

Autism Spectrum Disorder & Puberty

Every child's experience and journey with puberty is different. For those on the spectrum, the physical, emotional, and social changes they will begin to experience can be particularly shocking.

When the time is right, here are a few considerations for parents and caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

- ✓ If children with ASD are not prepared for puberty, they may become confused or frightened that something is wrong. **Determining when to talk with your child about puberty will depend on their level of functioning, growth and development.** Some parents may delay the conversation so as to avoid unneeded anxiety — that is okay. Ideally, you want to preempt any physical changes.
- ✓ Social stories can be an impactful tool for children with ASD by teaching them socially appropriate behavior and responses to new situations. You can create, personalize— even illustrate! — stories to explain each developmental change your child will encounter. By sharing these stories, children can make better sense of what they're experiencing and know how to react and cope.

SOCIAL STORIES FOR GIRLS

- The shape of my body will change
- Extra hair will grow
- I will get taller
- I will begin my period

SOCIAL STORIES FOR BOYS

- I will get taller
- Extra hair will grow
- My body will do new things
- My voice will sound different

- ✓ **If your child has sensory processing disorder or is sensitive to certain stimuli, introducing new sensations proactively can ease the transition.** For example, pretending to shave using a toy razor and shaving cream can introduce these sensations without the risk of injury.

- ✓ Fluctuating hormones that are associated with puberty can lead to changes in mood and emotional changes. Having a list of preplanned ideas of what they can do when they feel these emotions can better support them to work through the feeling. It is a good idea to have these visually represented.

WHEN I FEEL SAD I CAN

- Take a nap or have time by myself
- Read a book or listen to music
- Sit with a loved one

SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

- Eating and sleeping disturbance
- Increased agitation
- Extreme lethargy

Some adults expect that depression is part of puberty, but it is not. Any concerns for depression should be discussed with the child's pediatrician.

- ✓ If your child has difficulties with language and abstract concepts, they may not need to know the reasons behind the developmental changes. It is less about teaching the "when" and "why" and more about how to respond to them. For example, the need for personal hygiene for girls and privacy for boys.
- ✓ There are also many books and videos for children with ASD and their caregivers. You may want to curate what your child reads or sees based on their functioning and experience with puberty. **It is always recommended that caregivers vet books and videos before sharing them with children.**
- ✓ No matter how different your child's situation is from others, they still need to establish some form of independence during these times. **Be proactive in finding ways to facilitate independence and avoid power struggles.** Finally, remember to exercise compassion and remind yourself that your child is not giving you a hard time, they are having a hard time.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

"Talking Together About Growing Up," Lorna Scott
"What's Happening to Tom?" Kate E. Reynolds
"What's Happening to Ellie?" Kate E. Reynolds
Autism Speaks: Autismspeaks.org/resource-guide



NEED HELP?

If you have concerns about your child's development, contact your Family First Care Expert and speak with your pediatrician right away.