

Supporting neurodivergent youth through puberty

A guide for parents and carers

This guide is designed to support families to understand puberty in neurodivergent children, identify potential concerns early, and facilitate positive, developmentally appropriate conversations. While puberty is a universal developmental process, neurodivergent children often require more explicit teaching, visual supports, repeated learning opportunities, and individualized strategies to navigate the physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and sensory changes that occur.

What is puberty?

Puberty is a developmental period during which a child's body, brain, emotions, relationships, and sense of identity mature toward adulthood.

Talking about changes

The changes that occur during puberty between males and females are very different in some areas, however in others they are very similar! It is important to identify with your young person that every child goes through this stage of life, and that you yourself went through this. Reassuring them that this is normal, and feeling confident to have open and honest conversations about puberty will provide some level of comfort.

Female

- Menstruation
- Breast growth
- Increased body hair
- Pubic Hair
- Underarm hair
- Height increases
- Increased body odour
- Hips widen

Male

- Testes increase to volume of 4ml
- Height increase
- Pubic hair
- Increased body hair
- Increased body odour
- Underarm hair
- Voice deepens
- Penis enlarges



When does puberty typically start?

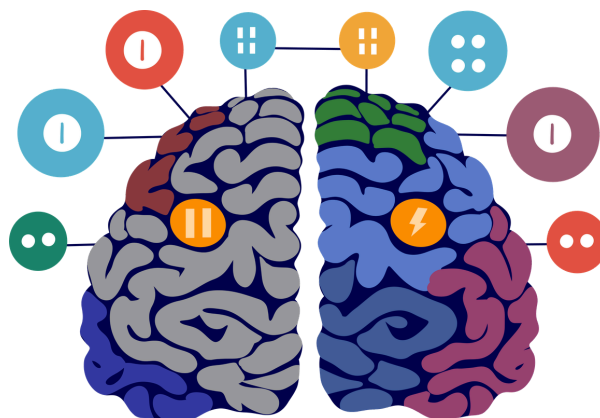
- It is important to remember that there is a wide range of 'typical'.
- The sequence of changes is generally more important than the exact age at which they occur.
- **Girls:** Puberty typically begins between 8 and 13 years of age. The average age of onset is approximately 10-11 years.
- **Boys:** Puberty typically begins between 9 and 14 years of age. The average age of onset is approximately 11-12 years.

Why puberty can be more challenging for neurodivergent children

- Puberty is often discussed as a physical process. However, many challenges experienced by neurodivergent young people during puberty relate to the additional demands placed on executive functioning, emotional regulation, social participation, self-awareness, and independence.

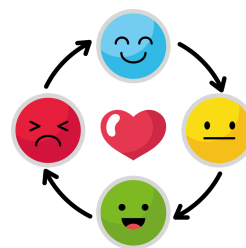
Executive functioning challenges

- Puberty brings many new expectations for young people, including managing personal hygiene and self-care routines more independently.
- Young people are often expected to remember daily hygiene tasks such as showering regularly, applying deodorant, changing clothes when appropriate, monitoring body odour, and maintaining grooming routines.
- They may also need to organise personal care items, pack hygiene products when away from home, and, for those who menstruate, manage menstrual care independently.
- These tasks rely heavily on executive functioning skills such as planning, organisation, memory, self-monitoring, and task initiation.
- For children with conditions such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual Disability, or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), these skills may not develop automatically. As a result, they often benefit from explicit teaching, visual supports, checklists, schedules, and consistent routines to successfully learn and manage the increased self-care demands associated with puberty.



Emotional regulation challenges

- Alongside the physical changes of puberty, young people experience significant changes in brain development and hormone levels that can influence how they experience, express, and manage emotions.
- They may find it more difficult to recognise and understand their feelings, cope with frustration, think before acting, or independently use strategies to calm themselves when upset.
- As a result, parents and caregivers may observe more intense emotional responses, including increased irritability, worry, emotional outbursts, withdrawal, or periods of feeling overwhelmed.
- Some adolescents may also become less resilient when faced with everyday challenges, have difficulty recovering after setbacks, or show reluctance to participate in previously manageable activities such as attending school, as is common for many neurodivergent young people.
- Supporting emotional literacy, problem-solving skills, and healthy coping strategies can help young people navigate these changes and build confidence in managing their emotional wellbeing.



Social challenges

- As children move through puberty, their social world often becomes more complex. They begin to navigate new experiences such as developing romantic interests, understanding attraction, managing peer pressure, and coping with increased awareness of body image and social comparison.
- The growing influence of social media can further shape how young people perceive themselves and interact with others, sometimes creating additional pressure to fit in or meet perceived social expectations.
- For some neurodivergent adolescents, understanding these social changes can be particularly challenging. They may have difficulty interpreting social cues, recognising unspoken social rules, understanding the intentions of others, or adapting to changes within friendship groups.
- Some young people may also find concepts such as attraction, dating, and relationships confusing, which can increase their vulnerability to manipulation, exploitation, or unhealthy relationships.
- Open communication, explicit discussions about relationships and boundaries, and ongoing support to develop social understanding can help adolescents navigate these emerging social experiences with greater confidence and safety.

Interoception challenges

- Interoception refers to the ability to notice and interpret internal body signals, such as physical sensations, bodily needs, and emotional states.
- During puberty, many changes occur within the body that require increased awareness of these internal cues.
- Some neurodivergent children may find it difficult to recognise signs such as the onset of menstruation, body odour, erections, wet dreams, hunger, thirst, fatigue, or the physical sensations associated with different emotions.
- As a result, they may not automatically notice when action is needed or may struggle to understand what their body is communicating to them.
- Providing clear explanations about expected physical changes, discussing how these experiences may feel, and teaching body awareness skills can support young people to better understand and respond to their changing bodies.



Identity and self esteem challenges

- Puberty is a time when many young people become increasingly aware of themselves in relation to their peers.
- As social and physical development progresses, some children may begin to recognise differences in how they communicate, build friendships, navigate social situations, or experience physical and emotional changes.
- This growing self-awareness can sometimes contribute to feelings of self-doubt, particularly when young people perceive themselves as different from those around them.
- For some adolescents, these experiences may impact confidence, emotional wellbeing, and participation in school or social activities.
- Others may attempt to hide or mask their difficulties in order to fit in with peers, which can be emotionally exhausting over time. Encouraging a positive sense of identity, celebrating individual strengths, and fostering accepting and supportive environments can help young people develop resilience and maintain positive self-esteem throughout puberty.



When should I start talking to my child about puberty?

Recommended Timeline

Ages 6-8 years or earlier!

- Learn accurate names for body parts.
- Discuss private versus public body parts.
- Teach consent and body safety.
- Introduce basic concepts about body growth.

Ages 8-10 years

- Begin discussing puberty before changes occur.
- Introduce menstruation and erections factually.
- Discuss hygiene routines.
- Prepare for emotional changes.

Ages 10-12 years

- More detailed discussions.
- Explain sexual development.
- Discuss friendships and peer pressure.
- Address online safety.

Teen Years

- Continue conversations regularly.
- Discuss relationships.
- Expand conversations around consent.
- Support self-advocacy and independence.

Red flags - When to seek medical advice

Girls

- Persistent fatigue
- Excessive weight changes
- Severe acne
- Abnormal growth patterns
- Extreme mood disturbances
- Self-harm concerns
- Significant depression or anxiety
- Genital redness or pain
- No breast development by age 13yrs
- No menstruation by 15yrs
- Breast budding before 8yrs
- Heavy periods and significant period pain
- Social difficulties
- Any other developmental concerns

Boys

- Persistent fatigue
- Excessive weight changes
- Severe acne
- Abnormal growth patterns
- Extreme mood disturbances
- Self-harm concerns
- Significant depression or anxiety
- Genital redness or pain
- Undescended testicles in boys
- Breast development in boys
- No testicular enlargement by 14yrs in boys
- Penis significantly smaller than expected for age
- Firm, small testes
- Non-retractile foreskin after 5yrs
- Social difficulties
- Swollen painful foreskin
- Any other developmental concerns



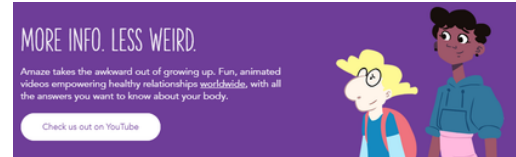
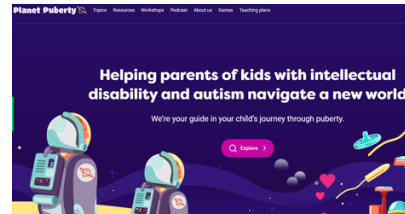


How to talk to your child about puberty

- Talking to your child about puberty is one of the best ways to help them feel prepared, confident, and safe as they grow.
- Rather than having one large "puberty talk," aim for many small conversations over time. Starting discussions before physical changes occur helps prevent fear and confusion and allows your child to learn about puberty gradually.
- Remember that puberty and reproduction do not need to be discussed all at once. Focus on what is relevant to your child at their current stage of development. Information delivered in smaller, ongoing conversations is often easier for children, particularly neurodivergent children, to understand and retain.
- When discussing puberty, use clear, factual language and correct anatomical terms. Words such as penis, vulva, vagina, breasts, testicles, pubic hair, and menstruation help normalise conversations about the body and support body safety, self-advocacy, and communication with health professionals. Avoid nicknames, vague explanations, or euphemisms that may create confusion.
- For neurodivergent children, concrete explanations are often easier to understand. For example, instead of saying, "One day you'll become a young woman," try explaining, "As your body grows, you will notice changes such as breast development, body hair, and periods. We will learn about these changes together before they happen."
- It is equally important to follow your child's lead and encourage questions. When your child asks a question, answer the specific question being asked rather than providing too much additional information. This helps prevent children from becoming overwhelmed and allows them to learn at a pace that feels comfortable. If you do not know the answer, it is perfectly acceptable to say, "That's a great question. Let me think about it and come back to you," or "Let's find out together." Children should know that no question is embarrassing, that everybody develops differently, and that they can come to you whenever they have concerns or need support.
- Many neurodivergent children benefit from visual supports to help them understand puberty-related concepts. Books, social stories, diagrams, videos, visual schedules, and checklists can make information more accessible and predictable. Parents should review resources beforehand to ensure they are appropriate for their child's developmental level and communication needs. We've included some recommendations on the next page.
- Conversations should also include explicit teaching about privacy, personal boundaries, consent, self-care routines, and online safety, as these skills are often not learned incidentally.
- Most importantly, your child does not need you to be a puberty expert. They simply need to know that you are willing to listen, answer questions honestly, and support them throughout the process.

Useful websites

- www.planetpuberty.org.au
- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/puberty-sexual-development/puberty-helping-your-child>
- <https://secca.org.au/>
- https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Periods/
- <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/navigating-puberty-sexual-development>
- Amaze.org



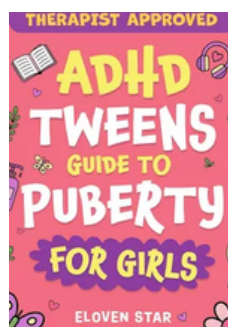
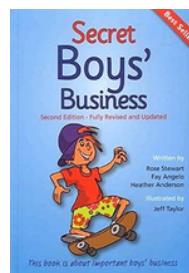
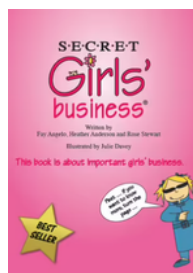
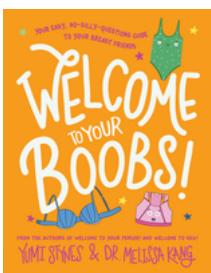
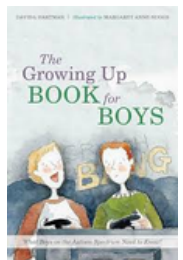
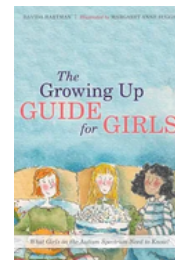
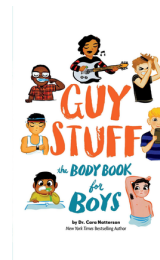
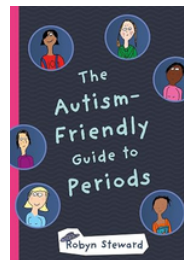
Free Book

Introduction to Consent

A free book about consent for people of all ages and abilities.



Useful books



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