
Parenting children through puberty

Summary

- Puberty is a time of great change for your child – and for you as a parent too.
 - You can help your child by arming yourself with information, being reassuring, role-modelling body acceptance and a healthy lifestyle, and respecting your child's need for more privacy.
 - Take practical steps to support your child through their bodily changes.
 - Look after your own needs too. Talking to professionals or friends and family may help.
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Puberty brings lots of changes for your child – and for you as a parent too. Your child is transitioning from child to adult, and you may feel uncertain about how best to support them through the physical, psychological and emotional changes this brings.

Never fear, there's plenty you can do to help your child. One of the best ways is to just be reassuring.

Puberty is simply a series of natural changes that every child goes through. Some kids struggle with the changes, while others sail through puberty without concern. Only a small percentage of children experience extreme turmoil during this phase of their development.

Puberty can also be exciting and special, and as your child's parent or carer, you're in the ideal position to help them through it.

What to expect during puberty

You can read more detailed articles on [puberty](#) and the [teenage years](#) in general, but this short summary gives you an idea of what to expect.

The changes of puberty are physical, sexual, social and emotional. Puberty starts when changes in your child's brain cause sex hormones to be released in the:

- ovaries (usually around age 10 or 11, but can range from 8 to 13 years), or
- testes (usually around age 11 to 13, but can range from 9 to 14 years).

You can't predict how long your child will go through puberty. It may be anywhere from 18 months up to 5 years. Genetic, nutritional and social factors determine when puberty starts and for how long it runs.

During puberty, most children will experience:

- oily skin (**acne** is possible)
- oily hair, possibly requiring frequent washing
- increased perspiration and body odour (frequent showering and deodorant help)
- a growth spurt (of around 11 cm a year in girls and up to 13 cm a year in boys). Teens continue to grow about 1–2 cm a year after this main growth spurt. Some body parts (such as head and hands) may grow faster than limbs and torso. The body eventually evens out.

Girls will experience:

- breast development and possible tenderness
 - a change in their figure, including widening of the hips
 - growth of pubic and underarm hair
 - the start of menstruation – periods may be irregular at first. Some discomfort, like headaches and stomach cramps, is normal but see your doctor if you have concerns
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- a clear or whitish vaginal discharge – this may occur before periods. See your doctor if your daughter experiences itching, pain or strong odour.

Boys will experience:

- growth of the penis and testes (testicles). Sometimes the growth of the testes is uneven (that is, one testis grows faster than the other). This is not something to worry about
- growth of pubic, underarm and facial hair
- the start of testosterone production, which stimulates the testes to produce sperm
- the start of erections and ejaculation
- growth of the larynx or voice box – the voice ‘breaks’ and eventually deepens. Voice variations are normal and will settle in time.

What to expect socially and emotionally

Mood changes and energy level variations are normal parts of puberty, as are swings between feeling independent and wanting parental support.

Your child will want to establish their own identity, which may include new friendships and experiences. If this happens, they will encounter challenges about how to manage current friendships. They may also start to explore their sexuality and may go on dates and start developing romantic relationships.

Puberty and adolescence is a time for children to become more independent (such as getting themselves to and from school). They may also be looking for more responsibility, such as taking on a leadership position at school, or finding a part-time job.

Your child may also be sensitive about how they look and their new body changes. Privacy and personal space may become very important to them. They may alternate between feeling self-conscious about themselves one day, to feeling ‘bullet proof’ the next.

These social and emotional changes show your child is forming their own identity and learning how to be an independent adult. They are developing their decision-making skills and learning to recognise and understand the consequences of their actions.

Teenagers and social media

Social media use is common among teenagers. It has a range of benefits (such as connecting with friends, feeling less isolated, exposure to new ideas) and risks (such as cyberbullying, sexting and spending too much time online) associated with its use.

ReachOut has helpful tips about [teenage social media use](#) and the eSafety Commissioner has developed an [online safety guide for parents and carers](#) in several languages.

Read more about [internet safety for children](#) on the Better Health Channel.

How you can support your child during puberty

One of the best strategies during your child’s puberty is reassurance. Explain that puberty is an exciting time that means adulthood is approaching.

Try to show compassion for the changes they’re experiencing and reassure them the changes are normal – and many will pass. Of course, if you’re concerned about your child’s development, talk to your healthcare professional.

Puberty is also a time when role-modelling body acceptance is really valuable. Your child will compare their body to those of their friends, and may feel worried about their own development. The best thing you can do is show understanding and explain bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Modelling a healthy lifestyle will also help your child.

Be accepting of your child’s need for privacy, and that your child may be exploring their body through masturbation. Always knock before entering their room.

If your child is early or late to puberty, be understanding and offer lots of reassurance and support. They may feel embarrassed but let them know everybody develops at their own pace.

You may also find it useful to keep the following tips in mind:

- Praise your teenager for their efforts, achievements and positive behaviour.
- Put yourself in your child's shoes, and try to see their behaviour for what it often is: your child struggling to become an individual.
- Try to stay calm during angry outbursts from your child. Wait for your child to cool down before talking about the problem.
- Stay interested and involved, and be available if your child wants to talk.
- Chat to your partner or other parents of teenagers. Sharing concerns and experiences can ease the load.
- Try to support your child in their self-expression, even if some of it seems odd to you, such as an extreme haircut or offbeat clothing choices.
- Try to tolerate long periods of time spent on personal care, such as hours in the bathroom, but chat to your child about reasonable family time limits.
- Talk to your child about any permanent changes they want to make to their body, such as tattoos and piercings, and discuss temporary alternatives, such as henna (removable) tattoos.
- If your child has acne, talk to them about how they feel about it. If it is bothering them, ask if they would like to see a doctor. Your doctor may refer your teenager to a skin specialist or dermatologist.

How you can support your daughter during puberty

Helping your daughter with firsts, such as being ready for her first period are really important. Discreetly pack some sanitary items in her schoolbag, and explain to her how to use them (for example, not sleeping with a tampon in place).

Be ready for period pain: a hot water bottle and pain relief from your doctor or pharmacist may help. Talk to your doctor if your daughter hasn't had her period by 16 or 17 years of age, or if her periods stop after they've started.

Remember, explain to your daughter that all these changes are natural and happen to every girl in her own time.

How you can support your son during puberty

Helping your son through puberty is mostly about reassurance. Reassure your son that testes develop unevenly, and it's common for one to be lower than the other. If your son's testes are very small or not both in the scrotum, see your GP.

You may also need to reassure your son that penis size does not affect sexual functioning, and that erect penises are usually very similar in size. Every boy develops in his own time. Ejaculating during sleep (sometimes called a wet dream) and spontaneous erections are both normal.

If your son experiences breast growth or tenderness, he may be concerned. Again, reassurance is the key. Any tenderness is likely to settle once his chest widens. If your son feels small or too thin for his age, reassure him he will grow in time.

Remember, you know your child best. If anything about their development concerns you, see your GP.

How to talk about puberty and body image

The best time to talk about puberty with your child is before it begins. Take an open and relaxed approach to chatting with your child.

Use the correct terms for body parts so your child learns the right words and is comfortable using them when talking about their body. They need to know their body parts are normal and natural, with words to match.

You may like to open a conversation by asking whether your child has learned about puberty at school and what they've been taught.

Convey facts in the conversation, such as 'Every kid goes through these changes, but not always at the same time. Have you noticed that?' And talk about your values too: for instance, you may choose to say that you think a behaviour such as masturbation is a normal way to handle sexual feelings.

Pick a time to talk when there are no distractions, and don't be worried if your child doesn't want to share everything with you. They may prefer to talk to your family doctor or a counsellor.

Kids Helpline has useful information about talking to young people about **puberty and body image**. You may choose to let your child read the Kids Helpline information on **body changes and sexuality**.

How to foster positive independence during puberty

It's normal for your child to want more independence – but still need your support – during puberty or teen years. They may take risks as they explore their boundaries.

As a parent, you may be worried about your child's safety, and find yourself arguing with them about their push for independence. Try to stay calm and work through the issues with your child. Communicate openly, and make sure your child knows you're there for them. Stay available, because being accessible is the best way to find out what your child is doing and to help keep them safe.

Talk to your child about making good decisions, and your family's values. Ask your child to tell you where they are and what they're doing.

How to look after yourself at this time

It's important that you look after yourself during this potentially challenging time in your child's development. Trust in your skills as a parent – and talk to others or read up on the subject so you feel confident in guiding your child through it.

Puberty is the beginning of your child's transformation into an adult. Take some time to accept that your child, and your role as parent and your family dynamic, is changing.

You may also need to accept that you won't have total control over your child's choices and life direction once they're a young adult. It may help to trust that you've done your best as a parent and trust in your young person. But if your child makes new friendships that lead to activities that concern you, such as violence or drug taking, you may feel particularly stressed. In these times it may be useful to seek the advice of a family counsellor or a service like **Relationships Australia** (which offers parenting advice as well as relationship education programs).

Stay available and caring. Let your child know you are there for them, no matter how old they are. Take some time for yourself to reduce stress, and look after your own needs if this time is particularly challenging.

Some tips for ways to take care of yourself are listed below.

- Prepare a weekly family plan, so you know what people are doing and where they need to be. Include some fun family rituals, like Saturday night cards, or maybe a weekly walk or bike ride. Don't forget to schedule some time for yourself.
- Nurture your relationship with your partner. Remember, they're facing many of the same challenges that you are. A regular date night in your family schedule can work wonders.
- Use your support networks, like grandparents, other family members and friends. What child (including your teenager) doesn't enjoy being spoiled by a doting grandparent? You could also share carpooling or supervision duties with friends.
- Ask the kids to help out with household chores. Your child will learn some new skills, gain some new responsibility, and it will lighten the load for you as parents and carers.
- Stay positive and keep things in perspective.

For an extra boost, you could try some meditation, yoga or deep breathing exercises. The Australian Government Department of Health has more **useful tips for dealing with adolescents and looking after yourself** during this development stage in your child's life.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Family Planning Victoria** – focuses on sexual and reproductive health care and education Tel. **1800 013 952**
- **Community health services**
- **Maternal and child health services**
- **Relationships Australia** provides counselling, mediation, family violence services, family dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally Tel. **1300 364 277**

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