

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT PUBERTY

➔ Puberty is a complicated time for adolescents, with physical, sexual and emotional changes on the horizon. Children and their parents should be ready to discuss and explore these changes as they occur. The conversations can be awkward, especially early on, but there are ways to broach the topic so everyone is comfortable. Open lines of communication are necessary between parents and their children, especially when it comes to health.

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING PUBERTY

In general, children begin puberty around 9 years old. Girls usually start earlier than boys, perhaps as early as age 8, while boys often reach puberty at 10 to 12. Some children may begin puberty slower, and won't start until 13 or 14. Puberty generally ends around 16 years old for both genders, but it can extend throughout the teen years for some.

The biggest benchmark of puberty tends to be the development of sexual organs for both genders, but an array of changes occurs during this time.

BOYS

- Growth of the testicles and penis
- Development of facial and chest hair
- Occurrence of erections and more frequent erections (during puberty this can happen spontaneously, without sexual thoughts or influences)
- Production of semen and ejaculation (can happen as a result of masturbation or as a "wet dream")

BOTH GENDERS

- Growth spurt
- Body shape changes (wider hips for girls and broader shoulders for boys, etc.)
- Development of body hair (including pubic hair and underarm hair)
- Body odor and sweating more
- Oily skin and pimples on the face and body
- Development of sexual feelings, thoughts and urges
- Deepening of the voice (this happens more drastically and suddenly for boys but occurs in both genders)

GIRLS

- Breast development (including swelling, soreness and/or enlargement of the nipples)
- Thickening and darkening of leg and arm hair
- Menstruation
- Vaginal discharge



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INITIATING THE DISCUSSION

Because puberty ushers in many changes over time, you need to have a series of discussions with your children.

Introduce the subject when they are about 8 years old. While this might seem early, children should feel secure and prepared about the forthcoming changes, not startled or surprised. You shouldn't wait until your child begins puberty, because it's likely some of their friends and classmates already are experiencing changes, and your child might be curious.

The initial conversation doesn't need to be an in-depth one. You can explain some of the changes they'll start to experience and let them know you're available to talk any time. Encourage them to ask questions and tell you about any changes they're noticing on an ongoing basis. Some children will be eager and curious, while others may be timid about the topic. Both are fine, as long as you assure them often that what they're going through is normal.

As your child ages and begins to experience the changes, you can address them as they come up. It's a good idea to check in with your child regularly during this time, especially if they're shy or embarrassed about the subject.

CONVERSATION TIPS

1 Be direct and matter-of-fact, especially when it comes to more sensitive topics such as sexual arousal or menstruation. You should reassure your child that they're normal and healthy, through both your words and your demeanor during the conversation. If you're not nervous and uncomfortable about it, they're less likely to be.

2 Don't segregate every conversation by gender.

A common inclination is to have mothers talk to daughters, and fathers talk to sons about their respective bodies. While there are benefits to this technique — some parents and children might be more comfortable having the conversation when they share a common understanding — not all conversations need to be divided in this way. It's important that children realize that it's normal for adults to know about the bodies of both genders, and that those conversations don't need to be secretive or gender-specific.

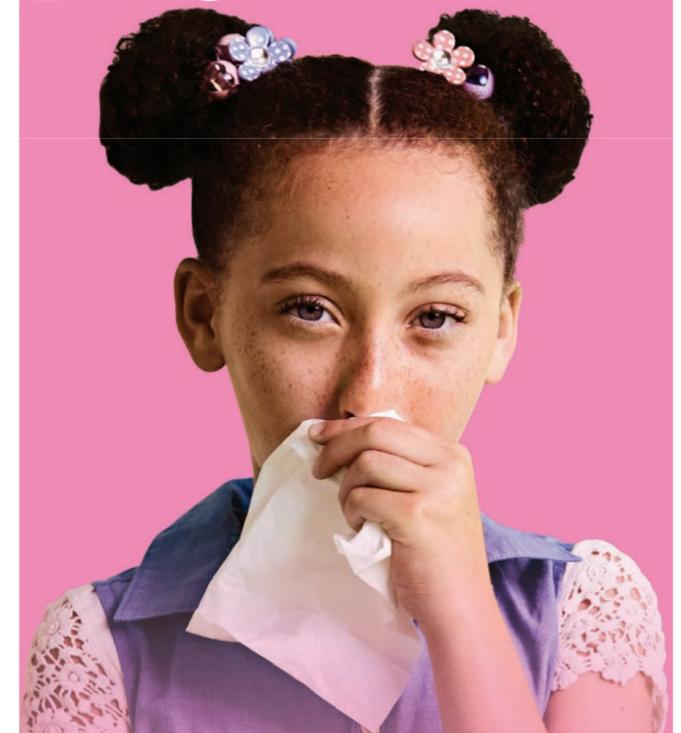
3 Talk to your child about what puberty is like for people of the opposite gender as well.

Many schools divide boys and girls during conversations about puberty, so you should help normalize and educate your child on what's happening for their opposite-sex classmates. Boys should know about things like menstruation — and they should know it's healthy, normal and not gross or funny. Equally, girls should know that boys are experiencing changes and that erections, for instance, aren't shameful or weird.

4 Be sensitive to your child's comfort level.

The changes that they're experiencing are intense and emotional, and some children won't want to talk about it. Continue to encourage the conversation and give them the information they need, but don't overwhelm them if they're not ready to talk about it yet.

Goodbye
high fever,
hello
high-fives.



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