

Changes at puberty

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A guide for parents and carers
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PUBERTY

Pūhuruhurutanga

This resource has been designed as a practical tool around all things ‘puberty’ for parents and caregivers of a disabled child.

It is intended to educate and empower you and your family by suggesting some important topics to cover and giving some examples of how to go about it. Puberty is however different for each child, especially with a disability thrown into the mix. If you would like more specific information about a certain topic and how it relates to your child’s disability, feel free to contact us at Parent to Parent for more tailored, free information. Parent to Parent 0508 236 236 or email national@parent2parent.org.nz

A note on language throughout this document

We use the term female/girl to refer to people assigned female at birth, and male/boy to refer to people assigned male at birth.

WHAT IS PUBERTY

pūhuruhurutanga?

Puberty is the period of time when children begin to change and grow into adults. There is no consistent age for when puberty begins.

For some, changes may begin as young as eight years old, but for others it may not start until they are 12 or 13. Children with intellectual or developmental disabilities typically start puberty around the same time as other children their age, although some children (e.g., boys with cerebral palsy) may experience an early or 'precocious' puberty.

For girls, the average age to start puberty is usually 10 or 11, but it can happen anywhere from 8 to 13.

For boys, the average age is usually 11 or 12, but it can be anywhere from 10 to 15 years old.

Puberty/pūhuruhurutanga can be a tough time for disabled kids and parents and caregivers alike. The physical and emotional changes your children go through can be tumultuous, and it can be awkward and challenging for you as a parent/caregiver to discuss these things with them, but it helps to be prepared.

TALKING ABOUT PUBERTY/PŪHURUHURUTANGA

Below are our top tips for explaining puberty to your child and the changes, both physical and emotional, they will experience as they begin to grow into adults.

START EARLY

It is important to talk to your children about the changes they will go through before they start to happen, so they know what to expect and are not afraid. Some children may be inquisitive and come to you with questions, but others

may not be which is why it pays to be proactive. Additionally, there is a lot of misinformation out there and it is better that your child gets correct information from someone they trust rather than from their friends or the internet.

IT'S NOT 'THE TALK', IT'S AN ONGOING CONVERSATION

As mentioned previously, puberty can be an awkward thing for parents to talk about with their children and as a result, they often try to



have one big conversation about it and then never raise the topic again. However, puberty is a big topic. Your child will be going through changes for years, and it is hard to cover everything at once. If your child has unique needs or trouble processing information, then trying to fit everything into a single talk might be a bit hard for them to comprehend and retain what you are telling them. Try to build talking about puberty into everyday conversation, this helps to normalise the changes that happen as we grow and develop. Let your children know that you are here for them and that you are open to answering any questions they have about this topic.

ACCURATELY TEACH BODY PARTS

Some families prefer to use their own slang terms for body parts when they are talking to their children about puberty, but this could run the risk of confusing your child if they are in a situation where those parts are referred to by different names. It is important to refer to these body parts – penis, vagina, testicles, nipples, etc. – by their correct names. This normalises them, because after all, they are simply parts of the body much like hands and feet are. There is also some research that shows when children have accurate language to describe their private areas, they are more likely to report if they have been sexually abused.

USE SUPPORT AIDS

You know best about your child's needs and how they best learn new information. Try and talk about puberty in ways that are tailored to their strengths and difficulties. Using picture books or other visual supports may help some children, while using short stories to illustrate what you are trying to teach may help others. There are lots of books and resources that can help you with this. Don't be afraid to adapt existing puberty resources and supports to best fit them to your child's learning style. For tailored puberty resources contact your local Parent to Parent office.

LESSON PLAN

It might be worthwhile contacting your child's school to discuss their puberty and sexual education curriculum, as well as your child's needs around this area. Knowing what they will be learning about at school can help you plan your own talk with them accordingly.



GENERAL PUBERTY

changes

The changes of puberty are driven by hormones which are different for boys and girls. Some changes are similar for both.

Everyone who goes through puberty will:

- Get taller and heavier
- Sweat more and probably need to start wearing deodorant
- Get oilier skin which can lead to pimples or acne for some people
- Develop pubic hair around their genitals and buttocks, as well as hair on their underarms, legs, and arms

GENERAL HYGIENE

Creating good hygiene habits is especially important during puberty due to the changes to our body such as sweating more, body odour, and having oilier skin and hair.

Tips for creating a good hygiene routine with your child include:

- **Schedule.** Making a schedule can help remind your child what tasks to do and how often. Some children work better with visual materials, so try creating a picture book with them. Having pictures of the supplies they need, as well as of the steps in which to use them can be helpful. This could be laminated and kept in the bathroom as a reminder. Discuss when hygiene tasks should be carried out and how often they need to be done.

For example:

- ▶ Brushing teeth – twice daily
- ▶ Shower/bathing – daily
- ▶ Hair washing – twice weekly
- ▶ Changing underwear – daily

Social stories can be tailored to teaching specific hygiene tasks. There are also different apps and technologies that can be used for reminders.

- **Hygiene kits.** Creating hygiene kits for different personal hygiene tasks or for different times of the day can help children establish a routine and helps to foster a sense of independence. For example, a morning routine kit could include a box kept in the bathroom with face wash, body wash, toothbrush and tooth paste, hair brush and deodorant. Involving your child in creating these kits helps to establish a sense of ownership and responsibility.
- **Consider sensitivities.** Work around your child's sensitivities. If they don't like a particular soap or shampoo because of the scent, try another. Try liquid soap instead of bar soap, try baths instead of showers, soft sponges or cloths instead of washing with their hands and so forth.

- **Use visuals.** Visuals such as checklists and stories can help remind your child about what steps they need to follow and why it is important to do so.
- **Make it fun.** Try to include a sense of fun where you can with these tasks. For example, using music during shower or bath times. Or taking pictures of each family member when they first wake up (with messy hair and pajamas on), and then another set of pictures when they are dressed and ready for the day. Talk about the differences between the pictures together and why it might not be reasonable for someone to go out looking like they have in the first picture.

Some tips in dealing with acne include:

- Washing the face at least once a day with a gentle face wash.
 - ▶ For severe acne you may need to speak to your GP about medicated face and body washes
- Encourage your child not to pop or squeeze any pimples, this can lead to infections or scarring
- Try using products made to help clear up acne, such as something with salicylic acid, benzoyl peroxide or tea tree oil
- If your child has severe, constant acne that is not going away, speaking to a GP is a good idea. In some cases, girls may be prescribed the oral contraceptive pill to help combat acne problems

ACNE/PIMPLES

Acne can be a real problem area for some children and teenagers. Acne and pimples occur because of the hormone changes experienced during puberty and the increase in oil levels in the skin. Acne is usually found on the face, neck, upper back, shoulders, or buttocks.



BODY HAIR AND SHAVING

Teaching children about where they will begin to grow body hair during puberty helps to prepare them for the change. Some children/teenagers may decide they want to shave or remove this hair. Boys especially, may feel uncomfortable with facial hair and may prefer this removed.

Some tips around shaving and hair removal include:

- Safety first – consider your child’s range of motion and motor skills as to whether you teach them to use a razor, or whether you need to look into alternative options
- Type of tool – some children may not be able to safely use traditional razors, electric shavers can be a safer option
- Model the behaviour – let your child watch you or an older sibling shaving, and list the steps as you go through them. Taking pictures of each step to use as visual prompts can help
- Involve your child – even if your child is not able to shave without assistance, include them as much as you can in the process. Maybe they could gather the products needed for shaving, or apply the shaving cream etc



MASTURBATION

Masturbation can often be a difficult topic for parents to discuss with their children. The important thing to remember here is that it is a normal part of growing up, but it needs to be done in a private place.

Instead of focusing your attention on preventing your child from masturbating, try to teach them where and when it is appropriate to do so (see public vs private behaviour).

Explain to your child about where and when masturbation is appropriate, and how they can clean up afterwards.

If your child is touching their genitals in public or at times when it is inappropriate redirecting with minimal attention is best. Use visual cues or simple phrases to signal to your child that the behaviour should stop, e.g., “hands out of pants, that is private behaviour”.

You may need to consider scheduling ‘private time’ in their bedroom or as part of shower time to give clear times of when this behaviour may be performed. Teach and respect their privacy, e.g., by knocking on their door before entering the bedroom or bathroom.

PUBLIC VS PRIVATE BEHAVIOUR

There is nothing shameful about having a penis or a vagina or nipples, but it is also important to explain to your children that these parts are ‘private.’ There are certain circumstances where it is okay to show these or to be naked, like during bath/shower time, at the doctors if something is wrong, alone in their room, and later in life with a consensual sexual partner if/when that time comes.

However, it is important that your child knows that it is inappropriate to expose their genitals or buttocks to other people, such as in public settings like at school or in the shopping centre. It is also not okay to touch their private body parts around other people. If they need to touch their private body parts for a particular reason, e.g., adjusting their underwear, they can do so in a private area like the bathroom.

- Make it into a game! Come up with a list of public and private settings to practice with, e.g., the living room, the classroom, the shopping centre, and the bathroom at home. Using picture cards also works well.
- Try and think of some behaviours that are acceptable in the different settings together.
- Test your children afterwards!
- Public vs private applies to conversations too! Let them know that certain things are not okay to talk about in public
- Don’t forget about talking about closing toilet doors in public bathrooms, or closing bedroom doors when they are getting changed.

CONSENT

As your children begin puberty it is always good to make sure they are aware of consent, both their own and of others. Let them know they should always ask if it is okay before giving someone a hug or kiss or touching them in general. It is also okay to not be comfortable with other people touching you, and that you can say no at any time.

There are lots of great books resources that can help you explain consent to your child, contact Parent to Parent if you would like more information about these.

MALE PUBERTY

The main sex hormone for boys is testosterone which increases during puberty.

High enough testosterone levels during puberty cause:

- Facial hair to develop and body hair to thicken
- The chest and shoulders broaden and may also grow hair
- Voice begins to deepen, and there will be periods of time during puberty where the voice can get croaky or squeaky
- The penis grows larger and the testicles descend
- The production of sperm begins, and things like spontaneous erections and nocturnal emissions (wet dreams) are likely to also start

ERECTIONS

During puberty, teenage boys will often get erections without a reason. Sometimes this can happen in public which can feel embarrassing, especially because it is not always in your son's control. Erections are what we call a private behaviour (see public vs private behaviour). While erections are a normal part of development, they are something that shouldn't be drawn attention to in public.

Teach your child that erections go away eventually. So, if they occur in public they could:

- Stay seated and wait for the erection to stop
- Tie a jacket around their waist to obscure the area

- Take themselves to the bathroom and wait for the erection to stop

Remind them that if they have questions, they can talk to you, a trusted friend or family member or their doctor about this.

NOCTURNAL EMISSIONS (WET DREAMS)

A wet dream occurs when a male teenager gets an erection in the middle of the night and a small amount of fluid (semen) comes out of their penis.

Tips for preparing your child for nocturnal emissions include:

- Explaining to your child that this is normal and that there is nothing to be embarrassed by
- Wet dreams do not necessarily have to be 'sexual' in nature. They are a normal part of getting the body to release excess semen that the testicles have stored up.
- Plan with your child what to do when this happens. Be specific in your communication. E.g., you need to change your clothes, and your bedsheets (use visuals if that helps)
- You could use this as an opportunity to encourage some independence in dealing with the discharge that comes with a nocturnal emission, e.g., encouraging them to change or wash their sheets and underwear the morning after.

FEMALE PUBERTY

The main sex hormones for girls are oestrogen and progesterone.

Oestrogen is responsible for:

- Breast growth
- The redistribution of body fat to the waist, hip, and buttock area which makes them look larger and more defined
- Beginning of the menstrual cycle
- Vaginal growth
- Vaginal discharge

INTRODUCING BRAS

Wearing a bra can be an uncomfortable experience at first, so you may need to build your child up to wearing a bra. Start with getting your child used to wearing singlets and camisoles or training bras under their clothes. Comfort is important. Consider different fabrics and ones that don't feel scratchy on the skin. Where possible, avoid bras with underwires. You may also want to look at bras that do up at the front rather than the back to make it easier for your child to get dressed independently.

PERIODS

Menstruation can happen for girls anytime from the age of 8 or 9, so it pays to start talking about this topic early. Explaining why and how

periods happen can be helpful, but if your child with an intellectual disability is having trouble understanding, the main thing to make sure they understand is that they will bleed for a short time each month (5-10 days) and that it doesn't mean they are sick or hurt. It means they have a healthy body, and that's good.

It is important to normalise periods. Most girls will have periods and it is a normal part of growing up. Use everyday opportunities to start talking about this topic. E.g., when you see a commercial on TV for pads and tampons or period underwear.

Tips for managing periods:

- Let your child know that they will need to use hygiene products such as menstrual pads or period undies to absorb their period blood.
- If your daughter is getting close to puberty age and hasn't had her period yet, it could be a good idea to start practice early, so she is used to wearing menstrual products and the routine around it. Try out different options and different brands; one may be more comfortable for your daughter than the other.

- Teach your child the routine of changing a pad, how often this needs to be done (e.g., every 3-4 hours) and how to discard them safely and discretely. They should not be flushed down the toilet. Social stories can help with explaining this.
- Talk about the other physical and emotional symptoms they may experience, e.g., cramping in their stomach, or feeling more emotional and grumpier than usual. Use pictured pain scales so your child can easily communicate period pain to you.
- Make sure to have supplies on hand for menstruation and let your child know where to find them and how to use them. Pads and period underwear are probably the best option to begin with, but you can also discuss tampons or menstrual cups with them either at the time, or when they are a bit older.
- Help your child to track their menstrual cycle so you are both prepared for when it is expected.

Often when girls first start menstruating their cycle can be a bit irregular, this is normal, and it will eventually become more regular.

- As with other sections, don't be afraid to use visual supports!

VAGINAL HYGIENE

Girls also experience some clear or white discharge from their vagina beginning in puberty; this is normal and part of the body's natural cleaning process.

- Make sure your child knows to stick to using water or a pH-neutral product when cleaning this area. Help them pick out something from the supermarket that looks safe.

It is normal for the vagina to have an odour, which can change throughout the reproductive cycle. If your child is worried about the way their vagina smells, or if they have noticed an unpleasant change in odour, then consult with your GP as this may be the result of an infection.



EMOTIONAL CHANGES

during puberty

Much focus is put on the physical changes of puberty, but it is also important to remember to talk about the emotional changes that come with an influx of hormones. Children may become more self-conscious about their body; they may experience intense mood swings from very upset to happy to angry and there can be an increased focus on peer relationships.

Giving your child space when they need it, but also making sure the home is a safe space and that they can come to you if they want is very important. Discuss a list of people that your child could talk to if they have questions or worries.

For example, an older sibling, an aunty or uncle, or a trusted family friend.

If your child is non-verbal, finding resources to help them to communicate how they're feeling or if they would like some alone time is important.

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For more information about anything listed in this resource, or for more tailored information for your situation, contact your local Parent to Parent Regional Coordinator via our website [here](#).

Alternatively, you can reach us at our National Office on 0508 236 236



HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **FAMILY PLANNING – ALL ABOUT GROWING UP RESOURCE**

www.familyplanning.org.nz

- **THE GROWING UP BOOK FOR BOYS – EXPLAINS FACTS ABOUT PUBERTY FOR BOYS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM**

www.bookdepository.com/Growing-Up-Book-for-Boys-Davida-Hartman/

- **THE GROWING UP BOOK FOR GIRLS – EXPLAINS FACTS ABOUT PUBERTY FOR GIRLS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM**

www.bookdepository.com/Growing-Up-Guide-for-Girls-Davida-Hartman/

- **THE HEALTHY BODIES TOOLKIT FOR BOYS**

www.vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/files/HealthyBodies-Boys-web.pdf

- **THE HEALTHY BODIES TOOLKIT FOR GIRLS**

www.vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/files/HealthyBodies-Girls-web.pdf



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