

Families Are Talking

Talking with Parents about puberty

In a national study* of young people eight to 15 years of age:

- 70%** have talked to their mother or father about puberty
- 26%** have talked regularly to their mother or father about puberty
- 45%** are "kind of comfortable" talking to their mother or father about puberty
- 37%** would like to know more about puberty

Talking with Young People about puberty

In a national study* of parents of young people eight to 15 years of age:

- 65%** have talked with their child about puberty
- 52%** said that the first time they talked with their child about puberty they initiated the conversation
- 34%** said that their child brought it up
- 51%** have talked with their child about puberty a couple of times

*Talking with Kids about Tough Issues: A National Survey of Parents and Kids, (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001).

What is Puberty?

Puberty is the time between childhood and adulthood when girls' and boys' bodies change rapidly as they grow into young women and men.

Everyone's body changes at different times and at different rates. Some young people start puberty when they are nine, 10, or 11 years old. Others start when they are in their middle to late teens. Generally, girls start puberty before boys. Caused by chemicals in the body called hormones, puberty does not happen overnight. It can last for a few years.

During puberty, girls and boys experience many changes. They often wonder if they are "normal." Changes include a growth spurt,

increased pubic and underarm hair, acne, and the development of sweat glands. They also often experience a rollercoaster of emotions—feeling happy one minute and angry the next.

During puberty, girls' bodies change shape. Breasts develop and hips widen. Menstruation starts—making it possible for those that have intercourse to get pregnant.

During puberty, boys grow facial hair, develop deeper voices, grow larger penises, and begin to make sperm—making it possible

for them to father a child if they have intercourse.

Puberty is a time when young people often want more independence and privacy. Their relationships with friends and family often change. They may develop crushes, begin to date, experience sexual feelings, face peer pressure, and struggle with body image and self-esteem.

Families Are Talking is a quarterly newsletter supported by a grant from The Annie E. Casey Foundation. It contains information to help families communicate about sexuality-related issues.

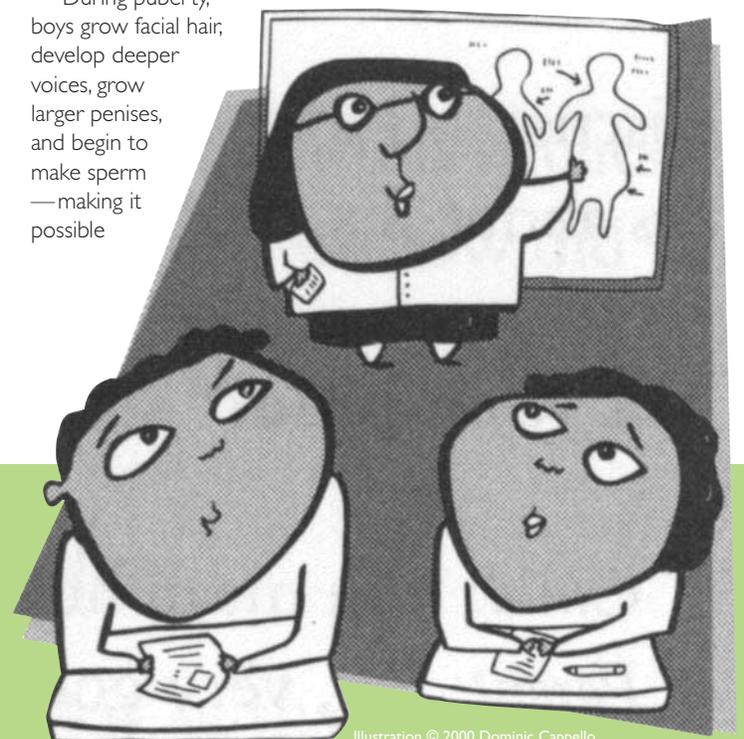


Illustration © 2000 Dominic Cappello

Sharing Messages with
Young People about
Puberty

Before talking with children about puberty, it is helpful for parents and caregivers to consider the messages they want to share.

These can include:

- Bodies change as children grow older
- Puberty begins and ends at different ages for different people
- Some people do not reach puberty until their later teens
- Girls often begin puberty before boys
- A young person may feel clumsy, self-conscious, or uncomfortable during puberty
- The sexual and reproductive systems mature during puberty
- Girls begin to ovulate and menstruate during puberty
- Boys begin to produce sperm and ejaculate during puberty
- People are able to have children only after they have reached puberty
- Many people begin to develop sexual and romantic feelings during puberty

Tips to Help Parents
and Caregivers Talk
to Their Children about
Puberty

- Do not wait until your child asks questions
- Think of the messages that you want to share
- Seek “teachable moments” — daily opportunities that occur when you are with your child — that make it easy to share your messages and values
- Let your child know that you are open to talking with them about sexuality issues
- Listen
- Share your experiences of puberty with your child
- Provide pamphlets, books, and other age-appropriate, medically-accurate materials
- If you don’t know how to answer your child’s question, offer to find the answer or look it up together
- Find out what your child’s school is teaching about puberty

PREPARING Young People for Puberty

“Am I Normal?”

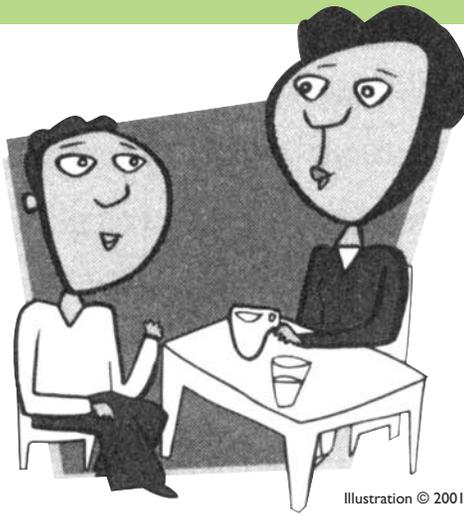


Illustration © 2001 Dominic Cappello

and Other Questions Young People Have about PUBERTY

Following are some typical questions about sexuality from students in fifth and sixth grade classes. It can be helpful for parents and caregivers to practice answering these questions before talking with their children.

General Questions

- “Why do we have to go through puberty?”
- “Does puberty hurt?”
- “What is a sign that puberty is starting?”
- “Why do we get hair on our privates?”
- “How can people get a ‘six pack’ in their stomachs?”
- “What is masturbation?”

Questions about Girls’ Bodies

- “When do girls grow breasts and why?”
- “Why do girls have a period?”
- “How do you know you’re beginning to get your period?”
- “How old do you have to be to get your period?”
- “Is it true that girls have one breast smaller than the other?”
- “What if you have your period; is it better to use a tampon or pad?”

Questions about Boys’ Bodies

- “Do boys develop sperm at a young age?”
- “What is the color of sperm?”
- “Does sperm come from the testicles?”
- “What’s a wet dream?”
- “What happens when you jerk off?”
- “How long is the man’s or boy’s penis or the longest it could grow?”

Other Questions Young People Asked

- “When you have sex, do you bleed?”
- “How does the man make the woman pregnant?”
- “How does it feel to have sex?”
- “Where do babies come from?”
- “How do you reproduce?”
- “What happens during an orgasm?”

SIECUS thanks the young people in New York City who generously shared their questions as well as the educators who helped gather them.

With the exception of infancy, young people experience their most rapid growth during puberty. And puberty is happening earlier than ever before—sometimes as early as age nine.

Young people will probably notice the signs of puberty before their parents and caregivers do. They will have many questions and will wonder if their experiences are “normal.” Puberty can be both exciting and scary.

It is important that parents and caregivers prepare their children little by little so they will understand puberty and feel comfortable about the changes happening to their bodies.

Talking about Puberty

It's easy for young people to overlook the fact that parents and caregivers once went through puberty. Talking to the young people in your life about your experiences can help them prepare for the changes that happen during puberty. It also lets them know that you are there to support them through the physical and emotional changes that they are likely to experience.

Parents and caregivers can begin the conversation when a “teachable moment” presents itself or by saying something like “I remember when I was your age and my body began to change...”

Consider sharing:

- When and how you learned about puberty
- Who, if anyone, you felt comfortable talking with about puberty

- How the changes you experienced made you feel
- A positive experience you had during puberty
- An embarrassing experience you had during puberty
- What you wish someone had told you before you went through puberty
- What you wish someone had told you during puberty
- Photos of yourself before, during, and after puberty

What is Your Child Learning about Puberty in School?

Some schools teach young people about puberty. Others do not. Find out what your child may—or may not be—learning in school so that you can provide or supplement that information.

- Ask your child what they are learning about puberty at school
- Contact the teacher or principal and seek specific details about what the school teaches about puberty
- Ask to review the handouts, textbooks, and other materials the school provides your child
- Advocate for young people to receive comprehensive sexuality education

Your Thoughts

Tell us about your ideas to celebrate puberty as a rite of passage.

Visit us at
www.familiesaretalking.org/feedback.html

or call
212/819-9770,
extension 303

Celebrating Puberty as a Rite of Passage:

An Activity for Young People and their Parents and Caregivers

Many cultures have rituals or ceremonies to mark the transition as girls and boys become young women and men.

In the United States, some people may have cultural, religious, community, or family traditions. Others may create a celebration to acknowledge this event.

Young people, parents, and caregivers can:

- Visit the public library or use the Internet to research rituals or ceremonies throughout the world
- Ask extended family members and friends if they have a special ritual in their family
- Make a list of ideas and then decide how to celebrate their rite of passage
- Go to a favorite restaurant, park, beach, or other meaningful place
- Receive a special gift

Perhaps young people will want to:

- Create a special book or journal to express your feelings and thoughts through the years. This may include keepsakes, drawings, or poems
- Have a party

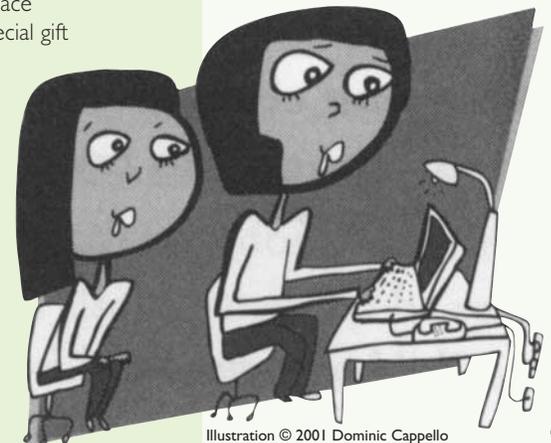


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We invite you to visit www.familiesaretalking.org for more information. The Spanish Web site www.lafamiliahabla.org is currently under construction.

Join our listserv to receive future *Families Are Talking* newsletters and information. E-mail families_are_talking-subscribe@topica.com to subscribe.

You must e-mail from the address you want to receive the information.

Illustrations are by Dominic Cappello, coauthor of *Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Sex and Character* (with Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D.), *Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Drugs and Choices* (with Xenia Becher, M.S.W., C.S.W.), and author of *Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Violence*.

For more information on the *Ten Talks* parent-child communication trainings on sexuality, character, violence, and drugs, visit www.tentalks.com

PUBERTY RESOURCES

Resources to Help Families Talk about Puberty

Talking with young children about sexuality-related topics will help them make a healthier transition into adulthood.

Parents and caregivers can use these resources to create "teachable moments" and to begin conversations about puberty.

Family Connections

Family Health Council, Inc., Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention
These three guidebooks are for parents of children from birth to seven years, from eight to 13 years, and from 14 to 18 years. They provide information on child development, puberty, contraception, sexual abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases.
2000; Free; *Family Health Council, Inc.*;
Phone: 412/288-0518; Web site: www.fhcinc.org

Talking About Sex: A Guide for Families

This kit includes a video and book for parents, as well as a book for young people 10 to 14.
1996; \$19.95; *Planned Parenthood Federation of America*;
Phone: 800/669-0156; Web site: www.plannedparenthood.org/store

What Kids Want to Know About Sex and Growing Up

This video answers questions kids in grades five through nine have about puberty and other sexuality-related issues.
1992; \$59.95; *ETR Associates*; Phone: 800/321-4407; Web site: www.etr.org

Resources to Celebrate Menstruation

Before She Gets Her Period: Talking with Your Daughter about Menstruation

Jessica B. Gillooly, Ph.D.
This book helps parents talk with their daughters about menstruation. It also provides exercises, activities, and ideas about how to celebrate this rite of passage.
1999; \$13.95; ISBN 0962203696;
Perspective Publishing, Inc.;
Phone: 800/330-5851;
Web site: www.familyhelp.com

Me, My Body & Mom: Sharing a Rite of Passage

This manual helps mothers and daughters plan a puberty "party" for a small group of six to eight

girls and their mothers (or other significant adults).
1996; \$25; *Planned Parenthood of Southern New Jersey*;
Phone: 856/365-3519; Web site: www.ppsnj.org/me_my_body_and_mom.htm

Sweet Secrets: Stories of Menstruation

Kathleen O'Grady and Paula Wansbrough
This book provides information about menstruation as well as stories from young women about this rite of passage.
1997; \$9.95; ISBN 0929005333; *ORCA Book Publishers*; Phone: 800/210-5277;
Web site: www.orcabook.com

Books to Help Parents and Caregivers Talk with Their Children

Beyond The Big Talk: Every Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens—From Middle School to High School and Beyond

Debra W. Haffner, M.P.H.
This book will help parents and caregivers address sexuality issues with their children.
2002; \$14.95; ISBN 1557045178;
Newmarket Press; Phone: 212/832-3575 or 800/669-3903; Web site: www.newmarketpress.com

"But How'd I Get in There in the First Place?" Talking to Your Young Child about Sex

Deborah Roffman
This book will help parents of children age three to six begin talking about sexuality, conception, and birth.
2002; \$14; ISBN 0738205729; *Perseus Publishing*; Phone: 800/386-5656;
Web site: www.perseuspublishing.com

From Diapers To Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children—From Infancy to Middle School

Debra W. Haffner, M.P.H.
This book is intended to help parents talk with children and early adolescents about sexuality issues.
2000; \$14.95; ISBN 1557044260;
Newmarket Press; Phone: 212/832-3575 or 800/669-3903; Web site: www.newmarketpress.com

Sex & Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense about Sex

Deborah Roffman
This book for parents is intended to inspire honest communication with their children about sexuality.
2001; \$16; ISBN 0738205206; *Perseus*

Books Group; Phone: 800/386-5656;
Web site: www.perseuspublishing.com

Puberty 411 for Young People

Check these books for information on puberty and other sexuality-related issues. You may find them in libraries, book stores, community-based organizations, and schools.

Changes in You and Me: A Book about Puberty Mostly for Boys Changes in You and Me: A Book about Puberty Mostly for Girls

Paulette Bourgeois and Martin Wolfish, M.D.
These two books for young people address the changes and feelings that come with growing up.
1994; \$14.95; ISBN 0836228146 (Boys); ISBN 0836228154 (Girls); *Intercontinental Books*; Phone: 888/866-6631; Web site: www.simonsays.com

It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Sex & Sexual Health

Robie H. Harris
This book for ages 10 and up uses cartoons to provide information about conception, puberty, contraception, HIV/AIDS, and other sexuality-related topics.
1996; \$10.99; ISBN 1564021599;
Candlewick Press; Phone: 617/661-3330; Web site: www.candlewick.com
The Spanish version, *¿Sexo... Qué es?* is also available.
2002; \$15.96; ISBN 1930996330;
Planned Parenthood Federation of America; Phone: 800/669-0156; Web site: www.plannedparenthood.org/store

What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Sons What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Daughters

Lynda Madaras and Area Madaras
These books cover the physical changes of puberty for young people.
2000; \$12.95; ISBN 1557044430 (Boys); ISBN 1557044449 (Girls); *Newmarket Press*; Phone: 212/832-3575 or 800/669-3903; Web site: www.newmarketpress.com

For a list of other books, Web sites, and organizations for parents, caregivers, and young people go to www.siecus.org/pubs/biblio/sex_ed_in_the_home.pdf or call 212/819-9770 and request a free copy of *Sexuality Education in the Home: A SIECUS Annotated Bibliography*, code # FPI.