

Talking about puberty

Talking about puberty can be awkward and uncomfortable, but it's important to provide children with the information and support they need to navigate changes to their bodies. Below are some tips and strategies for talking about puberty with your autistic child.

Start early

Many autistic children take extra time to adjust to big changes, and need a lot of preparation for change. Starting with simple, clearly visible or audible differences between child and adult bodies (like adults being taller and stronger, men having deeper voices or facial hair, etc.) can make it less uncomfortable to move into conversations about the other changes your child's body will go through during puberty.

Most children start puberty when they are around 9-12 years old (girls tend to be earlier, and boys tend to be later). Autistic children who know what's coming for months or even years beforehand are likely to have an easier time coping with the huge changes that come with puberty.

Be direct and literal

Most autistic children do best when given concrete, exact information. Use the correct names for body parts ('penis' instead of 'willy', 'breasts' instead of 'boobs', etc.).

Provide detail where appropriate (e.g. 'hair will grow under your arms and around your groin/genitals' rather than 'hair will grow in new places'). Explain the literal meanings of common terms like voices 'breaking', or 'wet dreams'.

For new processes that your child needs to learn, like using deodorant or sanitary pads, it often helps to demonstrate the new skill directly, and have your child practice it, before they need to use it for real.

Be prepared for difficult questions

It's ok to say you don't know, and offer to look it up together, or come back to your child with an answer.

It can help to have a script prepared ahead of time for if your child surprises you with a question at an inappropriate place or time ("That's a really good question, but I need to concentrate on grocery shopping right now, so we'll talk about it at home"). Make sure you remember to come back to the question; your child needs to know the answer, and may continue to ask at inappropriate times if they don't get it!

You may want to have a discussion with your child about who they can go to for information, and when it is appropriate to ask puberty-related questions. It's important to make sure that your child doesn't feel ashamed of asking questions, or of anything that's happening to their body – try not to react with shock, anger, or annoyance when they ask questions in public or at inappropriate times.

If possible, having a trusted adult (or even a teenager who has already gone through puberty) other than a parent for your child to talk to can be immensely helpful. Puberty is embarrassing, and comes with changes like developing sexual attraction, which are also embarrassing – children are often reluctant to talk about these things with parents, and someone else to go to with truly embarrassing questions can help. This person could be an older sibling, a cousin your child is close to, a family friend, or anyone else both you and your child trust.

Check your child's understanding

It's common for autistic children to misunderstand or misinterpret what they're being told – especially if it's a complicated subject or they're already anxious about what's going to happen. It can help to wait a few days, and then ask your child to tell you everything they know about puberty (or pick a subtopic, like periods or underarm hair, and ask your child what they know about it). Check if they've missed anything important, misunderstood anything, or added any information that isn't true.

All children get information about puberty from their peers and from the internet, and some of this information is likely to be inaccurate (particularly if an autistic child has misunderstood something a peer said, or inferred the wrong meaning of a slang term). It can help to encourage your child to share new information they've found out with you, so that you can correct any misunderstandings or false information. (You may also want to be prepared to google some things – your child is likely to come home with slang terms picked up from other children, wanting to know exactly what they mean.)

Allow time to process big feelings

Change is upsetting for many autistic children, and unpredictable, unavoidable changes like puberty can be the most upsetting kind. Your child may want as much information as possible all at once, and then need to sit and digest it for a while; or they may want lots of time between each new piece of information so that they can process their feelings. Some children will also do better with written information that they can process alone, before coming to you with questions. Work out with your child what will be most helpful for them.

Puberty comes with big feelings for every child, and decreases children's ability to regulate their emotions at the same time. Be prepared for your child to become suddenly and extremely upset or angry, especially when they are doing difficult things like talking about awkward topics – give them lots of space and processing time, and remember to give yourself a break as well!

Giving your child control over any aspect of puberty you can is often really helpful in decreasing their feelings of panic and loss of control over their own bodies. Let them try out different deodorant scents and/or different types of sanitary pad or other period products; get them to pick out the new bra or underwear that they like the best; and give them as much freedom as possible around clothing. Getting the chance to express their identity and have control over how they look through clothing helps children to regain a sense of ownership and belonging associated with their body (and it's worth having your child dress bizarrely for a while to make puberty more comfortable for them!).

Some aspects of puberty that may need extra processing time, or that may be particularly distressing for some children:

- Their body changing into something different. Many autistic children need control over their environment to feel safe, and puberty takes control of their own bodies away from them.
- New, unpleasant sensory input. Facial, pubic, underarm, and chest hair; periods and sanitary pads; and new hygiene requirements like deodorant can all be intensely unpleasant for autistic children.
- Autistic people are more likely than the general population to be transgender (their bodies don't match their gender) and/or non-binary (they don't have a gender, or have a more complex relationship with gender). It's common to figure this out during puberty, as their body changes in ways that don't align with their gender. If you think this may be something your child is experiencing, there is support available:

- Outline provide a free helpline and chat service for the rainbow community and their whānau – you can find the helpline number and access the chat service here: <https://outline.org.nz/free-helpline-service/>
- Inside Out has a series of video resources for families: <https://insideout.org.nz/for-whanau-and-allies/>
- Gender Minorities Aotearoa has a resource for parents whose children are transgender: <https://genderminorities.com/2017/04/01/help-is-my-child-transgender/> as well as a list of support groups and other resources: <https://genderminorities.com/resources/youth-and-whanau/>