

## How to support children and young people through puberty

### Information for parents and carers

Puberty describes the process of development when a child's body grows and they experience physical, emotional and social changes. Many children and young people will begin puberty between the ages of **8 and 16**.

### Starting conversations

Many parents and carers want to have conversations with their child about puberty changes, but may feel nervous. By starting conversations early, you get to practice and prepare children for changes before they start. Having short, relaxed conversations often, shows that you are comfortable talking and they can come to you with questions.

Conversation starters:

- If looking at past photos, compare images of them younger to now and discuss how the body changes as it grows
- Ask what they already know about puberty or if they have learnt anything at school
- Use a scene from a tv show, picture in a book or

- When children are closer to puberty, a good book can facilitate more detailed conversations

### When talking about puberty

- Use correct names for genitals like vulva and testicles. For example – it's normal for the skin of the vulva, testes and penis to become darker during puberty. This supports young people to feel positive about their bodies and communicate clearly about health issues or injury.
- Give simple, factual explanations – for example: A period is when blood comes out of the vagina. The period blood is the lining of the uterus.
- Reinforce that the way they are experiencing puberty is the right way for them, changes happen at different times for different people.
- Avoid connecting sexual biology to gender. Use phrases like or 'people with ovaries or 'people with penises' when discussing changes. This lays the foundation for their understanding of gender roles and identity.
- Practice 'What if...' scenarios: 'What would you do if you got your period at school' or 'what would you do if you had a wet dream at a sleepover'.

Q: What is the name for the external part that is mistakenly called the vagina that include the clitoris, inner and outer labia?



A: Vulva



## Support healthy relationships

The quality of people's interpersonal relationships can have a profound impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Having positive relationships supports people to be happy and healthy, while a lack of supportive relationships can increase anxiety and depression. To support your child's ability to build healthy relationships with peers have conversations about personal boundaries, respect, and consent. Remind young people that they are the boss of their own body and equip them with the language of consent by sharing that:

- Everybody deserves respect
- To respect someone is to ask before you touch their body. For example – “do you want a hug” or “do you want to hold hands”
- Respect for self involves speaking up if you feel uncomfortable
- If they ever feel uncomfortable or don't want to do something with someone else, they can say so.

Help them practice the language of consent by asking - 'What would you say to someone who wanted you to play a game that you didn't want to play?' or 'what would you say to someone if they came up and hugged you and you didn't want them to?'

## Gender diverse and Intersex experiences of puberty

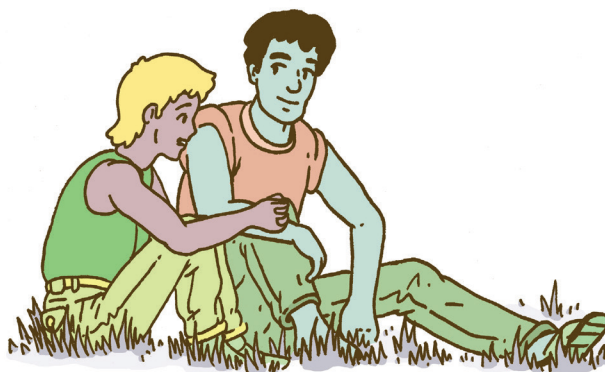
Gender diverse children may need extra support during puberty. Watching their body change in a way that doesn't align with their gender identity may bring on uncomfortable feelings.

Young people with intersex variations may experience puberty differently including some unexpected physical changes. These experiences can negatively impact mental health and increase anxiety, depression and risk of self-harm.

To support them you can:

- Reassure young people that all bodies are different and that their Identity is up to them
- Listen to your child's concerns and seek out appropriate supports
- Ask them what they need to feel comfortable. If physical changes are causing discomfort

adjusting clothing can help with confidence/ support them in wearing clothing that makes them feel comfortable and confident. (Remember clothing doesn't actually have a gender).



- If you are concerned about the way your child's body is changing or delays in development talk to a health professional (a doctor or nurse)

## Mood swings and disagreements

Puberty changes will affect how children think, feel and act. For some this can make disagreements more likely as children seek out independence. When disagreements happen:

- Stay calm (breathe)
- Hear their point of view before discussing yours
- Explain your concerns
- Be prepared to compromise

## Fostering positive self-image

The messages children receive about ideal body types from digital media and popular culture are often unattainable. It's important children receive information about what diverse healthy bodies look like.

- Remind them healthy bodies come in all shapes, sizes and tones
- Focus on a skill when giving praise or complements - "I like the way you have styled your hair" instead

of “you look pretty” (to foster a strong identity not based on looks)

- Support young people to develop practical skills so they can experience the feeling of pride and achievement.
- Talk about how photo editing and filters create unrealistic body shapes in movies and on social media.

## Sexual images and information

If your child has access (at home or elsewhere) to smart phones or the internet without supervision, they will see sexual and/or pornographic imagery; by accident or on purpose.

Things you could communicate with children:

- Porn is common on the internet and curiosity is normal – “it’s common for kids to be curious and look for pictures of naked people and sex”
- Porn is not real – “porn often gives people the wrong idea about what sex is (and how most people look when they’re naked because of lighting, special effects and plastic surgery)”. “Watching porn and thinking that’s how people have sex is like watching a car chase and thinking that’s how people drive”.
- Mainstream porn doesn’t show lots of things that are needed for sex like conversations, consent, condoms and mutual pleasure.
- Free porn young people access can send unhealthy messages, is often violent towards girls and women and only shows them giving pleasure to men. “In real relationships, sexual pleasure is mutual, shared and negotiated/ talked about beforehand”.



For more information and a free puberty activity book visit  
[www.true.org.au/relationship-ready](http://www.true.org.au/relationship-ready)

## Support your child’s physical and mental health

- Encourage physical activity every day
- Provide healthy foods
- Encourage a regular bed time and ‘winding down’ (could include no screen time) before bed

Providing young people with information as well as being open to learning, listening and mutual conversations, will support them to feel comfortable in their bodies and develop healthy, happy relationships with themselves and others.

**Disclaimer:** True Relationships & Reproductive Health (True) has taken every care to ensure that the information contained in this publication is accurate and up-to-date at the time of being published. As information and knowledge is constantly changing, readers are strongly advised to confirm that the information complies with present research, legislation and policy guidelines. True accepts no responsibility for difficulties that may arise as a result of an individual acting on this information and any recommendations it contains.

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