

SEXUALITY

Puberty — information for parents and carers



Puberty describes the period of time when a child physically develops to sexual maturity and experiences significant emotional and social changes.

What is puberty?

For most young people, puberty begins between the ages of 9 and 16. The hormone gonadotrophin is released from the pituitary gland at the base of the brain and hormones are released from the ovaries in girls and the testicles in boys. This causes the female's ova (eggs) to mature and be released, and the male to produce sperm.

When should parents/carers start discussing puberty?

Learning about puberty can start in early childhood, with information reinforced and expanded on, in the years leading up to puberty. Puberty is just one part of understanding about growth and development.

Be brief, factual and positive when answering a child's questions about puberty. By sharing just a small amount of information in a positive way, you are sending the message that this is a normal event and one that you are happy talking about.

What happens when puberty occurs?

The age puberty occurs will depend on a number of things, including diet, exercise, amount of body fat and heredity (the age when a child's parents began to go through puberty).

Most girls will notice their bodies changing around the age of 10 or 11 and most boys will notice changes around the age of 12 or 13. All young people will experience puberty differently.

Physical changes

Both girls and boys:

- growth spurt
- weight increase
- pubic hair
- underarm hair
- face changes shape
- sweating increases
- skin becomes oilier
- acne may develop

Boys:

- chest and shoulders broaden
- body becomes more muscular
- penis and testicles enlarge and darken
- sperm is produced
- ejaculation occurs
- voice becomes deeper
- facial and chest hair develops

Girls:

- nipples enlarge and darken
- pelvis becomes wider
- vaginal discharge increases
- increase of fat on breasts, hips and thighs
- breasts develop
- genitals become darker in colour
- ovulation begins, followed by menstruation (periods)

Important points to discuss

Periods

Most females menstruate about every 28 days and the period will last for approximately 3 to 7 days. This may vary from month to month. During the first year or two, a girl's period may be quite irregular.

It is difficult to tell exactly when a girl's first period will start. Before it happens most girls will experience increased vaginal discharge and other signs of physical development. As soon as the beginning of puberty is obvious she should keep a supply of pads and a change of pants in her school bag. Encourage her to practice wearing a pad before her periods begin.

There is no physical reason why a young girl cannot use tampons. However, using pads for the first few times at least will allow her to become familiar with the amount of blood loss. If she does choose to use tampons, it is important for her to use pads overnight to reduce the risk of toxic shock syndrome. Read the directions in the pack of tampons with her and encourage her to follow that advice.

Breast development – girls and boys

Some girls will feel soreness or tenderness as their breasts develop. This is due to growth and changing hormone levels. This is quite normal. Wearing a well-fitting bra may help. Some girls may notice one breast grows first, or is slightly larger. This is not unusual.

There is no 'right' age for a girl to start wearing a bra. Some girls wish to wear one quite early and begin with a 'crop top' or 'training' bra. Other girls may wish to wait and get a fitted, supporting bra.

Boys may also experience some breast development, but this will be temporary. Give reassurance that this will settle down as soon as his body adjusts to changing hormone levels. Until this happens he may wish to wear loose fitting shirts.

Acne

Pimples are caused when an oily substance called sebum blocks the pores or ducts of the skin. At puberty the amount of sebum increases, causing pimples to occur in varying degrees of severity. It is a myth that pimples are caused by eating sweet or fatty foods. Severe acne is more common in males than females and is often an inherited condition. Even a very mild case of acne can cause a young person to be self-conscious, so take their concerns seriously.

To prevent or treat pimples, wash the face with warm water and a mild soap twice a day and gently dry. Hair should be kept clean and away from the face. Avoid harsh scrubbing, steam treatments and moisturisers. Squeezing pimples or blackheads can cause scarring and increase the risk of infection. Severe acne should be assessed by a general practitioner or dermatologist.

Wet dreams

A wet dream occurs when a male ejaculates semen while asleep. It happens in response to the body producing sperm. Usually when a boy has a wet dream he will also experience pleasurable feelings. All boys will have a wet dream at some stage, with most beginning about 13 or 14 years. It may only happen occasionally or it may be quite frequent.

Boys need to be reassured that wet dreams are normal. The amount of semen is only about 5 mls (1 teaspoon), so it won't make much of a mess and can be easily cleaned up with a wet cloth, tissues or by washing pyjamas or sheets.

Erections

When a boy reaches puberty he will experience more frequent erections. Sometimes this may happen for no apparent reason and at an inappropriate time or place. He may find this very embarrassing, but it is unlikely that anyone else will notice.



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The best way to make erections go away is for him to think of something boring. He may wish to wear clothes that make erections less noticeable such as board shorts over his swimming togs and well-fitting jeans instead of track pants.

Voice changes

When a boy goes through puberty his larynx grows and his voice becomes deeper. This change can be very gradual or it can happen quickly. The boy's voice may 'crack'. If this bothers him, suggest he try to speak in a low, even tone and try to avoid 'excited' high notes. Girls' voices also change, but less so and it is rarely noticeable.

Weight gain and body image

Both boys and girls may experience weight gain around the time of puberty. With so many media messages telling young people that they should be thin or muscular, it is not surprising that many young people develop unrealistic expectations about what a healthy body looks like.

To encourage a positive body image you can:

- Encourage them to feel proud of themselves as a whole person, not just for their physical appearance.
- Challenge messages on television or magazines that present unrealistic body shapes or encourage unnecessary dieting.
- Be aware of yourself as a role model and try not to criticise your own appearance or the appearance of others.

Social and emotional changes

Towards independence

Puberty will also affect the way young people think, feel and act. Their relationship with you will change as they move from being a dependent child to an independent adult. This is a normal and important stage of development.

They may start to spend more time with their friends and less with their family and when they are at home, spend more time in private. Of course this doesn't mean they don't need you or love you less. They will still need your guidance as they begin to make rules and decisions for themselves. The difficulty for many parents is finding a balance between allowing more freedom while still offering guidance and direction.

It is not unusual for children and parents/carers to disagree. The child's ability to analyse and reason is developing, so arguing with you is one way of testing these new skills. Stay calm and hear their concerns before discussing your point of view.

Mood swings caused by hormonal changes are also common. Their peer group is becoming more important and they may be feeling pressure to do as their friends are doing or wear what 'everyone' is wearing. When you do disagree, explain why you have made your decision and what your concerns are. Be prepared to compromise.

Developing sexual feelings

Relationships

It is common for young people to develop strong feelings for people of the other sex, the same sex, or both. Having these feelings is a healthy way for young people to learn about relationships and sexuality.



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These can be short-lived crushes, which may or may not extend to more serious relationships as adolescence progresses. Everyone is different. Some people form committed relationships very early, while others show little or no interest until later.

Masturbation

For many young people, masturbation is their first experience of sexual activity. Nearly all boys and many girls masturbate at some time during adolescence. Some only masturbate occasionally, while for others it is a regular activity. An adolescent's sex drive can be very strong. Masturbation is one way of gaining sexual pleasure and releasing sexual tension without the risks associated with early sexual intercourse. Masturbation is healthy as long as it happens in private and without feelings of guilt.

How to encourage healthy attitudes and behaviours

- Be open with the child from an early age and provide lots of information.
- Provide books about puberty, and then follow up by discussing the information.
- Share your own experiences, particularly those that were positive.
- Reassure them that the changes are normal.
- If they are an early or late developer, encourage them to accept that the way they are experiencing puberty is right for them.

- Discuss 'What if ...' scenarios with the child, such as 'What would you do if you got your period in class time', or 'What if you don't have a pad or tampon in your bag', or 'What if you experienced an erection while you were coming home on the bus'. Then think of possible actions together.
- Respect their privacy and allow them time alone.
- Discuss your values and beliefs with them.
- Remind the young person that they should never feel pressured into doing anything they are not ready for and discuss other people's right to say no as well.
- Ensure you provide accurate information about contraception and safe sex practices.

Where do I go for more information about sexuality education?

For further reading about parents and children, visit www.fpq.com.au for reference to FPQ's book catalogue and parent education factsheets – *Communicating About Sexuality with Children and Sexual Development in Early Childhood*.

Disclaimer

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