



# Puberty, Adolescence and Independence

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# What does this mean?

## ▶ PUBERTY

- ▶ • refers to the physical changes in the body that make a person able to sexually reproduce.

## ▶ ADOLESCENCE

- ▶ • is the period of emotional and social transition between childhood and adulthood.



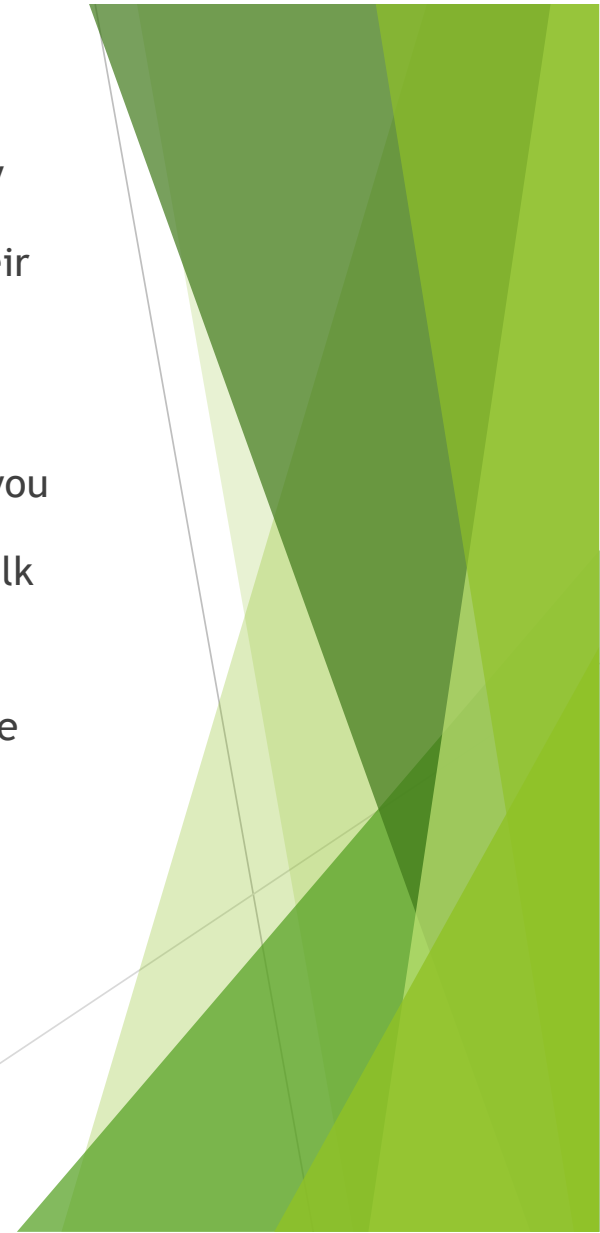
- ▶ This difference is important to keep in mind, especially when parenting pre-teens (sometimes referred to as tweens) with ASD and other disabilities.
- ▶ Teens with ASD often experience delayed development of social and emotional skills.
- ▶ They may not achieve the transition of adolescence until their late teens or early twenties.
- ▶ Will most likely undergo the physical changes of puberty within the typical time frame, which can be as early as 10 or 11 years of age.
- ▶ What does all this mean? Simply put, many teens with ASD may experience the sensations of a physically mature body without the social, emotional or psychological maturity to understand these sensations.



# Parent Tips: Body Changes

- ▶ **Start early with teaching privacy.** With families, friends etc often around, privacy is difficult to find, but is absolutely appropriate at a certain point in life. Help your young person to learn when that is and how to safely obtain it.
- ▶ **Model appropriate hygiene behaviour.** Let your child watch you when you shave, put on deodorant or any other activities that maintain good hygiene if you feel it's suitable, especially younger children.
- ▶ **Use the correct language for body parts and body functions.** Our children are all going to grow up to be adults one day and need to be taught proper terms for a mature subject.
- ▶ **Start practicing early.** The sooner you and your child can develop a routine, the sooner he or she will get used to it. Teaching skills early makes it easier to incorporate them into everyday life.

- ▶ It is important to give your child time to process the idea of his or her body changing before puberty actually starts. Boys will typically show signs of puberty around the age of 11 or 12. Girls usually experience changes in their bodies earlier, around the age of 9 or 10.
- ▶ We're going to talk about some things that happen to everyone, even me. People's bodies change as they grow up, and I want to tell you about it so you know what's happening when your body starts changing too. It happens differently for everyone, and that's okay. The important thing is that we talk to each other, and that you know you can ask me questions whenever you want.
- ▶ For the less verbal child with ASD and other disabilities, adjust the language and information to the level of the child and add visual supports.
- ▶ Start saying something like..."the rule is that your body will change and I want to show you how. Everyone's body changes as we become a grown up. Your body is going to change like this (using pictures). You will start to look more like a grown up body like me (or another person)."



# ADOLESCENCE

## Some basic rules for parents

- ▶ These rules may help minimise the inevitable stresses that occur as teenagers assert themselves.
- ▶ Always listen, even when you're on different sides of the fence.
- ▶ Don't confuse the thing that bothers you with the person who has done it. At times you'll feel annoyed and angry by your teenager's behaviour. Every parent does. It doesn't mean you've stopped loving your youngster. It probably means exactly the opposite – that you care. Keep your anger focused on their actions, not on them as human beings.
- ▶ Avoid constant criticism, however much teenagers' behaviour or appearance annoys you. Ignore insignificant incidents. With bigger issues let them know that although you disagree, you respect their right to hold a different opinion. Look for opportunities to pay honest compliments.
- ▶ Take an interest in what your teenager is doing. When disagreements arise, try to find a compromise that both sides can accept. At worst, you should agree to disagree.

- ▶ Don't preach and don't nag. Be careful about saying things like: 'When I was your age ...'. You probably had more in common with your teenager than you'd care to admit.
- ▶ Expect to become the target of blame – the one responsible for all their difficulties, not letting them grow up and have fun.
- ▶ Don't take most of this criticism to heart. And don't give up on your teenager. Teenagers are watching, listening, and learning more than you may think.
- ▶ Mood swings are quite common at this age, partly due to hormonal changes but also in response to the worries so common during this time of life.
- ▶ By late adolescence most teenagers feel much more comfortable spending time with their parents. If you've treated them fairly and consistently, and given them room to grow, they will leave adolescence and enter adulthood with family ties intact.



# What kind of difficulties can a young person have.

- ▶ It's important to note that despite the popular myth of 'difficult teenager', the majority of adolescents do not have significant or severe difficulties.

## Emotional problems

- ▶ Over-eating, excessive sleepiness and a persistent over-concern with appearance may be signs of emotional distress.
- ▶ Anxiety may produce phobias and panic attacks. Research suggests that emotional disorders are often not recognised, even by family and friends.
- ▶ At some time, 4 out of 10 adolescents have felt so miserable that they have cried and have wanted to get away from everyone and everything.
- ▶ During their adolescence, more than 1 in 5 teenagers think so little of themselves that life does not seem worth living. In spite of these powerful feelings, depression may not be obvious to other people.



## Sexual problems

- ▶ The dramatic physical changes of adolescence can be very worrying to some teenagers, especially to those who are shy and who don't like to ask questions. At the other end of the scale, some express their concern with excessive bragging about sexual ability and experiences.
- ▶ More than half of young people in the UK will have had their first experience of sex before the age of 16 and so the risk of pregnancy is a significant part of adolescent life.
- ▶ The age of consent for both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse is 16 in England, Scotland and Wales, 17 in N. Ireland. It is illegal to have sex if either partner is under this age, even if they give consent.
- ▶ Those who start having sex early are at greater risk of early pregnancy and health problems. Sexually transmitted diseases are common, and HIV infection and AIDS are becoming more common.
- ▶ Crushes on someone of the same sex are common in adolescence. Some young people go on to be gay.
- ▶ Some young people (and their parents) will not be sure whether they are gay or straight.

- ▶ Sensitive support, clear guidance and accurate information about these different aspects of sex are essential - from parents, schools, GPs, and family planning clinics.
- ▶ Most adolescents choose their partners quite carefully. Sleeping around and risky unprotected intercourse are often signs of underlying emotional problems. They may also be the signs of a risk-taking lifestyle - adolescents who take risks in one way tend to take risks in other ways as well.
- ▶ Recent research suggests that girls who are close to their parents are less likely to become pregnant in their teenage years.



## Behaviour problems

- ▶ Teenagers and their parents complain about each other's behaviour. Parents often feel they have lost any sort of control or influence over their child. Adolescents want their parents to be clear and consistent about rules and boundaries, but at the same time may resent any restrictions on their growing freedom and ability to decide for themselves.
- ▶ If disagreements are common and normal, when should you worry? Experience suggests that children are at greater risk of getting into trouble if their parents don't know where they are. So, try to make sure that you know where they are going and what they are up to. If you really don't know, you need to find out.

# The Good News for Parents

- ▶ Difficult times come and go, but most adolescents don't develop serious problems. It's worth remembering this when things are difficult.
- ▶ Parents may sometimes start to feel that they have failed. However, whatever may be said in the heat of the moment, they play a crucial part in their children's lives. Helping your children grow through adolescence can be profoundly satisfying.



# Independence: Self Care

## ▶ SELF-CARE AND HYGIENE

- ▶ As puberty begins, there are many new challenges for kids to understand. Many children with ASD and other disabilities struggle with the changes in self-care and hygiene routines that is necessary for managing puberty. Here are some of the changes to expect and some ideas to help your child deal with them.

### ▶ *General hygiene*

- ▶ With puberty comes sweat, oily skin, and pimples. Children will need to start bathing or showering daily to keep their bodies clean. Often, children with ASD and other disabilities are not aware of the social impacts poor hygiene may create. If it is appropriate, talk to your child (or set up a routine) about why he or she needs to bathe more frequently. Social Narratives can be a helpful way to teach children about why hygiene is important. If getting your child to become motivated to bathe is a struggle, you may need to introduce daily bathing as a “new house rule”, provide visual checklists and reminders to bathe, wash thoroughly, use soap and shampoo, etc. At this age, it may be increasingly hard for you to monitor how well your child is washing his or her body - another reason to teach independent bathing early.

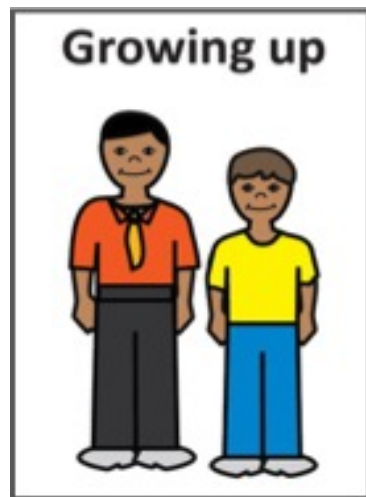
# Shaving

## ▶ *Shaving*

- ▶ This can be extremely tricky, especially if your child struggles with tactile sensations. You will need to teach your child how to shave safely, as pain or even a cut may lead to future avoidance. This may be an area where children require assistance until you feel confident that they can shave safely on their own. Try different razors and shaving creams to find one your child prefers and accepts. Often, an electric razor is a better option for teenagers just starting out. Keep in mind that some young people with ASD and other disabilities may be sensitive to the sounds of electric razors. If your child is very averse to shaving, you may need to work on increasing his or her comfort level first. To do this, start gradually with single steps (i.e. put on shaving cream and rinse off), short periods of time (i.e. turn razor on for 5 seconds and then off), or small areas (i.e. put on shaving cream and shave a small area). At first, your child may only tolerate these small exposures. Gradually work your way up and be patient. If shaving is not an option, these same incremental steps could be used with depilatory creams, which may have less of a sensory impact and require less fine motor skills.

► ***Wearing deodorant***

- Adding a new step to the morning routine can be tough - your child may already have a well-established routine by this age. This can be a very crucial step when managing body changes. Try a variety of deodorants and antiperspirants (e.g., sticks, gels, sprays, etc.). Let your child pick which one he or she prefers - this may be helpful in motivating him or her to use it. Many teens do better when given a choice. Again, you may need a visual reminder for your child to put on the deodorant. You may also need to introduce it as a “new house rule” or provide rewards until your child integrates this step into his or her regular routine.





► *Wearing a bra*

- Most girls will accept this change quite well. However, adding a new item to the dressing routine can sometimes be tricky. Try a few styles of bra with your daughter to find one that fits well and that she finds comfortable. You may need to start with a less supportive bra, or training bra, until she is tolerant of a more supportive bra. Explain that this is a part of becoming a woman and experiencing body changes. You may need to re-introduce a visual schedule or check list with steps for dressing to remind her to put on the bra while getting dressed.



# Menstruation (having a period)

Once you are ready to talk to your daughter, there are some key topics to address

- ▶ Your daughter with ASD or other additional needs will experience a lot of changes during puberty, just like other girls do. Getting her first period is likely to be one of her biggest milestones during this time. ASD does not affect when girls start their periods, so many girls with ASD will most likely have her first period between the age of 9 and 11 years old.
  - ▶ Since it is impossible to know exactly when your daughter will get her first period, it is important to take her personal preferences, personality and her level of understanding into consideration when deciding when to discuss this topic. Keep in mind that pre-teens with ASD often need extra time to adjust to changes and new information, and they sometimes can become fixated on events that are unpredictable and potentially frightening. Since the first period usually comes about 12 to 18 months after starting breast development, it is often a good time to start discussing it as she is getting used to wearing a bra.
  - ▶ It is crucial to prepare your daughter for her first period ahead of time. Make sure you pick the right moment to prepare her for this. Consider what point in time will minimize the stress and anxiety of anticipating her period, while also maximizing her ability to process this information. There is no right way to do this for every child, so use your best judgment!
- ▶ *What does “having your period” mean?*
  - ▶ If girls don’t know or understand what periods are, they may be frightened that they are sick or injured. Making sure your child understands that monthly bleeding is absolutely normal, natural and healthy is crucial to reducing anxiety. Consider whether a social narrative might be helpful for your daughter, both as an instructive tool and as a reminder of what to expect each month.
  - ▶ *Stomach cramps and body aches are normal.*
  - ▶ Try to prepare your daughter for the physical sensations associated with monthly periods. Abdominal cramping, feeling tired and experiencing breast, stomach or low back soreness are all normal sensations, even though they are not very comfortable! Teach your daughter appropriate strategies for relieving discomfort. For example, it may be fully appropriate for your daughter to use a hot water bottle to reduce cramps or body pain independently, but pain-relieving medications should only be used with permission and under parental supervision. Of course, if these symptoms appear to be severe or interfere with daily activities, you should speak to her medical provider for additional options.

## Continued:

- ▶ *Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) is normal, too.*
  - ▶ Girls with ASD and other additional needs can experience the same range of PMS symptoms as typically developing girls. However, their symptoms may lead to challenging behaviour if they have trouble regulating their emotions. Like most girls, your daughter may feel cranky, depressed, tired and find it difficult to concentrate. If she understands why she is feeling this way, your daughter may feel more in control of her changing body. A social story, specific to your child's symptoms, may help. As with physical symptoms, you should speak with your child's medical provider if symptoms of PMS are severe or interfering with daily life.
- ▶ *What are pads and tampons?*
  - ▶ Once your child's periods have started, she will need to know what pads and tampons look like and how to use them. Consider going to the grocery store together to pick out different types to try. Girls of any age can use tampons, but they take practice and require regular changing to prevent any serious illness that could happen as a result of not changing your tampon frequently enough. It is often easier for girls who have newly started their period to use pads in the beginning, since they require less skill to replace and are, in and of themselves, a visual reminder to be changed. If your daughter uses visual supports, a visual schedule showing the steps involved in changing a pad, tampon or alternative sanitary product like a Diva Cup (a reusable menstrual cup that is a safe hygienic alternative) may be very useful.