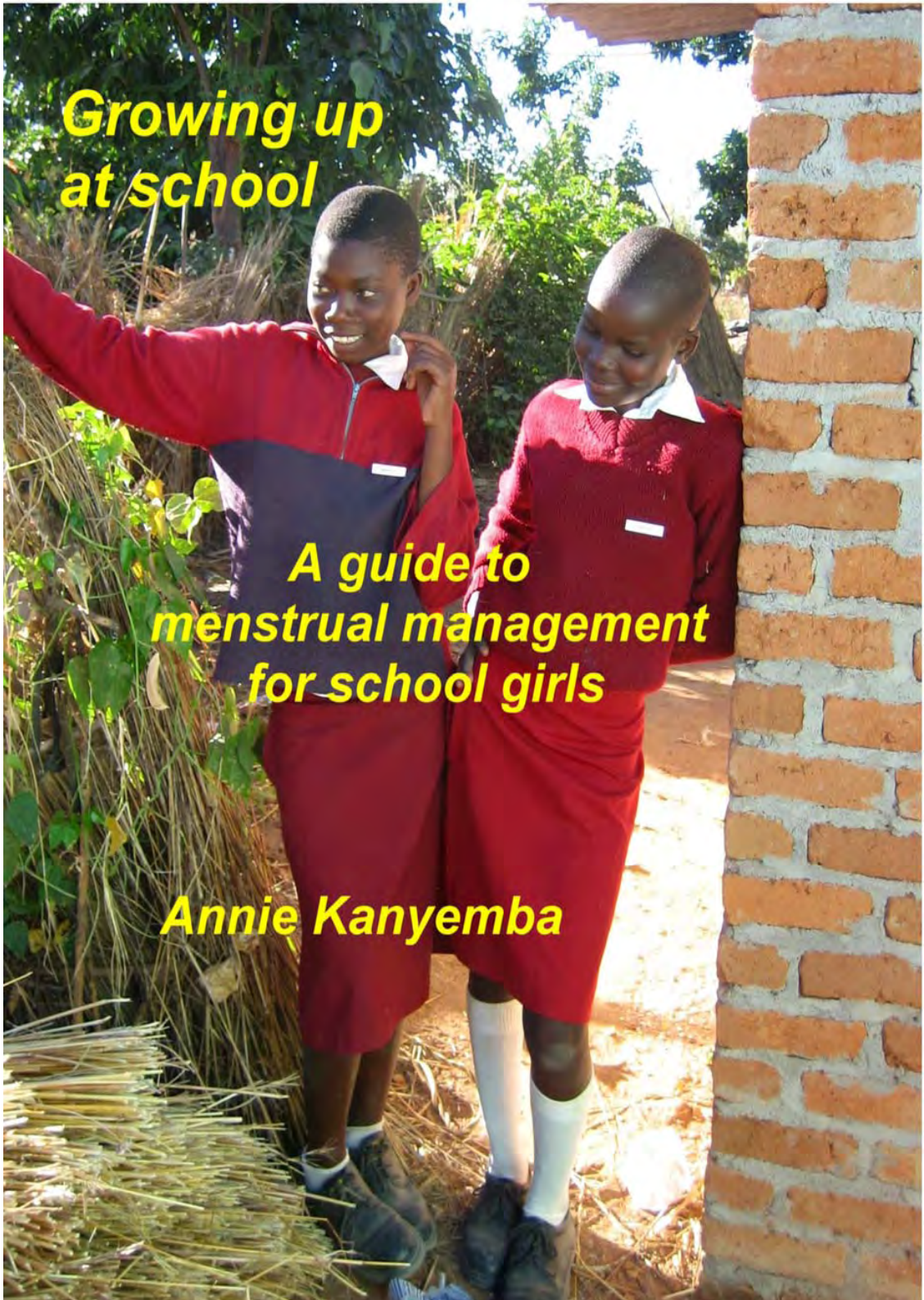
This book tells the story of young Zimbabwean girls.

This book is a draft copy which is also being written in Shona and Ndebele.



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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my late mother Beauty Matemayi.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Water Research Commission of South Africa, for their support which has made this Zimbabwean project on menstrual management for school girls possible. Particularly I wish to thank Ditshego Magoro for her help in initiating and assisting with this project. Many thanks also to Madeleine Fogde and the EcoSanRes project of SEI, Sweden, who gave initial support to the Girl Child Program in Zimbabwe. Special thanks also to Peter Morgan, for all the help and encouragement he has given me. I also wish to thank Marni Sommer for inspiring me to write this book for Zimbabwean school girls. Also many thanks to Malaika Mushandu for her friendship and assistance. Thanks also to Obedience Matubede for helping me with translations. Thanks also to the various schools for their co-operation - for Chisungu Primary School, Domboramwari Secondary School, Marirangwe Primary and Secondary Schools, Nyamutumbu Primary School, Chikarudzo Secondary School.

WATER RESEARCH COMMISSION

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It's all normal:

*If some girls become rude and stubborn when they have their MPs.

*If a girl gets her period when she is still young, such as 9, 10 or 11. Or when she is a bit older such as 16 to 18 years.

*If sometimes a girl will get clots coming out with her period.

*If girls get pimples just before or during their period.

*If a girl get water-like or white discharge right before or after her period.

*If a girl gets stomach pains during her period.

*If girls do not get their period every month.

*If a girl's period only lasts for a day or 2days.

*If you get your period for three days and your friend gets hers for five days.

*If you get breast pains when you are growing up.

Keep a check on period times

Always keep track of how long you have had your period, when it starts and when it ends and how heavy the flow is. You count 26—28 days after the first day of your last period. So if your period started on June 1st, you can expect it again between June 26th and June 28th. If your period lasts for more than 10days, visit your nearest clinic.

Disposing or keeping the pads

During your period, always make sure you dispose of your sanitary materials (cloths/ pads/tissues/cotton) in a pit latrine or (Blair VIP). If you are to reuse the cloth and you are at school, carefully fold the cloth and put it in a plastic bag before you put it in your school bag then when you get home wash it with hot water and soap, make sure you dry it in the sunshine and iron it if you can.

A brief introduction

This booklet has been written to help school girls manage the critical period when they enter adolescence between the ages of 10 and 14. Adolescence is the time during which boys and girls grow from childhood into adulthood and changes take place in their bodies. During this period, known as puberty, menstruation starts in girls.

Menstruation

Menstruation is commonly called a **period or MPs** (menstrual period). Menstruation is basically the monthly discharge of blood from the uterus through the vagina of non pregnant girls and woman from puberty to menopause (when menstruation stops in older women). The menstruation or bleeding, usually lasts from about three to seven days. However, some girls' bleeding may last longer than seven days. The whole menstrual process or cycle takes about 28 days from the first day of your MPs. In a few cases, girls may have cycles that last for as many as 34days or as few as 19days.

During the first two years after the first menstruation starts, the periods may not occur every month (regularly). **This is normal.** Menstruation is entirely normal. All girls will experience menstruation and will have to learn how to live with it for many years of their life. There are many ways to make it easier to cope with.

Menstruation can be uncomfortable, painful and embarrassing, but there are many ways of coping with it.

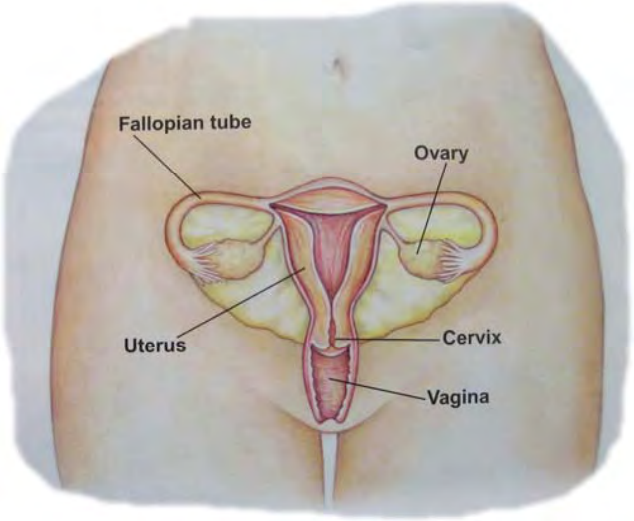

Diagram of the female reproductive system

Building up your confidence (self esteem)

What is self esteem?

This is the opinion you have about yourself. In other words, it is your general assessment or judgment of your own worth.

1. Accept yourself for who you are.
2. There is only one like you.
3. Walk proud
4. Focus on your positive attributes and traits
5. Develop your weakness
6. Use your personal talents and skills to help you socialize and interact with other people

Stretching exercises

For the body to work at its best, the muscles like to be stretched. When we practice sports we stretch our muscles and we feel better for it. This helps our bodies. Doing stretching every day helps us feel better.

When does it start?

In most cases, girls experience their first menstruation between the ages of 9 to 15. However, there are times whereby some start earlier than nine years or later than 15 years. During the menstrual period, there is a flow of blood from the vagina and often "cramps" or pain may be experienced as well. Sanitary pads are used to absorb the blood and stop soiling of cloths. Pills like aspirin can also be used to help reduce the pain.

What is Pre-Menstrual Syndrome?

This is a mixture of emotional, physical and mood disturbances that occur a few days before the start of a girl's period. The most common mood related symptoms are getting angry quickly, crying, and feeling happy and sad at the same time. The common physical symptoms include fatigue, bloating, pimples and appetite changes with need for more food. Exercising and eating a healthy diet may help reduce the effects of these symptoms.

Body changes in girls during puberty

- Height and weight increase
- Breasts develop
- Hips and waist become more defined,
- Muscles become stronger

- Body hair grows in the private area and under the arms,
- Pimples may develop,
- Sweat and oils glands become more active
- Body odour changes,
- Reproductive system matures,
- Menstruation begins,
- Mood changes may occur.

Exercises (deep breathing and stretching)

We breath all the time to keep us alive. Normally these are shallow breaths unless we are exercising. But deep breathing, that is deliberately breathing deeply can help us relax and feel better. To do this you have to concentrate on breathing.

Go to a quiet place and make yourself comfortable in a chair and close your eyes. Listen to the world outside. Then breath in deeply – as far as you can so your lungs are full. Then breath out all the way. Continue breathing deeply in and out for a full minute. That is about 12 breaths. Then keep breathing deeply but more slowly. Breath in and hold for ten seconds and then breath out. Breathe in again and hold your lungs full for 10 seconds. And breathe out again slowly. Repeat ten times. This should make you feel more relaxed and comfortable. Each time you practice you will benefit more. Deep breathing and drinking plenty of water will make you feel better, and more relaxed and comfortable.

Laughter is the best medicine

Tell a good story, share funny thoughts and feelings. Laughter is one of the best medicines known.

School girls tell their stories

Story 1

When I was growing up, I used to hear a lot of stories about menstruation from friends and relatives and so I had drawn my own conclusion that periods were disgusting and I prayed that mine should come after finishing high school. The day I started menstruating was at the age of 14 and it was on a weekend. I was in the garden when all of a sudden I felt as if I had wet my pants and I quickly looked around to see if there was anyone watching me and then I clutched my panties and blood stains came to my hand.

My first reaction after seeing the blood was frustration. I cried silently and wished it wasn't happening to me, I told myself that it was way too early for me. Since I was not prepared for my first period, I had no one at the house except my mom, so I went to talk to her and asked her what that blood on my panties meant. I pretended not to know anything about menstruation as she was explaining it in detail to me. I disguised my knowledge of it because I thought she would think that I was too naughty to know something like that.

My mom gave me cotton and showed me how to put it on my pant and then later taught me how to use cloth in the event that there was no money in the house to buy cotton. Then Monday came and I went to school and sat in class wearing the cotton but somehow it went sideways and I stained my uniform. I did not realize until I went to the chalk board to do maths and my friend came to me and whispered that she wanted to take me to the bathroom urgently. When we got there she gave me her own pads and taught me how to wear them. It was so embarrassing even just listening to her advice. I felt so low self-esteemed but later recovered. We got back to the class and my teacher did not say anything, I guess she had seen what had happened but I was very fortunate that most of my class mates had not seen anything. Since then I made it a point to be very cautious whenever I am on my period to avoid staining my clothes or uniform.

Moods

Inform those you are close to if you are feeling moody so that they may know how to deal with you. Part of maturing is to learn how to manage your moods.

Learn to relax

Learn to relax and not stress out about your period, stress can affect your flow and/or your cycle. So don't worry about your MPs, other girls go through the same experience, you are not alone!

A good diet helps

A good healthy diet helps to make the time during menstruation more comfortable and manageable. Drink lots of water and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. You can also take in a lot of potassium which is found in bananas.

Spinach – helps to restore the blood

Some vegetables are particularly valuable. Spinach is one. It is easy to grow and contains lots of fibre. It cleanses the blood and contains lots of iron. Iron is needed in the formation of new blood. When blood is lost in the periods, new blood must be made in the body to replace it. That is why green vegetables like spinach can help so much.

Spinach ´good for the blood!

Story 2

The day I started menstruating I was at school. It was at break time and I had gone to the toilet when I noticed blood on my pants. I was shocked and confused since I knew very little about menstruation. I went back to the classroom and I was embarrassed to ask anyone about it. Luckily it was not a heavy flow so I sat down on one buttock to avoid staining my uniform. After school I went home and washed my pant and wore another one without anything attached to it. I did not know of any menstrual management practices until today, and I have been menstruating for 2years now.

My parents died when I was still young so I stay with my brother and I could not tell my brother about what had happened to me. It was just embarrassing for me. I am very fortunate that I do not have a heavy flow so every time when I am on my period I do not miss school but I only wear my pants and sit on one buttock. Sometimes I spoil and I get a pass to go home. Now that I have learned these different practices I will adopt one that is easy for me so this meeting has been really useful for me. I hope schools can form focus groups to talk about these issues so that others like me who stay in a child headed family can learn something that they can use when the time comes and I also advise other girls that when they do not know anything about periods and it has happened to them they should not be afraid to tell their female teachers so that they can help them through their menstruation.

Story 3

My first menstruation started when I was home and I was very unhappy. I thought that maybe something in my stomach had broken. I told my mother who is a dressmaker and she told me that I was now worthy to be called a woman and that I should not play with boys because I would get pregnant. She then took some pieces of used cloth from her sewing machine and folded one of them and told me to put it in my underpants and the cloths she told me to keep them for further use when I change.

As I was moving around the yard that piece of cloth between my legs fell and fortunately there was no one else around, I picked it up and went to my mother's sewing area and picked four pieces of ribbon and tied them to each end of the cloth, I then put back the cloth in my pants and tied the two right ends to my right hip and the two left ends to my left hip. I never told my mother about this but since this method has worked for me and I am very comfortable with my period. I urge other girls to be more creative with the given resources so that they do not miss school because of a period.

A hot water bottle can help the pain

Heat treatment can help relax the muscles and also the pain during menstruation. Laying a hot water bottle on your tummy can help. Also bottles filled with hot water will work if you do not have a water bottle.

Period pains and their management

If you suffer from period pains, you can lessen them by having a healthy diet, exercising, or even putting a hot water bottle (or plastic bottle filled with hot water) on your stomach area when you are resting. Also taking a hot bath helps. Painkillers (aspirin, ibrufen, paracetamol, panados, etc) are also good in reducing the pain. Some traditional herbs are known also to alleviate the pain, herbs like “jeka checka” can help. Hot water bottles, pills, herbs and exercise can help.

Try to take plenty of exercise—it helps!

Story 4

I had my first period at school, I was so afraid and unhappy. I asked for a pass to go home. I come to school on a bicycle but I had to walk home pushing my bicycle because I was afraid I would hurt the bleeding area. When I got home my aunt was not there, only my uncle, so I had no choice but to tell him that I was bleeding.

He said nothing and went to his bedroom and came out with a lot of cloth and told me that I should put them in my pants and wait for my aunt to come back. It was my worst nightmare.—I was so embarrassed. My aunt came back and told me that I had grown from a child to an adult and that I should now act responsible and be careful with boys and she taught me how to use the cloths and that I was going to bleed every month until I become too old.

Story 5

I noticed my first period on my way home from school. I felt so embarrassed when I realised that I had been bleeding for a long time and that I had messed my uniform. The worst part is that I could not tell my mother because I did not know what to say. I thought she would blame me for being mischievous, so I decided not to tell her. I put on old cloths for two days not washing them but soaking them in water and hiding them in the bathroom.

It was in September and very hot, so I began to feel sick. That's when my mother noticed the wet cloths and came to me and straight up asked me when it started. I told her and that's when she told me to wash up and wear clean clothes. She told me I was now a grown woman and should not play with boys and that in that state I was required to stay clean.

I could not tell any of my friends of my condition as I felt I was the only one with the condition so I isolated my self.

Wear comfortable clothing

Wear comfortable clothes like skin tights inside your uniform and always keep your jersey around in case you stain your uniform. When that happens, you can just tie it around your waist. If you have to change for sports in school, wear red, black or brown panties so that people will not notice that you have your period.

Comfortable cloths can help

How to make a pad holder

This is a simple sanitary pad holder with elastic attachments which has been designed to hold cloths and pads in place underneath the panties. The idea was first seen by the author in Marirangwe, Zimbabwe. The two elastic attachments are drawn up over the legs and held up by the hips. The pad holder helps to keep the home made cloths or even normal sanitary pads in place. This avoids the embarrassment of loosing the cloths when walking or attending school.

Pad holder and pad holder with folded cloth

The sanitary pad older can be mass produced by a tailor at a cost of about one dollar or less. The pad holder is made of cotton with elastic attachments. It can be washed many times.

The pad holder can be made in several sizes to suit girls of different ages. It also helps to avoid staining your clothes during your periods. You must wear “corset” panties or panties big enough to accommodate a pad cloth and cover up your buttocks. Put your unused cloths/pads folded in plastic bags for further use.

Managing your Period

First of all: don’t be afraid of having your period, it is completely natural and normal and it means you are healthy. Tell a parent/guardian. It would be better if you tell someone close to you, so they can advise you on what to do or help you get through it. If you are embarrassed to tell someone, just think, every girl has to go through it. Remember: if you start before any of your friends then you’re being a mature adult before them.

Once you start having your periods, it is advisable that you always keep your pad or cloth with you even if it’s not that time of the month just in case.

Talking in groups with the teacher helps

Personal Hygiene

When you are having your periods, make sure you wash your private parts with water at least twice a day. This will reduce the risk of bad body odour and infections. Washing hands and body helps. Keeping clothes clean and well washed is important.

Drink plenty of clean water

Controlling the blood flow

Commercial pads

A pad is a soft piece of material worn under the panties to absorb the menstrual blood. These pads have a thin layer of plastic inside to keep the blood from going through the pad onto the panties. They also have a sticky surface to stick to the panties to keep it in place.

In Zimbabwe these pads cost a dollar for 10. A girl will need 1-3pads a day for about 3-7days every month. Even at this cost most school girls in Zimbabwe do not use commercial pads because they are either too expensive to buy or they are not available. This means that most girls in Zimbabwe use locally made pads.

Locally made pads

These are made from a variety of old soft torn clothing which are folded up into a series of reasonable layers which can absorb the menstrual blood. The disadvantages are that they do not stick to the panties hence they can be uncomfortable since they move about and can even fall out. They cause bruises when a girl walks about; they are not 100 percent efficient in keeping the blood from soiling clothes. Normally they are rewashed and that could be tricky in terms of hygiene because girls are embarrassed to dry them outside in the sun so they do not dry properly.