

years  
5-6

# Let's talk puberty

Puberty can be particularly daunting for young people. Our question box is always full of queries and concerns related to periods, mood swings, erections and the like. Start talking early about puberty and respond to your child's questions or concerns honestly and respectfully. Remember: short and simple is best.

- **What is puberty?** Puberty is something that humans go through where a child's body changes into an adult body. The changes that people go through are physical, social and emotional.
- **Why does puberty happen?** Puberty happens so that older people can have babies if they choose to. It means that the testicles start to make sperm and the ovaries start to release eggs and it's those two 'ingredients' that need to come together to make a baby.
- **When does it happen and how long does it take?** People will hit puberty at different times. It usually begins between eight and 13 in girls, and nine and 15 in boys. Of course, these ages are approximate. Puberty usually takes three to five years. If there are ever concerns about early or late development, see a medical professional.

## Here's a few things you can start to talk about (but there's many more!)

- **Puberty means relationships and the way you think changes.** Puberty is often a time when young people begin to seek and form identities outside of their family. They'll want to test out their opinions and try to solve problems on their own. This is in part due to the hormonal changes in the brain. It doesn't mean that all (or even most) young people will suddenly dislike their parents or no longer want to

spend time with them. They'll still need their parents and caregivers for help and support.

- **Privacy.** Respect your child's privacy and make sure others in the house do too.
- **Desire for greater freedom.** Negotiate and compromise on the freedoms that they want, and reward good behaviour.
- **Concern about appearance.** Being self-conscious and getting used to body changes can be confronting for some young people. Talk about societal pressure to be 'beautiful', 'buffed' and or 'lean', and the importance of non-physical attributes (such as sense of humour, creativity, sport or musical talents etc) when it comes to seeing and valuing themselves and others. Don't chastise any attempts to groom or dress themselves in a way that you think is too adult, inappropriate or silly. If you think they're too young to be shaving, putting on makeup, or whatever it may be, have a calm conversation where you explain your values without shaming them. Tweens especially care about fitting in with their peers and won't want to be seen in the 'wrong' clothing, and you can talk about this too.
- **Mood swings.** It's true that the hormonal changes in the brain that happen during puberty can make emotions more changeable and pronounced, but they don't turn someone into an entirely different person. Explain that this is a normal part of puberty and help their emotional literacy by naming feelings together, as well as the sensations that can come with them. These emotions can be managed through healthy strategies, like going for a walk, exercising, listening to music, talking to a friend or trusted adult. If they ever feel overwhelmed let them know they can talk to you or another trusted adult.
- **Crushes.** We say that crushes aren't a puberty change as such but that they might become a thing for some people as they're going through puberty. A crush is a feeling of like or love for someone else. It might be someone in real life or a celebrity. While a lot of people will experience their first crushes during puberty, not everyone will. Some people might get crushes earlier in life, some might a little later, some much later – and some never do! All of that is normal. Crushes are a way to take feelings for a 'test run' and to start to think about the qualities someone might want in a partner one day. No one has to tell anyone or do anything about a crush – no matter what they see in movies.
- **Sexual feelings.** Like crushes, we say that sexual feelings aren't a puberty change but that they

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might become relevant for some people as they grow older. A sexual feeling is described as a tingly nice feeling in or around the genitals. It's normal to have them and normal not to, and that they are usually very private. No one has to do anything about these feelings, but it's important not to worry about them. They're normal.

- **Erections.** An erection is where the penis gets hard and grows bigger. Clothes are usually enough to hide erections. Erections also normally go away by themselves within a few minutes. Concentrating on something, like reciting the times tables can also help them disappear quicker. Erections can happen because a person is thinking of something sexual, but not always. Sometimes they are more random, which can be annoying or embarrassing. Sometimes they happen at night during sleep (see below for info on wet dreams).
- **Pimples.** While hygiene and eating well are always important, pimples can be unavoidable due to hormonal changes during puberty. As the body develops, these hormones stimulate the sebaceous glands to make more sebum. Too much sebum can clog the pores with oil and lead to pimples. If pimples or acne are causing any distress or self-consciousness, talk to a trusted adult or doctor.
- **Breast development.** Breast development is a sure sign that someone is going through puberty and young people can be very self-conscious about this change. Talk about buying crop tops or a bra. 'Gynecomastia' is overdevelopment of the male breast. In preteen and teen male bodies, it can be caused by the hormonal changes of puberty and breast buds can be common. The puffiness tends to go away within the first year of their growth.
- **Body odour.** Hormonal changes increase sweat production during puberty. And it isn't just regular sweat either; the sebaceous glands begin producing oils that are a particular favourite of odour-producing bacteria. Remind your child that it's important to shower and change their clothes every day, not just for smells but for general hygiene, and using deodorant at this time can help manage the unpleasant odours.
- **Periods.** Normalise periods by talking about them and using the correct terminology. Talk about what periods are and how to manage them. Also mention that vaginal discharge is normal too and nothing to worry about – it's one reason why underwear is double lined.
- **Wet dreams.** Wet dreams, or nocturnal emissions, are when a person ejaculates or secretes vaginal fluids during sleep. For male bodies this means that they have an erection and then an ejaculation,

which is about a teaspoon of semen coming out from the urethra at the end of the penis. It's not something to worry about and in the morning, they can put their pyjamas in the wash. Wet dreams can happen throughout life. Sometimes there is a sexual dream, and everyone can have those, but sometimes there's not and it just happens. Wet dreams can't be controlled but are not only normal, but also quite common (although not everyone will have them).

Of course, these topics are only a starting point. You might like to find a book about puberty and read it together or give them a book you like and give it to them as a resource.

### Conversation starters (try one of these openers to get the chat going)

- 'How many puberty changes can you think of?'
- 'What are 3 puberty changes for female bodies and 3 for male?'
- 'What do you think people your age worry about the most, when it comes to puberty?'

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