article, if there's a way to just fold it into conversation.

Narration: According to Phyllis, it's always a good idea to look for natural segues to talk to your kids about sex, healthy relationships, and periods.

You can talk to children as young as six about the role of sex in having babies. If you wait until your child is eight, you might find yourself playing catch-up. But Phyllis also told us that when it comes to periods, pre-teens often have so many concerns about what's happening with their bodies that they often don't have a lot of questions about why.

Phyllis: So I wouldn't shy away from the conversation. I wouldn't have them at wildly different intervals, but it doesn't have to be on the same night.

Narration: So what kinds of questions do come up most often for preteens?

Phyllis: What happens if you get it at school? What happens if you get it when you're wearing white pants? Just how much pain and blood are we talking about here? When is it normal to get it?

Narration: It might seem that most of these questions have to do with the physical experience of getting a period. But Phyllis says that these questions have just as much to do with the emotional aspects.

Phyllis: So if they're worried that they'll get their period at school, that is a physical thing. They need to know what they should do in that instance, but it's also an emotional thing because they're worried that their peers will find out. They're worried that they, in some way, might embarrass themselves, so it's all one in the same.

Narration: Pre-teens really worry about getting caught unprepared. So a small thing parents can do that can make a huge difference is having them stick a pad and some extra underwear in their backpacks. Just in case.

Phyllis: It is incredibly reassuring to them to know that should they be in a situation where they need something, that they have it on hand.

Narration: Acknowledging the emotional side of periods is important...because for a lot of younger folks, it's a huge part of the experience of getting their period for the first time.

Phyllis: They can feel very melancholy about leaving childhood behind. You know, the tween phase, in many ways, they really are bridging childhood and adolescence and they can have a lot of sadness and they can have a lot of mixed feelings for many reasons and they have peers who are going through puberty faster and who are more socially precocious. And all of that can come to a head, particularly when you're in the midst of a phase where you, all of a sudden, are acutely aware of how you stack up to others. It's a very, very insecure and vulnerable age to begin with.

Narration: What else can parents do to support their young menstruators?

Phyllis: Tweens are really bad at recognizing when they need help. They're really bad at asking for help. So it's a good opportunity to not only talk about what they might experience hormonally and how that might impact their mood, but to talk about feelings more globally, to help them expand their emotional vocabulary, to help them understand that no feelings last forever and no feelings last at the same intensity for a sustained period of time.

Narration: If you're a parent, try to emphasize that this is a normal and expected part of the process of growing up. If you menstruate, sharing your own experience with periods can be really helpful. Talking to my mom about her own period experience showed me how much we had in common, and it made it more comfortable for me to ask her for advice.

Phyllis: So you might say, 'I had really bad cramps and then I went to work and I had a meeting that didn't go well. And so now everything feels compounded. I'm so stressed. So I'm going to take about 20 minutes and I'm just going to listen to music or I'm going to go for a walk or I'm going to call a friend and then to circle back and say, you know, 'I feel a lot better now.' So you want to be giving them that sense of agency that when they are in a darker place that they can pull themselves back out.

Narration: It was really cool to spend some time with you today, parents. We'd love to hear about your family's experiences with menstruation. Email us at hello@feelingmyflo.com.

Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you're a parent having the conversation for the first time...or second...or millionth!

Phyllis Fagell is the author of Middle School Matters. Soak up more of her wisdom at phyllisfagell.com.

Feeling My Flo is a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. We're here to inform, entertain, and empower.

If you want to explore some of the resources we mentioned in this episode, visit our website...feelingmyflo.com. And connect with us on social media. We're at [flo_pod](#) on Twitter and we're [feeling my flo](#) on Instagram.

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