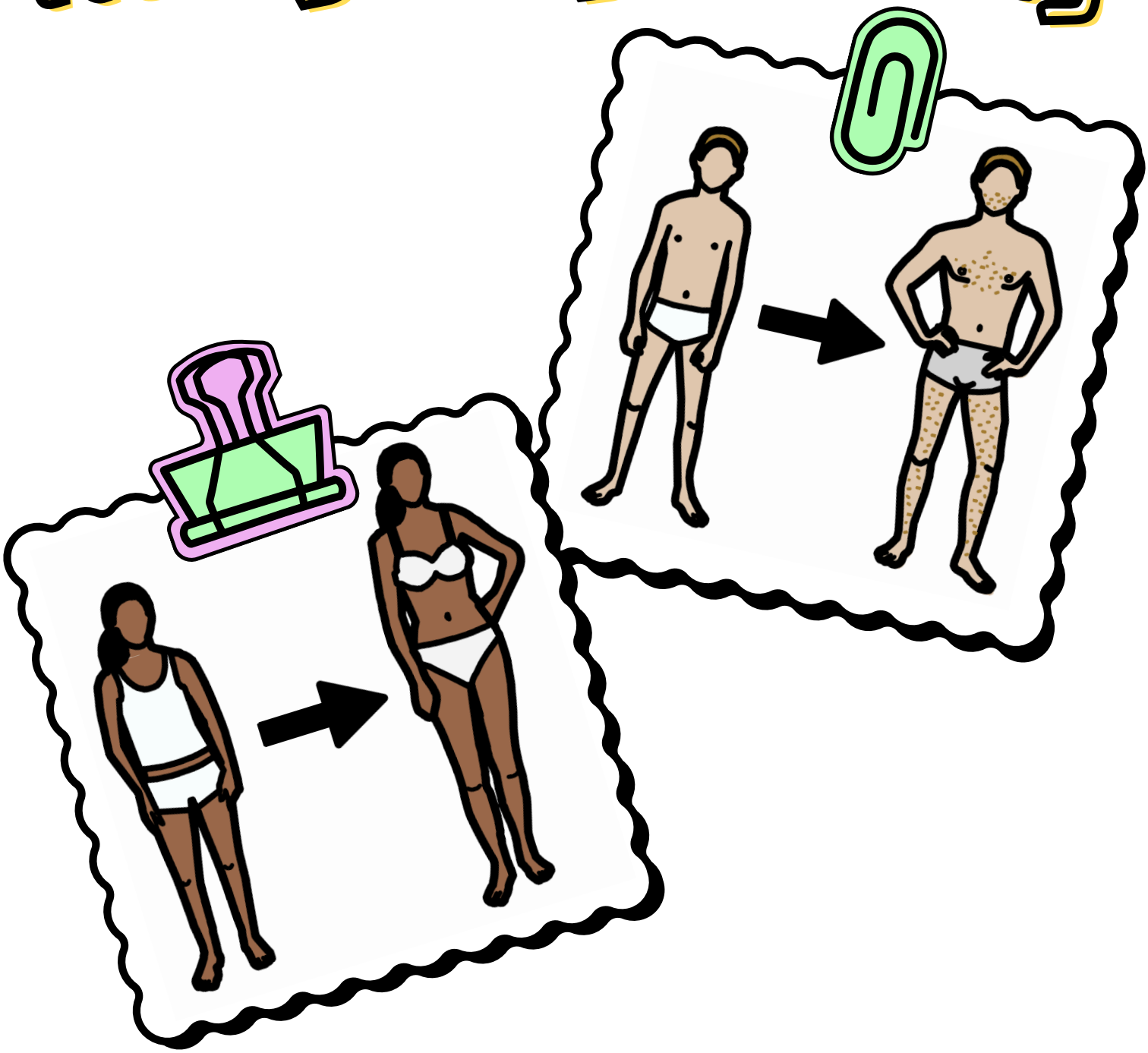
NSPCC

TOGETHER FOR CHILDHOOD

Navigating Puberty



A guide for parents and carers of children and young people who have a learning disability

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Introduction

Puberty can sometimes be a puzzling time for young people, as there are a lot of changes in the chemicals in the body (hormones) and in the way they think and feel. Some children completely welcome the changes that puberty brings, whilst others may be confused or uncomfortable. Young people who have a learning disability may find it difficult to understand the changes that are happening, manage their emotions, and communicate with others how they are feeling. They may also find it difficult to understand what is appropriate and inappropriate.

Puberty can also be a challenging time for parents and carers too. You may find it embarrassing or difficult to know how to talk about the changes your child is going through, and may have lots of questions about how to support your child through puberty.

The language and symbols used in this guide are simple and accessible, to support you when talking to your own child about puberty.

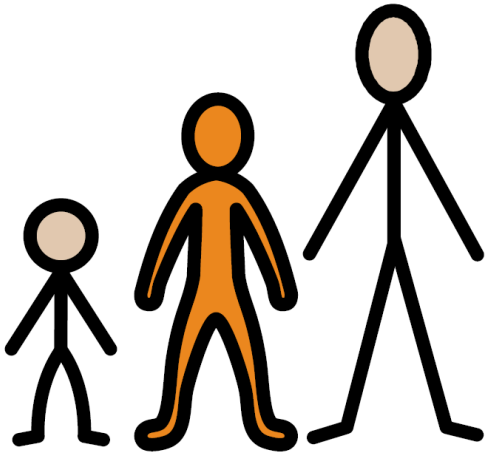
This guide will give you more information about what usually happens during puberty. However, it is important to remember that there is no ‘normal’ when it comes to bodies because everyone is different and unique.

What is puberty?

Puberty is the word used to describe the physical and emotional changes that happen to young people as they grow. Puberty is a normal part of growing up, and it affects each person differently. We will all grow up and none of us can prevent our bodies from changing. This is the same for everyone, whether someone has a learning disability or not.

Puberty can start from 8 years old, but it can often begin later. These changes will usually go on for a few years after puberty starts, but most young people will finish puberty by the time they turn 18.

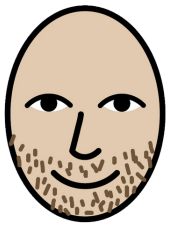
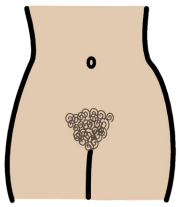
A word that you might hear a lot in relation to puberty is ‘hormones’. Hormones are chemicals that the body produces to send messages around the body. During puberty, your child’s body will produce hormones like testosterone and oestrogen.



Changes that happen to everyone during puberty

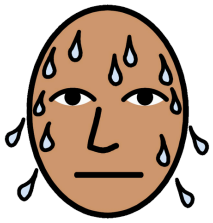
Body, facial and pubic hair

When young people go through puberty, hair will usually start to grow under their arms, around their genitals, and on their arms and legs. Lots of people also notice hairs appearing around the nipples, under the belly button, and on the face (such as on the upper lip and chin). The placement and amount of hair will vary from person to person.


Sweating and body odour

As a young person goes through puberty, you might find they sweat more and their hair becomes greasy. Keeping the areas that sweat clean and dry will help to stop any smell from developing. Some people choose to start using deodorant or antiperspirant under their armpits and begin to shower/bath more regularly.

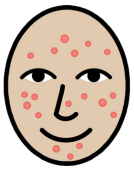



Body shape

Puberty causes a young person's body to change shape. They may become taller and heavier, their hips will widen, and their muscles will grow bigger.

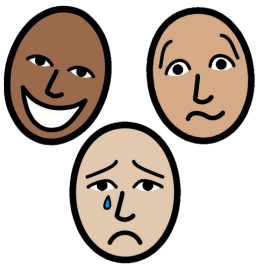
Acne

It is normal to get spots and blackheads during puberty and your child might have acne. Spots and acne are caused by hormones, not by being dirty or not washing. Having acne can, at times, be upsetting for some young people, but there are gels, creams and medication that your doctor might prescribe if needed.



Feelings and emotions

You might notice changes in your child's mood during puberty. They may appear happy or excited one minute and irritable, grumpy or tearful the next. Mood swings during puberty are very common. Young people may also become more aware of the differences between themselves and other people.



Changes that happen to girls/people with a vagina

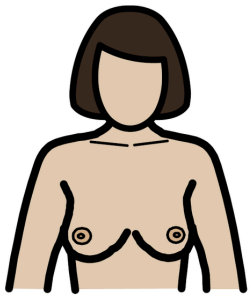
You may hear the words vagina and vulva used interchangeably, but they are not exactly the same.

The vagina is a muscular tube inside the body, but the opening can be seen within the vulva.

The vulva describes the external genitalia, which is the part that can be seen from outside the body.

Breast development

The size and shape of your child's breasts can change and grow a lot during puberty. It is common for one breast to develop faster than the other, and for one breast to be bigger than the other. It is completely normal for breasts to come in all shapes and sizes.

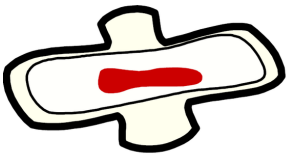


Discharge

It is normal for the vagina to produce discharge. This is a small amount of clear or milky liquid that comes from the vagina and keeps it healthy. If the discharge is yellow or smells, or if your child's vagina/vulva is itchy, you should see your doctor as they might have an infection.

Periods

At some point during puberty, most girls/people with a vagina will start having periods. During your child's period, they will lose a small amount of blood from the vagina. Their back, tummy or head might hurt, and they may feel more angry or sad than usual. Your child may be worried or scared when they start their period, so it is important to reassure them that periods are normal and losing blood is not something to worry about. You will need to talk to your child about using sanitary products, such as tampons and sanitary towels/pads, which absorb the blood.



Most people who get periods have one every four to five weeks, and they generally last between a few days to a week. For some people they are regular, and for others they are irregular. It is quite common for people's periods to be irregular when they first start having them, and for them to become more regular as they get older.



Changes that happen to boys/people with a penis

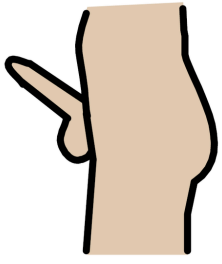
Voice changes

Your child's voice is likely to get deeper, which often takes several months to happen. While this is happening, their voice may go up and down and sometimes sound squeaky. This will settle down eventually. You may have heard this being referred to as the voice 'breaking'.



Erections

There are various changes that will happen to the genitals as a young person goes through puberty. The penis and testicles will grow larger, and erections become more common. An erection is when the penis goes hard and stiff. Erections can happen at any time. Sometimes this is because of sexual feelings but sometimes an erection can happen for no reason at all. Although this can be embarrassing for boys/people with a penis and those around them, this is a normal part of puberty.



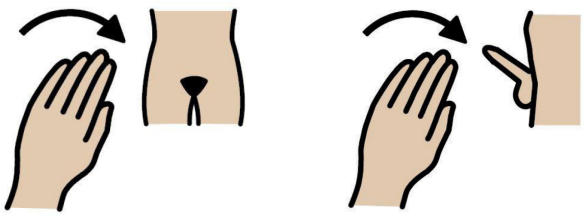
Wet Dreams

A wet dream is when someone ejaculates in their sleep and releases semen (a fluid which contains sperm cells) from their penis. This is completely normal, especially during puberty, but sometimes young people can feel embarrassed or confused. Sometimes, young people might wake up from a wet dream, but often they will sleep through it.



Masturbation

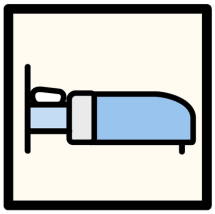
Masturbation is when people of any gender touch their genitals because it feels good or pleasurable. This behaviour tends to increase during puberty. Masturbation is a choice and although some young people may want to do this, others will not. Masturbation does not cause emotional or physical harm. However, it is important that young people are supported to understand that this should happen when they are alone in a private place, and not in public. Masturbation can become a concern if a young person becomes too focused on it, or it stops them from taking part in other activities.

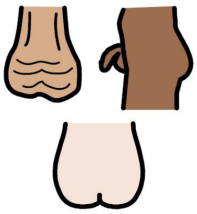


Understanding the differences between public and private will help to support your child to behave in safe and appropriate ways. Young people who have a learning disability can often find this confusing, so you may need to support them to understand what this means. Rules, boundaries, and modelling appropriate behaviour and language can be helpful for young people to understand the differences between public and private.

Private

'Private' can be described as being alone in a place where no one else can see or interrupt your child, such as their bedroom, a toilet at home, or the shower or bath. You may need to help your child understand that they can touch their private body parts if they choose to do so, but this must happen when they are alone in a private place.

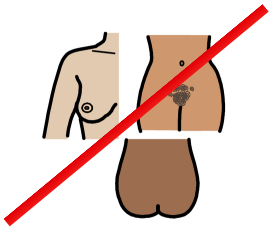




Public

Public is a place where anyone can go and where other people will be around such as a shop or a classroom. You may need to help your child understand that they cannot touch their private parts when they are in a public place, even if they want to.





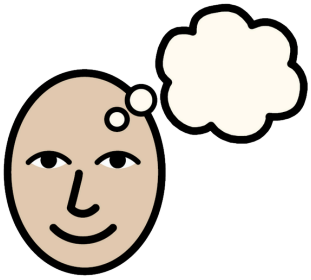
Top Tips

You can help your child get through the physical and emotional challenges that puberty brings. Finding out about what happens for your child during puberty will help you feel more prepared.

Communication

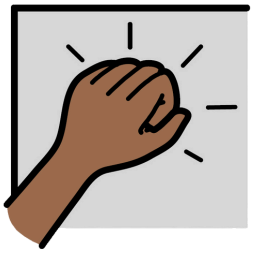


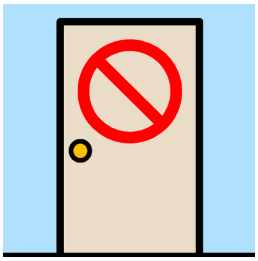
- Be clear and use simple language.
- Repeat the information often and be patient with them.
- Be sensitive to the huge changes your child is experiencing.
- Use visual communication such as signs, symbols, and photographs where appropriate.
- Listen to your child's worries or questions without judgement.



Although young people may use pet names or slang terms with their peers, try to use the correct words and phrases when talking to your child (such as vulva/vagina and penis).

Setting rules and boundaries



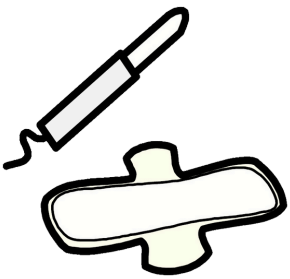


Try to give your child space and privacy as they navigate through puberty.

You should think about what rules you want to have in the home, such as:

- Knocking on bedroom doors before entering.
- Always wearing clothes in front of others.
- Reminding them that they can touch their body, but only in private.

Practicalities





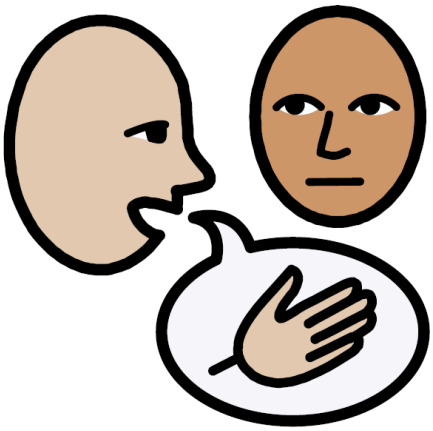
- Spend some time reminding yourself what will be happening physically and emotionally to your child. This will help you feel more confident in helping your child understand what happens during puberty.
- Help your child establish good hygiene habits, like using deodorants and showering regularly.
- Be tuned in to when your child needs privacy.

Sexual Behaviour

Many young people going through puberty will have an increased interest in their sexuality, and their behaviours are likely to reflect this. Sexual behaviour during puberty can be developmentally typical, however it can also be problematic or harmful, and may even be an indication that a young person has experienced abuse.

Research tells us that children and young people with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse, including sexual abuse. It is important that parents, carers and professionals are vigilant and consider whether a young person's sexual behaviour and sexual knowledge aligns with their unique stage of development.

If you are ever worried about your child's behaviour, towards either themselves or others, it is vital to be proactive and seek support.



Help and Support

NSPCC

If you are concerned about your child or another child, contact the NSPCC Helpline. You can also get advice and guidance about any parenting worries you might have, such as keeping your child safe online or managing their emotional wellbeing.

0808 800 5000

help@NSPCC.org.uk

nspcc.org.uk/helpline

childline

ONLINE, ON THE PHONE, ANYTIME
childline.org.uk | 0800 1111

If a child or young person you know needs to talk, they can always call Childline for free, confidential help.

0808 11 11

childline.org.uk

SENDIASS

This service is only available in England.

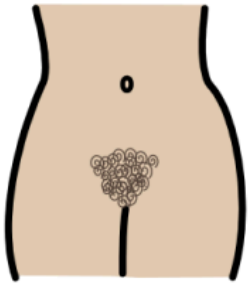
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) provides free, impartial, and confidential service offering information to young people with special educational needs and disabilities

You can find your local SENDIASS service here:

kids.org.uk/sendiass-home

Symbol Cards

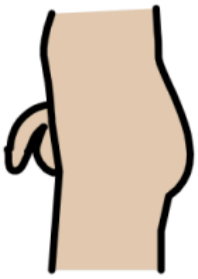
You may find it helpful to use these symbol flashcards when talking to your child about puberty.



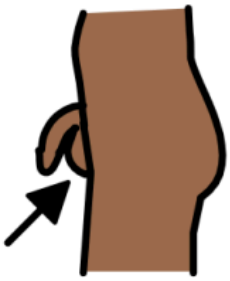
pubic hair



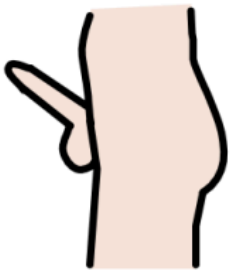
pubic hair



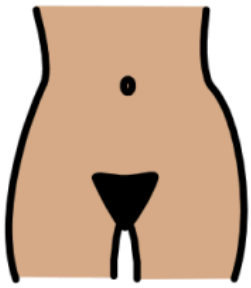
penis



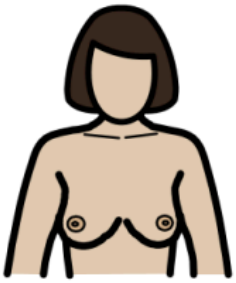
testicles



erection



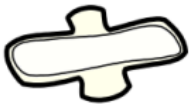
vagina



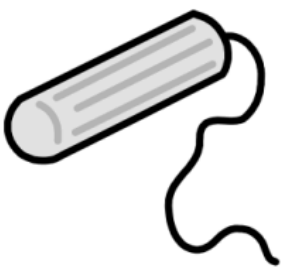
breasts



period



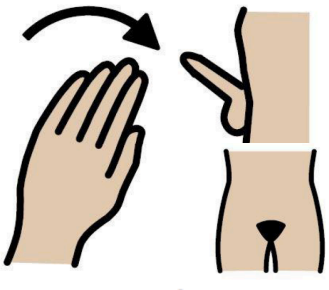
sanitary towel



tampon



wet dream



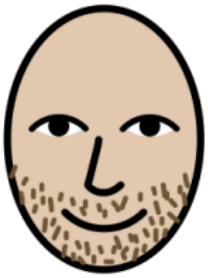
masturbation



armpit hair



body hair



facial hair



sweat



body odour



deodorant



spots



greasy hair



voice changes



puberty



public



private

This booklet has been created by Together for Childhood Stoke

Together for Childhood is the NSPCC's long-term project working with local communities to make them safer for children. We are grateful for the advice and guidance provided by subject experts, as well as staff and parents from Watermill School, who supported us to develop this booklet.

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