S11E5 - Growing Up GIRL

I want to start this episode with something that might surprise you.

Until 1998, the full anatomy of the clitoris had never been accurately mapped in medical literature.

So that's the same year Google was founded. The same year the Spice Girls were selling out arenas. The same year most of the parents listening to this episode were themselves going through puberty.

How interesting is that?

So the clitoris, the only organ in the human body whose sole function is pleasure, was so poorly understood, so consistently left out of anatomy textbooks — the ones that our doctors are reading, right? — so thoroughly ignored by medical research, that it took until the end of the 20th century for anyone to popularly document what it looks like and how it works.

Now, I'm not telling you this to be provocative.

I'm telling you this because it's the foundation of everything this episode is about.

Girls grow up in a world that has historically not told them the truth about their own bodies.

Not the full truth.

Not the parts that involve pleasure, or anatomy, or the simple right to understand what's happening to them and why.

And the consequence of that is shame, confusion, and a sense that their own bodies are somehow mysterious and more problematic than boys'.

That kind of shame follows them around for years.

This episode is about changing that.

Starting at home.

Starting with you.

I'm Ashley Costello. This is The Resilient Podcast, and this is **Growing Up Girl**.

So I want to tell you about two families.

The first is a mum.

Let's call her Diane.

Diane is 41. She's got a daughter, Sasha, who's 10.

Now, Sasha is bright, funny, obsessed with animals, and already showing some early signs of puberty that Diane has both been expecting, but also quietly dreading.

Not because she doesn't want to talk to Sasha about it, but because every time she tries to find the words, she finds herself reaching back into her own experience of being 10, 11, 12.

And what she finds there is not a model she wants to replicate.

Diane grew up in a household where periods were referred to as being poorly.

Where her own mother, a loving woman, would slip sanitary products under the bathroom door rather than discuss them.

Where her body's changes were treated as something to manage quietly and mention to nobody.

Where she learned, without anyone saying it directly, that the female body was private in a way that felt more like shame than dignity.

She came to me because she wanted something different for Sasha.

She just isn't sure what different looks like when different is all she's ever seen.

"I don't want Sasha to feel like I did," she said.

"Like her body was starting to embarrass her. I genuinely don't know where to start."

So we're going to come back to Diane and Sasha in a minute, but I want to talk about a second family.

And it's a dad I'm going to call Rob.

Rob's 44. He's got a daughter called Lily who's 11.

And Rob is, by his own cheerful admission, completely at sea.

"I didn't grow up with sisters," he said.

"I know basically nothing about what's happening to my daughter, and she's starting to... I can see things are changing. Her mum and I aren't together anymore, so now at weekends it's just me, and I want to be someone she can talk to this about. I just don't know how."

He paused, and he said this to me:

"Is it weird that I'm here? Is it weird that I'm asking about this?"

And I said:

“This is one of the least weird things a dad has ever done in my office. In fact, Rob, it’s one of the best.”

And it really was.

Because here’s the thing about Rob.

His instinct is to show up.

To learn.

To be present for his daughter through something that he doesn’t fully understand.

And that’s exactly the right instinct, isn’t it?

And it’s rarer than it ought to be.

Girls need their dads in this conversation.

Not instead of their mums, but as well as.

A dad who can talk to his daughter about her body without embarrassment tells her something profound:

That her body is not shameful.

That men are not people to hide her changing self from.

And that she doesn’t have to perform ignorance about her own biology in front of the men in her life.

That lesson has consequences that reach far beyond puberty.

The Research

So let’s get into my favourite bit.

Now, I love the stories about the families, and I know you do. I get a lot of feedback about that.

But the research — because everything we do is underpinned.

So let me do what I did in episode two, where we go through what’s actually happening clearly, without euphemism, so that every parent listening has the information they need to pass on.

Female puberty typically begins between the ages of, wait for it, eight and 13.

Earlier than male puberty on average, and with an equally wide range of normal.

The first sign is usually the development of breast buds, the small, sometimes tender lumps just beneath the nipples.

We often see that in primary school kids.

This can feel alarming to a girl who doesn't know what's coming.

And it shouldn't have to.

So what follows, roughly in order — although it's not always this way — is:

Pubic and underarm hair appears.

The vulva and vagina develop.

The hips widen.

Height increases, often in a significant growth spurt.

The skin produces more oil.

Body odour changes.

And vaginal discharge begins.

All of this is normal, healthy, and it's the body's way of keeping the vagina clean.

And then, usually between 10 and 16, somewhere along there, periods begin.

When I talk to parents of primary girls, that thought of eight years old really shocks them.

It has got younger lately, but what I would say to you is that this is just the start.

That is just the very, very beginning.

It's like writing a list before you go shopping.

It's just the list.

It's not the actual periods yet.

So that can vary quite a lot.

We have a whole episode dedicated to periods in episode four with our guests, Malou and James, authors of **The Woo Cycle**.

Now, I'm not going to go into it in depth here.

What I will say is, a girl whose period arrives without preparation is a girl who's been let down.

That preparation, as hard as it is, is our job.

And I can't wait to welcome James on, who is a young girl, and her mum, Malou.

I cannot wait to welcome them to the podcast with their new book.

And it will really help understand it a little bit more.

Now, the things that parents traditionally leave out, and the reasons they shouldn't.

The vulva.

Not the vagina.

The vulva.

These are not the same thing.

That mix-up of the two is one of the most persistent and unhelpful inaccuracies in the way that we talk about female anatomy.

Now, come on, we've waited this long to get it into the books. We need to get it correct ourselves.

And if we don't use these words, they will be eradicated from history.

So we need to make sure that we are using the correct terminology for the female anatomy.

The vagina is the internal canal.

The vulva is everything on the outside.

The labia majora.

The labia minora.

The clitoris.

The urethral opening.

Girls need to know the correct names for all of it.

Not because of any agenda, but because their body belongs to them, and they deserve to know what it's called.

Research by Jennifer Gunter, an obstetrician gynaecologist and the author of **The Vagina Bible**, makes this point forcefully.

The consistent use of vagina as a catch-all term for female genitalia is not a small thing.

She says it reflects and reinforces the cultural tendency to render female anatomy imprecise, interchangeable, and somehow less worth knowing accurately.

Correct language is not clinical.

It's respectful.

The clitoris, as I mentioned at the start of this episode, the full anatomy was not mapped until 1998.

What that means in practice is that girls have grown up for generations with a body part that only exists solely to provide pleasure.

Their pleasure, I might add.

Nobody else's.

That was not considered worth including in textbooks.

And that was omitted from diagrams that many adults cannot accurately locate or describe even today.

Girls need to know it exists.

They need to know what it's for.

And they need to know female pleasure is not an afterthought, or a bonus, or something that happens incidentally to somebody else's experience.

It's part of their body.

And it belongs to them.

Dr Christiane Northrup's work on the female body, her kind of literacy that she's gathered together, makes a case clearly that girls who understand their own bodies, including the parts associated with pleasure, have healthy relationships within themselves and with others.

They are more likely to recognise when something doesn't feel right.

They are more likely to understand what consent is, including their own right to say what they want to do and what they don't, because they have a language for their own experience.

Now, masturbation.

Self-stimulation.

Yes, for girls.

Less discussed.

Significantly less discussed.

The equivalent of conversation for boys, the research from Debbie Herbenick, I think it is, at Indiana University tells us clearly that this gap has consequences.

Girls who receive no information about self-exploration carry the same capacity for shame as boys, but with an added layer, because the cultural silence around female pleasure is even deeper.

The message, often unspoken, sometimes explicit, is that female sexuality exists in relation to somebody else, not in relation to themselves.

That message causes harm.

The antidote is simple.

Self-stimulation or masturbation is normal.

It is private.

It is healthy.

It's no different for girls than it is for boys.

Body image.

And this is tied up with social media, isn't it?

This is where research becomes particularly urgent.

Plan International UK's research on girls' body image and the UK government-commissioned review by Dr Linda Papadopoulos — sorry, Linda, if you're listening — on the sexualisation of young people both document something that any parent of a girl already feels in their bones.

The pressure on girls to look a certain way at a younger and younger age, through more and more channels, is relentless and is escalating.

Social media has not created the pressure, but it has amplified it beyond anything previous generations have experienced or that we could expect.

Girls who receive positive, accurate, shame-free information about their bodies from a trusted adult are significantly more buffered against that pressure.

They're not immune.

But they are buffered.

The home conversation's not a solution to a cultural problem, but that counter-narrative is really important.

And it matters.

What To Say, What Not To Say

Okay.

So what to say, what not to say.

Here's my top tips.

You know I'll always give you top tips.

One, use the correct anatomical language.

All of it.

And if you don't know it, brush up.

Vulva.

Vagina.

Labia.

Clitoris.

Uterus.

They're not rude words.

They are accurate ones.

A girl who knows what her body is called is a girl less likely to feel ashamed, more likely to seek help when something's wrong, and is better equipped to advocate for herself in every context that follows.

Teach her to name herself correctly.

It's one of the most quietly radical things we can do for our girls.

Excuse me.

Two, don't leave the clitoris out.

I know this feels like a big ask.

I know the word many parents will skip even if they manage everything else.

But I want to ask you to sit with this question:

Why?

Why is this the part we leave out?

And what does it teach our girls when we do?

It teaches her that her pleasure is not worth mentioning.

That part of her body is too much.

Too embarrassing.

Too complicated to name.

She deserves better than this.

Say the word.

Explain what it is.

Move on.

Simple as that.

It'll take 30 seconds, but it will stay with her for the rest of her life.

For dads, you belong in this conversation.

Rob asked if it was weird if he was here.

It wasn't.

It was necessary.

You don't need to have lived in a female body to tell your daughter what to expect from hers.

You need to have accurate information and the willingness to use it.

And you need to know what your presence is in this conversation.

The fact that you showed up.

The fact that you learned.

And the fact that you didn't make it weird.

Tell your daughter something she'll carry forward into her relationships, and probably every relationship that she has with men.

That her body is not shameful.

That she does not have to hide it.

And that the men who love her are not embarrassed by her humanity.

Four, talk about body image before social media does.

Don't wait until she's ready in the comparison spiral.

Start early.

Start simply.

Everybody goes through puberty at a different pace.

Everybody looks different.

What you see online is not what bodies actually look like.

It's not a one-time conversation.

It's a running thread.

Pull on it regularly.

The research is clear that girls who have heard a trusted adult name the pressure explicitly, repeatedly, are better equipped to resist it.

And five, tell her that her body belongs to her.

Not to a future partner.

Not to social media.

Not to the culture that will spend the next decade telling her how it should look and what it's for.

But to her.

This is the foundation of body autonomy.

And it's the foundation of consent, which we will go into in depth in episode five.

But it starts here.

Her body is hers.

And everything follows from that.

Okay, back to our stories.

Back to Diane.

She went home, and she did something that took courage.

She sat down with Sasha, just the two of them at the kitchen table.

TV off.

Phones down.

And told her the truth.

Not all of it.

Not all at once.

But the beginning.

She talked about what was going to happen to her body.

She used the correct words.

She said **vulva**, and **vagina**, and **clitoris**, and did not look away when she said them because she had practised not looking away.

She talked about periods briefly, with a promise that more information was to come.

And she told Sasha that every girl's body goes through this, but at different times, in different ways, and none of it was embarrassing or wrong or something to hide.

And then she said something she'd not planned to say.

Something that came out of somewhere old and true.

"When I was your age, nobody talked to me about any of this, and I had to figure it out on my own, and I found it really hard. I don't want that for you. I want you to be able to ask me anything."

So Sasha looked at her for a moment.

"Did you find it scary?"

"Yeah, a bit," she said, "because I didn't know what was happening."

And Sasha said,

"I won't be scared because I'll know."

And Diane told me afterwards she went upstairs and cried.

Not because there was anything wrong.

But because everything was right.

Something that had been wrong in her own family for at least two generations was stopping right there, at the kitchen table, on an ordinary Thursday evening.

"She'll know," Diane said.

"She'll just know.

And she'll have me."

Now Rob took a different approach.

As dads often do.

He researched thoroughly.

Quietly.

The way that boys look for a new car.

Practical people prepare.

And he read.

He looked things up.

He wrote some notes, which then he felt quite embarrassed about.

And he decided the embarrassment was worth it.

He took Lily to her favourite café.

The one with the good hot chocolates.

And he just started talking.

He told her he wanted to make sure she knew what was happening.

And he said he knew it might feel a bit strange to talk to her dad about it.

And he said he also wanted her to be able to talk to him about anything, forever.

And that this was part of that.

Lily stirred her hot chocolate.

Looked at the table.

And just said,

"Okay."

So he told her.

Not everything.

But enough.

The correct words.

The timeline.

The fact her body was going to change.

That all of it was normal.

And that she could ask him anything because he'd done his research.

On the way home, Lily slipped her hand into his.

She's 11.

He said she doesn't always do that anymore.

Rob said it was the best hot chocolate he'd ever had.

And it doesn't have to be all rosy.

You're not going to get it right all of the time.

What I want to do, though, is look at the bigger picture for a moment.

Let's think about what we're really doing when we have this conversation for our daughters.

We're not just giving them information about puberty.

We're giving them a framework for their own bodies.

A relationship with them that's grounded in knowledge rather than shame.

A sense that they are worth knowing accurately.

That their anatomy is worth naming.

That their pleasure is worth acknowledging.

And that their experience is worth preparing for.

And that framework matters.

Not just at 11 or 12.

But for the rest of their lives.

I know—I think I said it last week—I was given a Claire Rayner book.

She was an agony aunt at the time.

That was a thing.

And it was her body book.

My mum gave it to me and said,

"If you have any questions, let me know."

It was the last conversation that I had until I told her I was about to have sex for the first time.

Bearing in mind I was 18 at the time.

But in all of those years, from me getting that book to me bringing that conversation back, not once did we really talk about it.

I remember telling her...

Or I tell a lie.

I did tell her.

I was 13 and I came in from school and I said,

"I have started."

And I couldn't even say the word **period**.

I said,

"I've started."

And she said,

"On the netball team?"

God's honest truth.

And I was like,

"No... my periods."

And she said,

"Okay, there are some sanitary products in the bathroom."

That was it.

Now, it did open a little bit more of a conversation as I was older.

But there was no explanation.

There was no talking.

There was no talking about the names.

The labels.

The anatomy.

In fact, I remember there was a running joke in our family that when my sister was born, who's 10 years younger than me, we would call her vagina her **tuppence**.

And that was just what we called it in the family.

There was this running joke that she had a tuppence.

And because I was 10 years older, I must have had a **thruppence**.

And then, "What's my mum's?"

So we had this running joke.

But never once do I ever remember her saying **vagina**.

The work that Dr Christiane Northrup writes about—the idea that a woman who understands her own body is a woman who is fundamentally more equipped to take care of herself, to recognise when something is wrong, and advocate in medical settings.

Because remember this.

It's not just about when they're at school.

But when they're older.

They are more able to advocate for themselves if they are going for a gynaecological check-up.

A smear.

If they're having a baby.

If there's been any issues.

And they're more confident to build intimate relationships from a place of knowledge rather than ignorance.

It's not a luxury.

It's a health intervention.

The Girlguiding Attitudes Survey, published annually, shows consistently that body confidence in girls declines significantly between the ages of seven and 21.

And the steepest drop happens in early adolescence, precisely when puberty is beginning.

That's not coincidence, is it?

It's the outcome of a culture that tells girls their bodies are a problem to be managed rather than selves to be understood.

Now, the parents in this episode, Diane and Rob, are not solving this big cultural problem that we can look at researching.

But they are doing something that research consistently shows makes a difference.

They are being that counter-narrative.

The voice that says:

"I see your body. It is happy, healthy, and normal.

I know what it is called, and I will tell you.

I know what it can do.

You deserve to know."

That voice, heard early, heard at home from somebody who loves them, stays with those girls long after the hot chocolate's finished or the kitchen table is cleared away.

So I want to end this episode the same way I started, and the way I ended episode two, by speaking directly to two people.

First, to the mum who's carrying her own complicated history with her own body into this conversation.

I see you.

Who finds the words hard because the words were always hard.

Who wants to do it differently and isn't sure she knows what different looks like.

You don't have to have had a perfect relationship with your own body to give your daughter the truth about hers.

You just have to be willing to say what you didn't get to hear.

Something along the lines of:

"I wish somebody had told me this, so I'm telling you."

That sentence breaks generational chains.

It really does.

And the second, to the dad who asked if it was weird that he was here.

It wasn't.

It never is.

Your daughter needs you in this.

It's not good enough to just have mums.

And some of our girls don't have mums.

Not because you lead the conversation, but because your presence tells her that she does not have to hide this part of herself away from men.

Especially the men who love her.

And that's a lesson that will serve her quietly and powerfully for the rest of her life.

So parents...

Show up.

Use the correct words.

Tell your daughter her body belongs to her.

And the rest will follow.

That's **Growing Up Girl**.

Thank you for being here.

The next episode, we have our very special guests joining us.

Malou and her daughter James, the authors of **The Woo Cycle**, for a conversation entirely dedicated to periods.

It's one that is safe to share with younger listeners from age eight, with a parent alongside.

Don't miss it.

All the research references, the puberty timeline, and further reading are in the show notes.

And coming up later in the season, episode eight is addressed directly to girls aged 10 and up.

It's built for them.

Listen first.

Then share.

Until next time...

Tell her the truth.

She can handle it.

She needs it.

She deserves it.