



# Puberty

During the first few years of life, children grow and change extraordinarily fast. Children go through a similar growth spurt during puberty—the process of biological development that transforms a child into a physically mature adult. During this time, children experience dramatic physical and emotional changes—including rapid growth spurts and surging hormones—that are designed to prepare the body for adulthood. This guide offers an explanation of what you can expect as your child transitions through puberty as well as tips on how to help your child cope with the changes he or she is experiencing.

*Note*—This guide is for general informational purposes only. If you have questions about your child’s development, please consult your child’s pediatrician or your family physician.

## When Does Puberty Begin?

The onset of puberty begins when a series of hormones are produced in the body that stimulate growth and release additional hormones that make reproduction possible. Puberty affects children at different times in their lives. For girls, puberty usually begins between ages eight and 13, with the arrival of the first period, or menarche, signaling physical maturity of the reproductive organs. Altogether, the development of puberty for girls generally occurs over a span of three to five years.

Boys begin puberty slightly later than girls, anywhere between the ages of nine and 14. The first sign is development of the testicles and a thinning and reddening of the scrotum. Next, the voice changes and pubic and facial hair begin to appear. In the early years of adolescence, many boys also experience a slight swelling around their nipples, caused by hormonal changes in the body, which usually disappears within a year. Boys generally complete the physical changes associated with puberty at about age 17.

Keep in mind that these are general guidelines only. Each individual grows and develops at his or her own rate. You may find that your son, at age 13, is still short with undeveloped muscles and a high voice, while his best friend of the same age may have developed a larger physique and a deeper (though probably still squeaky) voice. Similarly, though your daughter may reach menarche or develop breasts at a young age, her friends could develop as late as age 16.

## Other Physical Changes During the Adolescent Years

At the same time that your child is going through puberty, he or she may also be experiencing the rapid growth spurts and physical changes that are characteristic of the adolescent years. On average, children gain a foot in height and 20 to 30 pounds in weight from the start to finish of adolescence. Since girls generally mature earlier and at a steadier rate than boys, they typically conclude their growth spurt around age 15, just when boys are beginning their growth spurt. Their height may increase by as much as three to five inches in a single year—and they may continue to grow through age 18. Your child’s doctor can provide growth charts that represent height and weight averages for children in the U.S. Keep in mind, however, that these are simply averages; for questions about your child’s unique growth, consult his or her doctor.

In addition to changes in size, your child may also experience changes in his or her overall body shape. Girls tend to develop hips and a larger chest during this time; boys gain wider shoulders, develop more muscle and lose fat. Even your child’s head, which stopped growing around age two, will widen and lengthen, due to the thickening of the skull bones.

During this period of rapid growth, your usually coordinated child may become more clumsy and awkward. This awkwardness is due, in part, to the fact that different parts of the body grow at different rates. Your child’s legs, for example, will probably finish their growth at an earlier rate than his or her arms, which can make your child look and feel disproportional.



## Preparing Your Child for Puberty

Since you cannot predict when puberty will affect your child, you can help prepare him or her by sharing information early, before obvious physical changes begin to occur. For example, if your daughter understands menstruation, she may be less frightened, embarrassed or confused when it arrives. Likewise, if your son is prepared for his voice to change, he may not be as self-conscious about it.

Though some young girls may have concerns about getting a period, you can ease some of your daughter's anxieties by preparing her for her first period long before you expect it to occur. (Once your daughter has begun real breast development, you can assume menarche will follow in a few months.) Explain to your daughter the biology of menstruation, emphasizing that it is a normal bodily process. Inform her that her periods may be irregular at first and that several months before her first period, she may experience a whitish discharge. You may also want to explain to your daughter that cramping before or during her period is normal and instruct her on how to use sanitary napkins or tampons, how often to change them and the proper way to dispose of them. Additionally, she may be comforted to know that having her period won't stop her from participating in her usual physical activities, such as gym class, sports, swimming, etc.

If you have a son, you may want to explain nocturnal emissions ("wet dreams") before he turns 11 since there is no way to know exactly when they might start. During nocturnal emissions, boys may awaken with damp pajamas caused by an ejaculation (not urination) that occurred during sleep. Reassure your son that this is normal and that he has no control over it. Likewise, assure him that the involuntary erections he may be getting are normal and a sign that his body is maturing. He may be comforted to know that as time goes on, he will experience involuntary erections less frequently.

Though your child may act annoyed or indifferent when you discuss the changes that puberty brings, he or she is undoubtedly listening, but may be embarrassed by the subject. Keep talking, even when he or she seems to ignore you. Your child needs the information, and will appreciate having it, in spite of his or her embarrassment.

## Helping Your Child Cope With Puberty

Once puberty begins, the rapid physical changes that your teen is experiencing may be upsetting even if you have prepared him or her ahead of time. Your teen may feel self-conscious or be sensitive to comments anyone makes about him or her, including you. By providing information and being sensitive to your child's confusion and frustrations, you can help your child adapt to the changes he or she is experiencing. Consider the following tips for helping your child cope with the changes of puberty:

- Let your child know you are available to talk. Though you may be just as embarrassed as your child talking about puberty, make sure he or she knows that you are willing to discuss both the feelings and changes in physical development that puberty brings—whenever he or she is ready to talk.
- Avoid making good-natured remarks about any physical changes. Your comments may end up making your child feel more, not less, self-conscious, no matter how well-intentioned.
- Allow your child to complain about slight physical flaws such as a nose that's too big or freckles; but try to steer the focus toward features your child admires.
- Respect your child's privacy. Adolescents are just learning to accept their physical maturation and they need time and privacy to make the adjustment.
- Don't make comparisons between your child and his or her friends who have matured more slowly or rapidly.
- Be candid about the pattern of your own development; your child may take comfort knowing that you too were the last or the first in the group to mature.

## Hormonal Changes Associated With Puberty

In addition to the physical changes your child is experiencing during puberty, his or her hormones are surging during this time. Girls' bodies are making the adjustment to the monthly estrogen/progesterone hormone cycle of menstruation. Just before her period, your daughter may become unusually weepy or irritable.

Boys are also going through hormone shifts, creating greater aggressiveness and boundless energy. You're apt to find your son running through the house, endlessly bouncing balls and even shoving siblings in good-natured play. Eventually, though, the male hormones—testosterone and androgen—will settle at appropriate levels.

Also in these early adolescent years, don't be surprised if a normally outgoing child shows moments of withdrawal and moodiness. Typically between ages 12 and 15, your child may shift moods quickly, from being cooperative and cheerful one moment to stubborn or tearful the next. It's during these early years of adolescence that your child is most likely to say, "You don't understand!" As upsetting as this may be, try not to take it to heart; remember, your child's hormones are most likely the cause for these emotional outbursts.

Acne is a common problem for adolescents going through puberty, especially boys. The hormonal changes in the body that characterize puberty are also responsible for the enlargement and increased secretion of oil from the sebaceous, or oil, glands. Acne is caused by a build-up of dead skin cells and bacteria that block the oil glands, causing them to swell. Those who are prone to acne may not be able to prevent it entirely, but there are things your child can do to help control it. Encourage your child to keep skin and hair as clean as possible and use an over-the-counter benzoyl peroxide cream on blemishes. If your child has a severe case of acne, see a dermatologist who may prescribe medication to treat it.

The monthly hormonal cycle of menstruation may cause uncomfortable physical symptoms in girls, including cramping, water retention, headaches and backaches. If your daughter is experiencing these symptoms, remind her to drink plenty of water, exercise and maintain a healthy diet that is high in iron and protein. A heating pad or a mild pain reliever may also help alleviate symptoms. If the pain is severe, consult a doctor.

## Coping With Your Child's Mood Swings

As adolescents enter the middle to late teen years, their hormones and the accompanying moodiness generally settle down. In the meantime, keep the following tips in mind:

- Don't take your child's behavior personally. It's as confusing for your child as it is for you, and whatever the mood may be, it will probably change soon.
- Respect your child's feelings—whatever they are. Telling your child that his or her momentary despair isn't important may be insulting.
- Maintain your limits on acceptable behavior. Don't allow a child to get away with extreme behavior in the name of understanding. Just as you would not tolerate a temper tantrum when your child was a toddler, don't tolerate one from your adolescent either.
- Most importantly, remember that your child needs your love and support while he or she gets used to the changes that are occurring. And, while your child may not appreciate it at the time, remind your child that puberty is a sign that he or she is maturing and on his or her way to becoming an adult. For more information on parenting issues, please refer to the other guides in the educational series.

## Helpful Resources

### **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)**

141 Northwest Point Boulevard  
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1098  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

The AAP dedicates resources to the mental and social health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults. It provides parents with answers to medical and parenting concerns. The web site provides education, advocacy, and a list of resources covering a wide variety of child care issues. Parents can also call, write or e-mail the AAP for information on services or to order publications.

### **Bam! Body and Mind**

[www.bam.org](http://www.bam.org)

This web site for kids is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It provides information, tips and quizzes for school-aged children on dealing with stress, eating healthy, getting in shape, and staying well.

### **Keepkidshealthy.com**

[www.keepkidshealthy.com](http://www.keepkidshealthy.com)

Keepkidshealthy.com is intended to supplement the information that you receive from your child's physician, with a special emphasis on better health through preventative care. In addition to a special section for school-age children with information on puberty, its features include free parenting advice, online forums, information on product recalls, an immunization schedule, growth charts, a body mass index calculator, a height predictor, a lead poisoning screening quiz, plus info on kids nutrition, growth, development, common problems, diseases and conditions and infections in children.

### **All About Puberty**

[kidshealth.org/kid/grow/body\\_stuff/puberty.html](http://kidshealth.org/kid/grow/body_stuff/puberty.html)

Created by The Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media, KidsHealth provides children and families with accurate, up-to-date, and jargon-free health information they can use. KidsHealth has been on the web since 1995 and is the largest and most visited site on the web providing doctor-approved health information about children from before birth through adolescence.

*This publication is for general informational purposes only and is not intended to provide any reader with specific authority, advice or recommendations.*

Copyright © 2011 LifeCare®, Inc. All rights reserved. LifeCare®, Inc. is the worldwide provider of Life Event Management® Services

#7475\_Puberty\_FOH\_0811

