

Supporting your Child to go through Puberty: Things to Consider



Going through puberty is a difficult time for any young person. Young people with additional needs may find it even more difficult for many different reasons. It can be confusing and frightening as their bodies and feelings start to change, particularly if they aren't prepared.

Young people need support as they're going through these changes and the best people to support them are the close adults around them. Here's a few thoughts about what you can do to help your child.

Prepare:

Most children will have had some lessons about puberty during their later primary school years (around the age of 10 or 11yrs). They may discuss changes with their friends, learn from older siblings or from the media.

Your child may have missed out on some of this formal and informal learning, but it's important to start introducing the idea of body changes to your child before they reach puberty.

Think about the following:

- Your child may need every aspect of puberty changes explained to them explicitly, in detail and repeatedly. They may find pictures helpful. If your child is worried, think about how they will let you know.
- Learning about puberty, private body parts, body fluids, sexual feelings and thoughts is normal. Don't be worried that you are going to harm your child by teaching them about these things. What is important is **how** you teach your child and **when** you teach them.
- Be creative, playful, and relaxed when talking about bodies. This shouldn't be a scary subject but should be something that your child feels is ok to discuss with someone who is safe. Going through pubescent changes may be worrying and embarrassing for your child, and for you – it's perfectly normal to find this difficult.
- Help your child to understand rules and boundaries from the start. Who can your child talk to about this subject (parents, carers, teachers), and who shouldn't they talk to (the bus driver, shop keeper). Think about rules about self-touch, showing parts of their bodies etc.
- If your child has online access and they are able to look things up independently, then you will need to think about safety around this.
- One idea may be to find a safe website that your child can access when they want to think about their body, so that they will not attempt to explore unknown websites.



As your Child goes through Puberty:

Your child's body has started to change, what is important?

- Does your child understand what is happening and do they feel ok about it? (Some children may struggle to get used to big changes in their bodies such as the emergence of hair or genital changes).
- Do you need to alter some of the routines or normal practices for your child, now that they are getting older? (Do you need to think about ways to keep your child's modesty when they have doctor's appointments or when they are getting washed, for example).
- How does your child communicate their wishes and feelings to you and to other adults who care for them? Helping your child to understand that they may feel differently, that their likes and dislikes may change, that they may experience some sad and different feelings, is important.
- Your child may start to fancy other children or adults. They may start to have 'sexual' reactions in their bodies (erections, wet dreams, wet vagina), and they may wish to touch their own genitals to feel nice. Set some rules around this, it's not always appropriate, but do allow your child the opportunity to explore their body if possible. It's ok to find this part of development difficult as a parent. See if you can talk to other parents who have been through similar experiences – how did they cope with it?



Relationships

- It is usual for adolescents to value spending time with their friends over their family. Consider whether it's possible to enable your child to have time with other young people in a safe but fun environment. This may help your child to learn social skills away from their parent.
- Does your child want to have a girlfriend/boyfriend? Consider what this means for your child, but don't rule it out altogether. This may mean different things to each young person, and it doesn't always equate to wishing to have a sexual relationship. It may be that your child wants to feel like other young people, they may want to feel that they are attractive.
- As your child develops through puberty, they may wish to start having sexual relationships. Their bodies may be ready before they are emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively ready for sex. Conversely, they may be thinking about sex, but their bodies may not be able to do what they wish. It is important that you do not rule out that your teenage child may think about and desire sex, and they may need help to understand what this is, and how to navigate this new life stage. It may be that your child does not wish to talk to you about it. Think about whether there is someone else (less embarrassing!) that your child can talk to.
- If your child is able to access online independently then they may find that they can connect with others (and others to them) through many different sites and apps, including social media, gaming, and video apps. It is very difficult to know who a friend is, and who isn't, online. If your child struggles to make friends offline then they may find it easier online, but this can make them vulnerable as well. They may need your help to navigate and learn about the digital world and rules connected to friends, relationships, bodies, and sex online. It may be useful to get to know a little about the digital world if you are not familiar, so that you can help your child.