From Home to School: Menstrual Education Films of the 1950s

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By the 1940s sex hygiene films had become one of the most common forms of sex education, because they constituted a popular form of ‘edutainment’—a portmanteau of ‘education’ and ‘entertainment.’ While Walt Disney did not use the term until the 1950s, he had popularized the concept through his numerous propaganda films produced during World War II (Disney 1954). Sex education was a popular category of edutainment films, including menstrual education films. Menstrual education films came from two categories of filmmakers, the hygiene product companies that sponsored the films or the non-profit organizations that created them for public health information (Vostral 2011). Due in no small part to the success of the first U.S. menstrual education film, *The Story of Menstruation* (1946), schools became the go-to place for menstrual education and film became the sought-after tool. No longer did the home serve as the sole place of instruction, the school overtook such necessities, and this meant that schools could purchase films for instruction, something that pleased the filmmakers and menstrual product companies.

While *The Story of Menstruation* remains one of the most well-known menstrual education films, the subsequent decades saw a surge of menstrual instruction motion pictures that had a lasting impact.¹ Scholarship has neglected menstrual education films of the 1950s, instead focusing on *The Story of Menstruation* or the new documentary-form menstrual education films of the 1960s which saw the introduction of color, advanced technology and graphics, and more racially diverse casts.²

Walt Disney Productions released *The Story of Menstruation* (1946) in association with International Cellucotton Products Company, a branch of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation and makers of Kotex. It took some time

for teachers to warm up to *The Story of Menstruation*, as the teachers expressed apprehension due to the commercially sponsored nature of the film. To combat this, Kimberly-Clark created a teaching manual and menstrual education program that educators could use in combination with the film in classrooms (Kennard 1989, 117). The use of *The Story of Menstruation* set the standard for how other menstrual education films incorporated teaching, commercialism, and health into the classroom, and as a result most of the literature on the topic covers that film. Absent from the menstrual education film literature is a discussion of the 1950s and how menstrual hygiene films of that era established their own approach to the topic.

In this essay I examine two menstrual hygiene films of the 1950s, *Molly Grows Up* (1953) and *As Boys Grow* (1957), to investigate how the films portrayed the menstrual cycle and how educational literature received the films. I argue that the films became so popular because they eased the teaching responsibilities of school instructors without undermining the authority figure of teachers. In other words, the films could supplement traditional menstrual education in the school while the teacher would serve the role of facilitator. I show that this occurred in these two films as a plot device, and in the real life use of the menstrual hygiene films. I contend that menstrual education films of the 1950s constructed the home as the starting place for menstrual education, but portrayed the school as the final authority. This teacher as authority figure laid the blueprint for subsequent menstrual education films of the 1960s and 1970s.

To show this I conduct a contextual analysis of the two films before turning to the widely read *Educational Screen* magazine to explore how it covered the films. *Molly Grows Up* is the second most well-known menstrual education film in the United States, after *The Story of Menstruation*. Medical Arts Productions produced *Molly Grows Up*, and the company had a reputation for its straight-forward presentation of sex education material (Smith 1999). Medical Arts Productions produced numerous films throughout the 1950s specifically made for junior high and high school students. The film *As Boys Grow* may seem an odd addition to the group since its main demographic was pubescent and pre-pubescent boys. In my research, I have yet to find any indication that the film was, at any time upon initial release, viewed by girls. However, I include the film here for two key reasons. First, the same production company, Medical Arts Production, produced both *As Boys Grow* and *Molly Grows Up*; there are similarities between the two films in both content and style. Second, despite the male audience, the period and the menstrual cycle take up a quarter of the time in the film, four minutes out of the 16-minute film. I explore why this film dealt with menstruation so deeply if only boys saw it, while *Molly Grows Up* only pays scant attention to the male body and male puberty.

There is another difference between the two films that make them of interest to study. *Molly Grows Up* is a menstrual hygiene film while *As Boys Grow*

is a sex hygiene film. While menstrual education is very much a part of sex education, it does not constitute a comprehensive instruction curriculum. As in the case with *The Story of Menstruation* and, as I will show, *Molly Grows Up*, the films only educate on the menstrual cycle and do not address other aspects of sexual education including sexual anatomy, reproductive health, sexual activity, or birth control and contraception. Part of this reason was due to the historical context, as sex education films of the time did not cover all of these topics. As *Boys Grow*, however, does include discussion of both sex and menstrual education, and the differences between it and *Molly Grows Up* warrant this examination.

As stated above, *The Story of Menstruation* and *Molly Grows Up* were the two most well-known menstrual education films of the twentieth century. Both were used for decades after production, even when the variety of sex education films increased in the 1970s and beyond. Personal Products Corporation sponsored the film alongside Medical Arts Productions; Personal Products Corporation actively incorporated itself into menstrual education and created films that were meant to replace their older counterparts. *Molly Grows Up* was the first film for Personal Products Corporation that focused on menstruation. The company would have continued success with *It's Wonderful Being a Girl* (1968), *Naturally . . . A Girl* (1973), and *Growing Up On Broadway* (1984) (Martin 1997).

MENSTRUAL PERFORMANCE IN *MOLLY GROWS UP*

Molly Grows Up tells the story of pre-adolescent Molly who is jealous of her older sister and close friends who have already started menstruating. Molly finally gets her first period and goes home to tell her mother about it. That evening she asks her mother questions about menstruation, while at school the next day the school nurse gives a lecture to the girls in Molly's class about menstruation and their growing bodies. Opening with a three-ring binder that displays the cast list, the black-and-white *Molly Grows Up* establishes itself as distinct from its famed Disney predecessor, thanks to this opening shot. The relation between education about the menstrual cycle at school and home is constructed as a necessity; a young girl's education may start in one place but it must carry over to the other. The binder sits on a table with a checkered tablecloth, conjuring an image of a pre-adolescent student sitting at the kitchen table doing her homework. Written in the notebook is the cast list and, as a hand comes into turn the page, the audience sees the crew, consultants, writer, and director of the film—each text on a new page. Thus, both students and audience learn that the film they are about to see is meant to be informational and has a knowledgeable authority over the students. Indeed, the film had four consultants—two medical doctors and two PhDs—giving a gravitas to *Molly Grows Up* that did not occur in *The Story of Menstruation*. Furthermore, such a list of medical professionals grants

the film a claim to the scientific, tying it to objectives of social and moral standards and communicating that the film will not be indecent or crass. The medical professionals listed function as moral specialists by linking the film not to sex, but to medicine.

In addition, to reinforce the notion that audiences' comfort is of utmost importance, the film creates the idea that menstruation is a girls-only and positive experience. Medical Arts Productions, and its sponsor Modess of the Personal Products Corporation, brought in consultants to address the medical components of the film and gave them opening credits.³ While the director, Charles Larrance, and writer/consultant, Donald M. Hatfield, are revealed to be men, three out of four of the consultants' genders—those who are meant to know and discuss the menstrual cycle—are kept unknown and only listed by their initials. Including consultants and medical professionals in the making of the film was a revolutionary idea, given medicine's history with sex hygiene films.

By the 1920s the medical profession did its best to distance itself from sex education films. This was due to the image that medical professionals crafted for themselves—an image that projected professional, educated doctors who rejected the popular sex hygiene films of the era because of their lack of medical foundations. In the decades preceding World War II, the medical community tightened its qualifications on who could practice medicine, who could qualify as a physician, and how medical knowledge was disseminated. Medical historian George Rosen noted that in the interwar period “scientific and clinical knowledge and expertise were used to establish criteria with which to circumscribe areas of specialization, to validate the competence of those who wished to practice in them, and to exclude self-styled specialists.” Rosen went on to state that the institutionalization of medicine “fostered an increasingly hierarchical structure of medical practice, involving not just physicians but also growing numbers of auxiliary paramedical personnel” (Rosen 1983, 115). Medical professionals rarely contributed to early sex education films. As such, the consultants on *Molly Grows Up* counter established social conventions regarding medicine's input to hygiene education films while also lending expert knowledge. This created a film that pushed against any notion of illicit or even pornographic material.

Molly Grows Up presents itself as an educational television drama with characters and a plotline. In his discussion on the forms of television, Raymond Williams notes that education by seeing is enacted as a means of “experience[ing] a process rather than being taught ‘about’ it” (Williams 1975, 74). Even though *Molly Grows Up* contains the stereotypical diagrams of the reproductive system, the audience experiences it in the same manner as the character of Molly, a student in a classroom. *Molly Grows Up* operates as a response to negative feedback concerning educational films—particularly a lack of attention regarding communication to audience members (students) and a rehashing of already established teaching tools. In other words, even

by the mid-1930s, educators were already jaded by educational films that did not contribute to the curriculum in ways that not only assisted teachers, but enhanced learning as well. Early social and sex hygiene films did little more than disseminate information, and educators insisted that films used in the classroom should have definite “bearing upon the broader objectives of education. Furthermore, [the films] must present those aspects of subject matter which cannot be equally well presented by the use of other mediums of communication” (Arnsperger 1936, 147). *Molly Grows Up* no longer served to feed spongy spectators menstrual information; rather, we, as audience members, are to relate to Molly and her menstrual misgivings. We are even instructed by the authority figure, the school nurse Miss Jensen, to meet Molly and her family so we can understand her frustration and share in her excited anticipation as she awaits her first period. As a result, the audience’s awareness of performance is part of the makeup of the film: the performance of the actors, the performance of menstrual envy in that Molly is jealous she does not have her period yet, and the performance of body maintenance (Fig. 67.1).

At the beginning of the film Molly is heartbroken that she has yet to get her period and goes to great lengths to present herself as a mature woman: she discusses fashion with her neighbors, she plays with and wears her older sister’s stylish hat, and she takes a Modess sanitary napkin from her sister’s room and turns it over and over in her hand musing about the joys of her not-yet-started period. The period is, undeniably, a natural function but the act and construction of a menstrual identity is far from organic. Molly’s interaction with her period, her desire to start her period, is a site of what Judith Butler calls a “dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals

Fig. 67.1 *Molly Grows Up* Jensen image: “Miss Jensen teaches the students on the reproductive cycle” (Credit: Medical Arts Productions for Personal Products Corp. [Modess] 1953)

Fig. 67.2 *Molly Grows Up* Molly image: “Molly plays with her older sister’s sanitary pad” (Credit: Medical Arts Productions for Personal Products Corp. [Modess] 1953)

the performative status of the natural itself” (Butler 1999, 186). As a form of menstrual performance, Molly is mimetically a woman—her failure is exhibited by her inability to bleed at a time when she thinks she is supposed to bleed, when society tells her she is supposed to bleed. Molly’s own father acknowledges that a time has occurred for her to start bleeding, by indicating that she is no longer a baby and thus her performance as a woman is dependent upon her ability to menstruate (Fig. 67.2).

MALE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PERIOD

With the success of *Molly Grows Up*, Medical Arts Production followed up with *As Boys Grow*, a film aimed specifically at adolescent boys. With a similar form to *Molly Grows Up*, this black-and-white tale uses actors, again set in school, and an authority figure to serve as educator about puberty and sexual experiences. The film’s authority figure is high school gym coach Gene Douglas (played by the father from *Molly Grows Up*, Joe Miksak), who conducts a lesson that is guided by the freshman track team’s questions on masturbation, ejaculation, nocturnal emissions, and menstruation. As with Nurse Jensen, the coach breaks the fourth wall in an attempt to relate to the audience members by means of introduction.

In the two films we, as audience members, are included in the discussion and talks by first being introduced to the characters via the authority figures. Jensen compels us to get to know Molly better saying that “I think you might like to know her, too,” while Douglas tell us that “maybe you’d like to meet some of them,” and subsequently introduces us to the members of the track team. Breaking the fourth wall, while often unexpected, can

result in a positive connection between program and viewer (Auter and Davis 1991). Doing so creates a viewer interest involvement that counters the traditionally passive expectations of audience members. More so, in the two films discussed here the fourth wall is not simply broken to address the audience but to invite them to participate in the following program. Both films want an active audience that participates in the education and learning of puberty and the menstrual cycle.

In addition to audience participation, *As Boys Grow*s constructs the same needed notion of authenticity, and a list of medical and professionals are credited at the onset of the film; two names worked on both *Molly Grows Up* and *As Boys Grow*. In the latter, W. M. Mitchell served as a psychological consultant, along with two other medical consultants, and D. M. Hatfield produced the short film. Noteworthy is that in *Molly Grows Up* the four respective doctors are simply billed as consultants without any distinction made between their roles. However, in *As Boys Grow*, the psychological consultant is billed separately from the medical consultants, indicating that the filmmakers wanted two points of views, one psychological and one medical, when producing the film and the roles were so great that a distinction was made. This raises the question, then, why was a separate billing of professionals deemed not needed on *Molly Grows Up* but was necessary on *As Boys Grow*?

As mentioned, Medical Arts Productions had a reputation for its frank, open, and blunt discussions of sexual education during the 1950s, and *As Boys Grow* is no exception. However, while *Molly Grows Up* concerns itself only with education on the female body—not once is the male body mentioned nor is there any discussion about conception—*As Boys Grow* challenges both those norms. Initially dancing around the issue of sexual intercourse when discussing the male sex organs—only mentioning that sperm is a “guy’s part of the baby” or that an egg must be fertilized by a sperm cell to produce a fetus—it is when the coach discusses the female reproductive system that sexual intercourse is brought into the discussion. Using a diagram of the cross section of a uterus and vagina, he explains how sexual intercourse works and concludes with the piece of advice that going out with girls is fun, and sex is not the only reason for socializing. I contend that because the film discusses both sex-specific reproductive systems and sexual intercourse, more caution was taken in the writing and framing of the explanation, caution that needed both medical and psychological professionals.

While in *Molly Grows Up* the girls in the film function as one unit to ask questions and get answers about the menstrual cycle, how the complete cycle works, and the emotional and physical impact the period will have on them, the main concern of *As Boys Grow* is to teach sexual education. Menstruation is thus explained only so far as its impact on men—specifically how menstruation plays a part in fertilization. The track coach, using a cardboard diagram, explains how an egg travels through the fallopian tubes and into the uterus, and he then explains a woman’s readiness for pregnancy. Coverage of the

menstrual cycle is incomplete, but the significance of this presentation can be understood, especially in its coverage of sexual intercourse as related to the period.

Where *As Boys Grow* falters is in its overt support for the traditional gender roles as related to menstruation. *As Boys Grow* frames the period as natural but an event that only women must experience and something that often incites acts of anger. The four boys in the film wear workout clothing in a gymnasium, playing off male-desired athleticism, and discuss menstruation with numerous attempts to one-up each other with questions and comments about the female reproductive system.⁴ As Butler cites, “culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism,” the film creates boys who reinforce their own masculinity and its role in our binary gendered society by laughing at the experience of women (Butler 1988, 528). When an image of a fertilized egg appears on screen, an egg with only the tail end of the sperm cell visible, one boy comments with a hint of laughter that it is a “pollywog,” or tadpole. The coach does correct him, noting that it is a fertilized egg, only after answering with a smile and small chuckle. By joking about the images of the female reproductive system the boys in the film reassure the male-dominated audience that the subject of menstruation and female anatomy is in some way more humorous than that of male anatomy. As such, the male gender performance in the film is accomplished by degrading the process of fertilization in females and celebrating the boys for acting in a manner that strengthens the “illusion of gender essentialism.”

EDUCATIONAL SCREEN MAGAZINE

Educational Screen started in January 1922 and called itself “the independent magazine devoted to the new influence in national education,” that new influence, of course, being the motion picture (*Educational Screen* 1922, 3). *Educational Screen* was popular with both educators and filmmakers who wanted to reach schools. Because of its vast influence, the journal was a pinnacle for reviews, commentary, advertisements, and essays on education film, including sex education. Pulling any mention of *Molly Grows Up* and *As Boys Grow* from *Educational Screen* from the 1950s I have found two categories of reference: advertisements and commentary. The advertisements tell us that teachers were the target audience for these films since they could benefit the most. Further, the advertisements acknowledge other nurses and educators who have already watched the film, and give their cited opinions. The commentary sections are like reviews, as the contributors analyze the film and then give critical analysis on it.

Educational Screen featured the film *Molly Grows Up* prominently in its magazine, including both advertisements and commentary.⁵ The first mention of the film occurred in February 1954, which contained an

advertisement for *Molly Grows Up* calling it a “NEW motion picture on Normal Menstruation.” The emphasis on both the newness and the normalcy of the film indicated two larger problems the magazine subtly addressed. First, ‘NEW’ signaled the immediacy of the research in the film, and the desire for educators to use the latest tools in their teaching. As it had been nearly eight years since *The Story of Menstruation*, advertisers quickly latched on to the selling point that educators could use *Molly Grows Up* as the latest and greatest film. Second, the term ‘Normal Menstruation’ has two meanings, the normalcy of the film and the normalcy of the cycle. One obstacle that filmmakers had to face included concerns that audiences would construe films on menstrual education or sex hygiene as immoral. Filmmakers paid close attention to the language used in the film and keywords like normal served to recognize the moral and wide acceptance of the film (Heinrich and Batchelor 2004). The advertisement noted that the film is for 9- to 15-year-old girls, again assigning an age demographic to the film to preemptively combat any negative criticism that the film could somehow damage the minds of young girls. This implied that boys did not need to see the film, thus keeping any talk about menstruation out of the hands of boys. The advertisement ended with information on how to preview, rent, or purchase the film from Medical Arts Productions, appealing to educators through different means of obtaining the film. That exact same advertisement appeared again in the four subsequent issues of the magazine: March 1954, April 1954, May 1954, and the Summer 1954 (*Educational Screen*, February 1954, 72).

In the same issue, under the listing of new motion pictures for rent or purchase, the magazine listed *Molly Grows Up* and described it as “the story of a 13-year-old as she experiences her first menstrual period and learns something of its significance.” *Educational Screen* identified every film by its production company and mailing address in order to obtain the film. The magazine did not shy away from addressing the finances of *Molly Grows Up*. Most other films were attached only to their production companies, however the magazine described *Molly Grows Up* as “financed in substantial part by Personal Products Corporation.” The transparency of this statement functioned as a disclaimer, noting that a commercial product is directly involved in the making of the film (*Educational Screen*, February 1954, 77).

Two months later, the magazine published a summary and analysis of the film in a large write-up. The unsigned article commented that when Molly gets her first period and rushes home to tell her mother, Molly’s mother is calm, shows no sign of embarrassment or “emotional disturbance,” and affectionately asks her daughter how she feels and promises to talk further with her after dinner. Most pointedly both the film and the *Educational Screen* article spent time addressing why society should not use language such as ‘the curse’ and that girls and women can treat the menstrual cycle not as a nuisance. The anonymous reviewer called the film “a calm, forthright, faithful, and sympathetic portrayal of a girl’s experiences connected with the

growing-up process.” The article’s intended audiences concerned both educators and parents. The author noted that teachers would find the film useful in explaining menstruation while allaying any fears the adolescent girls may have while, at the same time, parents would like the film for its helpful “ways of handling their daughter’s questions about menstruation and developing desirable attitudes toward the whole process of growing up.” Most strikingly, the author employed educators and parents to discuss the film after viewing, even by having group discussions. The film does not end the talk on menstruation but rather it begins it. Whereas many sex education films of decades before functioned as independent educational entities and did not foster talk, as seen by *Molly Grows Up*’s reception the film intended its audience to talk about it afterwards. I do not want to lose sight of the fact that since Personal Products Corporation sponsored *Molly Grows Up*, discussion of the film also meant discussion of the products used during menstruation. The *Educational Screen* article claimed that the “incidental references to the sponsor’s products do not seem to distract from the value of the film,” but the sponsor’s subtle presence allowed for further discussion afterwards, since the film did not feel like a sponsor’s advertisement (*Educational Screen*, April 1954, 152–53).

By the autumn of 1954, *Educational Screen* had advertised *Molly Grows Up* numerous times throughout the year, and in September the advertising message began to shift. The film was no longer the ‘new’ must-have motion picture; rather it morphed into an even more valuable educational tool that supported educators because the film had the luxury of time to establish itself as a legitimate motion picture for school use. That month an advertisement directed squarely at teachers played into the beginning of the school semester: “Preview your print of *Molly Grows Up* before classroom use this fall!” (*Educational Screen*, September 1954, 258). The following month a different advertisement pleaded with its audience to “preview before classroom use” and noted that *Molly Grows Up* contained a companion filmstrip, useful since schools often had a projector that could be used for the filmstrip (*Educational Screen*, October 1954, 336). These two advertisements worked off the positive reputation *Molly Grows Up* had crafted by this point. The magazine reiterated this idea in November 1954 by adding a disclaimer to one of its *Molly Grows Up* advertisements that an unnamed “School Nurse” called it “superior to anything else I have used” (*Educational Screen*, November 1954, 382).

The gravitas afforded to *Molly Grows Up* signified its importance, particularly in comparison to the advertisement for *As Boys Grow*. During the 1950s, there is not one advertisement for *As Boys Grow* in *Educational Screen*. Medical Arts Productions, and by extension the Personal Products Corporation, achieved a consistent advertising campaign with *Molly Grows Up* aimed at educators in the magazine, while the same production company did nothing for *As Boys Grow*. *Educational Screen* featured advertisements for *Molly Grows Up* throughout the late 1950s.

Molly Grows Up and *As Boys Grow* both exist within the spaces that pre-pubescent boys and girls would be intimately familiar with: the home and the school. *The Story of Menstruation* achieved its educational value through its narrator who communicated without the need of a plotline and characters. As a result, *The Story of Menstruation* does not take place in one specific location. Filmmakers of 1950s menstrual hygiene films turned away from such a structure and, instead, placed characters within spaces that provided opportunity for educational moments. These home-to-school moments reflect the way educators felt menstruation should be taught. Particularly, young students' menstrual education may happen at school, but it must first start at home. By including medical professionals in the making of each film, Medical Arts Productions granted the films a claim to scientific objectivity, thus binding it to social and moral standards. Doing so preemptively decreased any potential controversy around the films' subject matter. Menstrual education films evolved greatly from *The Story of Menstruation* to those of the 1950s, which approached the subject through new narration and served to assist school instructors with their teaching responsibilities. Even if educators still believed the home to be the starting place for menstrual education, they were keenly aware that such instruction was not occurring. With menstrual education films teachers could have the equipment to educate students on their bodies with the authority afforded to them by the films.

NOTES

1. During the 1950s films dealing with the menstrual cycle were either called 'menstrual education films,' 'menstrual instruction films,' or 'menstrual hygiene films.' I use all three terms here, interchangeably, because that is how educators and filmmakers used them during the 1950s.
2. For more on *The Story of Menstruation* see Bob Cruz, Jr. 2011. "Paging Dr. Disney: Health Education Films, 1922–1973," in *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt: Essays on Disney's Edutainment Films*, edited by A. Bowdoin Van Riper, 127–44. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.; Thomas Heinrich and Bob Batchelor. 2004. *Kotex, Kleenex, Huggies: Kimberly-Clark and Consumer Revolution in American Business*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press; Sharra Vostral. 2008. *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
3. The consultants are listed in the following order as W. M. Mitchell, PhD; D. C. Harrington, M. D.; E. M. Marsh, M. D.; and D. M. Hatfield, PhD.
4. The film sounds as if the filmmakers shot it in a gymnasium without any sound equipment. The boys shout questions/answers that are muffled and, at times, hard to understand. Even though Medical Arts Productions created *Molly Grows Up* and *As Boys Grow*, the latter does not appear to have had the same financial backing as its predecessor.
5. I recognize that *Educational Screen* did not create the specific advertisements for *Molly Grows Up*, but the magazine's willingness to run the advertisements coupled with its educator demographic makes the magazine a ripe place for analysis into how it advertised *Molly Grows Up* and its respective commentary.

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