

ADOLESCENT AND WOMEN'S HEALTH IN DIVERSE POPULATIONS

American Indian Girls' Experiences of Menstruation

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Purpose: Over the past decade, adolescent menstruation has received significant attention as a critical global public health challenge. Previous studies, largely situated in low- and middle-income countries, have articulated challenges of managing menstruation that result in poor school attendance and heightened emotional stress characterized by shame, embarrassment, and fear related to menstrual hygiene management compounded by a critical lack of puberty education. Despite clear public health implications, a critical knowledge gap about menstruation experiences of adolescent girls in the US and their impact on education persists. In particular, there is an absence of literature that considers how cultural, racial, and income differences may impact the ways in which adolescent girls experience menarche and menstruation. This study presents preliminary results that aim to describe the menstruation-related experiences of American Indian (AI) adolescent girls living in rural, reservation communities.

Methods: Building on previously established university-tribal partnerships, participants were recruited from middle and high schools located in two upper plains tribal nations. Qualitative data were collected via six focus groups with middle (n=4) and high (n=2) school participants. A female tribal liaison was hired and trained in each reservation community to recruit participants and facilitate the focus group interviews following a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified for accuracy. Descriptive content analysis techniques were used to identify and categorize key concepts and patterns in the interview data. The study received ethics approval from the university institutional review board, tribal institutional review boards, and/or tribal council approval.

Results: Fifty-eight adolescents who identified as female and AI, were in grades 6-12, and were 11 to 19 years of age (mean = 13.7 years) participated in the focus groups lasting 20-70 minutes that included 3-19 participants per group separated by middle or high school age. Five main themes emerged from the data: 1) finding your way, 2) shame, 3) lack of trust, 4) gaining confidence, and 5) making meaning of menstruation. Overall, participants described experiences of learning about menstruation from family, friends, and school that were incomplete and mistimed. They also described challenges of managing menstruation at school that ranged from shame and embarrassment to not being believed that they needed to use the bathroom. However, as participants aged, they described learning ways to manage and understand menstruation that resulted in making meaning of the relationship between being a woman and menstruating, as well as cultural teachings.

Conclusion: Preliminary results highlight the complexity of the experience of menstruation for adolescent girls. Equipped with a deeper understanding of menstruation experiences of AI girls, school-based puberty education can be tailored to reflect the specific needs of this population and foster traditional values that promote positive views of menstruation and its connection to women's sexuality. In addition, findings illuminate challenges experienced at school that can be addressed through policy and environmental interventions to support strong school connection for AI girls.

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