PARENTS' & CAREGIVERS' GUIDE TO PUBERTY

This guide to puberty is aimed at parents and caregivers to help them understand what to expect when a child goes through puberty and how they can best help and support this process.

This booklet has been developed as part of the ‘Pathline: Exploring Pathways to Children and Young People’s Mental Health’ research network, whose aim is to better understand pathways to mental health outcomes from childhood to late adolescence and early adulthood.

For more information, you can find links to further resources at the end of this booklet.

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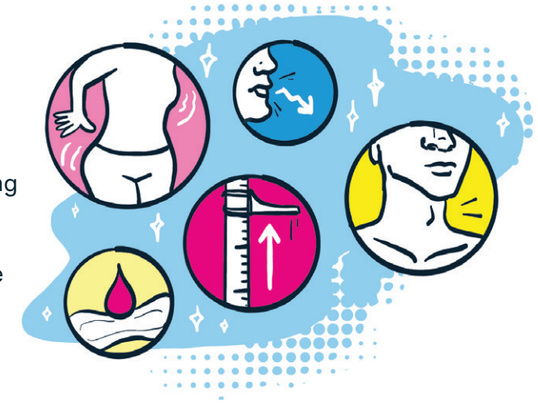
TIMING OF PUBERTY

When we talk about the timing of puberty, we’re referring to when things like the growth spurt, voice dropping, or periods starting. Like most things about human development, there’s a whole spectrum of age ranges when it comes to the timing of puberty.



Puberty is a process, not an event – it refers to the physical changes leading to our sexual maturity, when we become capable of reproduction.

While we often think of puberty and physical changes when we think about the teenage years, **adolescence** encompasses the **full spectrum of changes** which take us from childhood to adulthood. As well as physical changes of puberty, we develop competencies:

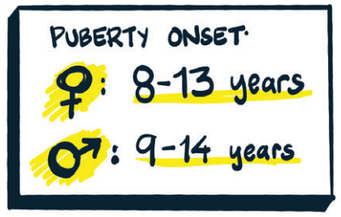
- **social** (the way we interact with each other)
- **cognitive** (the way we think and understand things)
- **emotional** (how we recognise and name our feelings)

Variation in when we start puberty is natural

As human beings, there can be a **variation of up to 4-5 years between our chronological age and our biological age** – this means your children can be fully physically and reproductively mature at 12 years old, for example, or still very much a child. **And both are normal!**

Variation between boys and girls is normal, with girls often starting puberty ahead of boys too

We know that there is also variation between boys and girls in terms of when they go through puberty. On average, girls tend to start the process of puberty ahead of boys. Puberty typically begins between ages 8 and 13 in girls and between ages 9 and 14 in boys.



COMMON QUESTIONS

Aren't young people today experiencing puberty earlier and earlier?

Although research suggests that puberty is happening earlier for girls now than in the past (1940-1994), **the age when girls in Europe get their first period has stayed pretty much the same** in recent years, with menstruation typically starting between ages 10 and 16. In the UK, according to the most recent reference data, the average age for starting periods is 12.9 years.

So how likely is it that my child will go through puberty earlier than average?

In a recent study on UK adolescents, around 1 in 10 girls aged 11 had already started their periods. There is a large inherited component at play here, so if you started puberty earlier, your child is more likely to.

Is this 'normal' and are there any disadvantages to my child?

While this variation in timing is not a reason for concern, we know that starting the process of puberty early can have an impact on how well equipped we feel to cope with those changes and what kinds of support we have access to.

It's normal during this time of change to experience challenges and it's likely that many young people will need additional support. Research suggests that this might be even more important for any young person who experiences **'off-time' puberty**. Those going through the pubertal transition ahead of or in delay of the majority of their peers, may need extra support and can be at higher risk of emotional distress and mental health challenges.

> ***'off-time' puberty***
>
> Going through the pubertal transition ahead of or in delay of the majority of their peers

Should I be worried if my daughter hasn't started her period by 16-17 years old? Or if her periods start and then stop again?

If your daughter hasn't had her period by 16 -17 years, or if they stopped after they started, seek advice from a healthcare professional.

> ***"Going through puberty feels much more distressing when we are developing slower or faster than our peers, resulting in us appearing different from them."***

THE SORTS OF THINGS THAT MIGHT HELP YOUNG PEOPLE INCLUDE...

> ***"Reassure us that there is nothing wrong with us and nothing to be ashamed of regarding the changes we're going through and the speed at which we are growing relative to our peers."***

> ***"Help us learn how to use sanitary items and provide us with varied sanitary options."***

> ***"Discuss gender stereotypes with us and talk to us about who our role models are and why."***

> ***"Reassure us about the changes we're going through, such as growing slower or quicker than our peers, or uneven growth of breasts or testes."***

FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS AROUND PUBERTY

Puberty can bring about **emotional changes and stress** for young people as they come to terms with their changing bodies.

The sorts of things which cause them to become worried or concerned are things like:

- Being different from their friends
- Voice changes
- Wet dreams and involuntary erections
- Breasts growing and changing
- Acne and skin changes
- Widening hips
- Growth spurts

During puberty, young people may experience several changes around feelings, emotions and moods.

"Our bodies are changing, and we are struggling to accept that."

"We often lash out at our parents due to stress because we are still learning to control our emotions, but we learn how to control them based on our parents' reactions to our outbursts."

WHAT TO EXPECT AS A PARENT

Mood and energy level changes

- Swings between feeling independent and wanting parental support
- Swings between feeling self-conscious about themselves to feeling really confident
- They are still learning how to control their emotions while so many physical and hormonal changes are occurring in their body

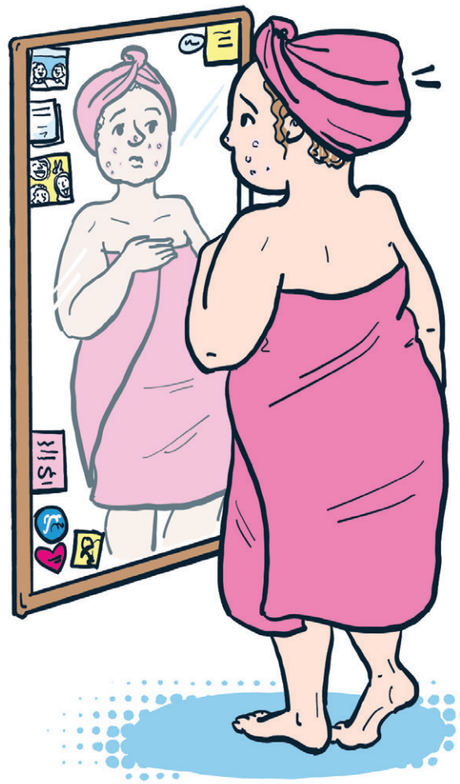
Identity development

- They are trying to establish their own identity so they might want to explore relationships outside of immediate family
- They will take more risks
- They might question parents' rules

BODY IMAGE

Body dissatisfaction is a normal feeling to have, especially during a time when their bodies are changing so much, but not when it leads to unhealthy diets and extreme exercise behaviours.

Half of all 11-16 year olds in the UK are worried about how they look. In fact, 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 4 boys would avoid taking part in physical education due to worries about their appearance.



What are the sorts of things you might notice if your teen is struggling with their body image?

- **Girls**: Unhappiness with changes to stomach, thighs, weight gain
- **Boys**: Wish they can gain more muscle and don't like feeling scrawny

Lots of things can impact the way young people see their bodies including:

- **Increased weight** due to hormones and pubertal development
- **Perceived pressure**
- **How parents talk about their own weight and modelling of dieting behaviour** - parents can affect their children's body image in both **direct ways** (comments or criticisms about weight and appearance) and more **indirect ways** (parental eating behaviours and attitudes toward their own bodies and appearance)
- **Teasing or comments from parents and peers about weight** - at least a quarter of young people reported that things their family said about their body caused them to worry about their body image
- **Internalisation of media stereotypes**

"Not being happy with the way we look may make us engage with unhealthy eating behaviours, feel sad and have low-mood and self-esteem."

"Sometimes we are so unhappy with our bodies that we would rather be alone and not seen by others."

SEX AND SEXUALITY

Talking about safe sex and sexuality with medical professionals and caregivers helps young people to better understand their sexuality in a way that is confidential.

"It is important to inform us about what is OK and what is not OK when it comes to sexual behaviour."

"It would help us a lot during this time to respect our need for privacy."

WHAT TO EXPECT REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEXUALITY ACROSS AGES

9–13 year olds might...

- Become more curious about sex and relationships
- Have or want to have a romantic relationship with peers (of the same or different gender)
- Use sexual language
- Make jokes about sex
- Discuss sexual acts with peers
- Want more privacy
- Look for info about sex in books, online or in the media
- Explore their body sexually in private

13–17 year olds might...

- Experiment sexually with same age group individuals
- Look for info about sex and sexual relationships
- Explore their body sexually in private

BENEFITS AND HARM OF THE PILL

Young people want more transparency when it comes to the benefits and harms of hormonal contraception such as the pill.

Hormonal contraception is effective

- It can **prevent unwanted pregnancies**, and **treat some medical conditions**.
- However, there is a **slight risk in affecting mental health negatively,** such as potentially increasing feelings of depression and anxiety. This is a very small risk but it is more evident in young women and in women with no previous mental health conditions.
- Some women might feel they are gaining weight after taking the pill.

Hormonal contraception, depending on the type, also carries **small risks of abnormal periods**. Some contraceptive pills might make periods worse and carry small health risks. Very rarely they can cause blood clots and in the long-term, increase risk of breast and cervical cancer.

Overall, hormonal contraception is very effective **in the prevention of pregnancies,** more so than condoms. However, **it does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases**.

"Before suggesting we take hormonal contraception as medical treatment or for managing periods in competitive sports, we need to know the risks and potential side effects. We would like to make an informed decision, it's about preventing pregnancies and taking a medication."

"We would like to learn about different types of contraception and their pros and cons, not just condoms, so that we can make an informed decision."

HOW PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN HELP

Evidence across the country shows that the majority of girls described their mum as the current and preferred source of information about the process of puberty and periods.

"We want to be able to go to parents for support, someone to talk to who will listen to us without making us feel judged or embarrassed."

"It helps us if you reassure us that the change that we are experiencing is normal, and if we are praised for our positive behaviour."

"We find it easier to accept ourselves and our new bodies when we learn about body confidence."

HOW TO START A DIALOGUE

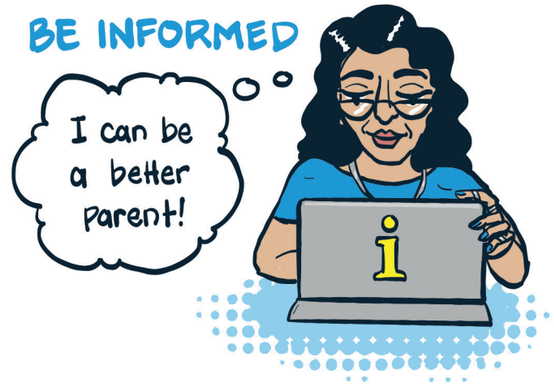
- **Talk about puberty before it begins**, be open and non-judgmental
- **Provide reassurance** – 'change is normal'
- **Make sure your child knows that you are a safe person** they can talk to if they need to
- **Make sure your child can talk to you** without being scared of feeling embarrassed or judged
- **Explain that puberty is an exciting time** - positive way to introduce change
- **Use correct terms for body parts** - so they are comfortable using them while talking about their body. They need to know their body parts are normal and natural
- **Ask whether your child has learned about puberty at school and what they've been taught**. Or ask them what they think about it and what it means
- **Pick a time to talk when there are no distractions**
- **Don't be worried if your child doesn't want to share everything with you**
- **Role model body acceptance and healthy lifestyle** – bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Exposure to body confidence is really important – three quarters of teenagers who learned about body confidence in school said it made them feel more positive about themselves
- **Respect your child's need for more privacy** – always knock before entering their room
- **Stay calm during angry outbursts** - wait for them to cool down before talking about the problem, they learn how to control their emotions from watching how you react

"Use the correct words for body parts when talking about our bodies. This empowers us and helps us to understand and accept our bodies."

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE AS A PARENT OR CAREGIVER

- **Be informed**
- **Praise your teenager** for their efforts and positive behaviour
- **Put yourself in your child's shoes**; they are often just struggling to become an individual on their own
- **Chat to your partner or other parents of teenagers** - make yourself feel more supported
- **Support your child in their self-expression**, even if it seems odd to you (e.g., extreme haircut or strange clothing choices)
- **Try to tolerate long periods of time spent on personal care**, such as spending a long time in the bathroom
- **Talk about any permanent bodily changes** they want to make such as piercings or tattoos, suggest temporary alternatives
- **Talk to your child about their acne**, ask how they feel about it. If it's bothering them then ask if they want to see a dermatologist

WHERE TO LOOK FOR HELP



Better Health AU – Parenting children through puberty and adolescence:
https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/Parenting-children-through-puberty/

NSPCC – Sexual development and behaviour in children:
https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/sexual-behaviour

Kids Helpline has useful information for young people about body image:
https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/body-image/
and sexual identity:
https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/tips/sexuality-your-body-and-your-mind/

The Raising Children Network website has information for parents about physical changes in puberty:
https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/puberty-sexual-development/physical-changes-in-puberty/

NOTES