



Navigating puberty

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Navigating puberty with your child is a daunting experience for all parents, but it can be especially daunting for parents who have a child with Down syndrome. Conscious that their child may be more vulnerable as they grow into a sexual person, parents are often unsure how to approach sex and puberty. Here are some practical steps to help reduce the stress for you and your children.

Start early

Instead of putting off talking about sex, start early! Talking about simple things when your child is young will help you lay the foundations for the more 'embarrassing' conversations that might come with puberty.

Begin by teaching the differences between boys and girls, the correct names of body parts, concepts like public and private, and appropriate touching. This will give your children the knowledge they need, and show them you can talk about these things in a natural and easy way. It's also good practice for you!

Noticing differences

Anyone who has had a baby boy (and some baby girls) knows the first thing he does when his nappy is off is explore his genitals. This is how he begins to develop an understanding of his gender. Children can also learn to distinguish 'boy' from 'girl' by seeing their parents in the shower or their siblings in the bath.

Correct names

Using the correct name for body parts will help your children avoid confusion in other settings. Words like penis, testicles, vagina and breasts should be used in place of slang or 'cute' words. An example of this would be: "Mummy is a girl because she has a vagina between her legs and you are a boy because you have a penis and testicles between your legs".

Public and private

Teach your child about privacy by letting them experience it. Offer older children privacy in the bathroom or bedroom: this means allowing them to have the door closed and requiring others to knock and wait to be invited in. Be concrete about the places in the house that are considered private (such as bathroom, toilet, bedroom) so as to avoid confusion.

Younger siblings need to be taught to respect their older siblings need for privacy. Give them

clear statements such as: "John wants to go into the bathroom by himself because he wants to be private. That's why he shuts the door. We need to stay out."

It is important that privacy is not only applied to hygiene and restricted to the bathroom and toilet. Many people require assistance with personal hygiene and are never alone during these tasks, but they still need opportunities for privacy.

Privacy is about developing a set of rules for our conduct and respect for ourselves and others. These rules become especially important when body changes begin to happen. Children need a safe environment to explore their own bodies.

If you establish a privacy system early on, your children will not feel strange about wanting privacy when they become embarrassed about their changing bodies.

Encourage your children to have private time beyond the bathroom or toilet – suggest a little quiet time reading a book in their bedroom or playing a solitary game on their bed. This shows children through experience that we sometimes need to take time out from the people around us.

Appropriate touching

All parents want their children to be safe in puberty and throughout their lives. Because studies show people with an intellectual disability are particularly vulnerable to abuse, it is important to empower your child by teaching appropriate touch, talk and trust.

The first step in teaching appropriate touch, talk and trust is teaching body ownership. Body ownership means they are the 'boss' of their own body, and no-one can touch it without them saying it's okay. Developing this understanding will help your child discern if someone is touching them in an inappropriate way.

You can help develop understanding by applying it

when you touch your own child. At an early age, let your child know what you are going to do and ask their permission to do it. For example, when washing your daughter's vagina in the bath, you could say something like: "I'm just going to wash your vagina now. Is that okay?" This approach teaches children that people have to ask permission before touching any private areas.

It also helps to make this message crystal clear by saying: "You are the only one who can touch your body without asking. Everyone else has to ask. When they ask, you can decide whether you want to say/sign yes or no."

Another effective way of teaching children about appropriate and inappropriate touch is to teach the Circles Concept. It uses concentric circles to help children understand the rules for appropriate talk, touch and trust and how they apply to the various people in their lives, from their inner circle of family, to their outer circle of strangers and community helpers. Check with your child's school to see whether they teach the Circles Concept as your child will benefit more if you are both teaching the same thing. Family Planning Victoria runs courses in using the Circles Concept for schools and carers.

Preparation for puberty

Once your child has understood the differences between boys and girls and has a firm grasp of the correct names, you need to have a discussion about the changes that will occur in puberty and adolescence. It is important to have this discussion before any major changes occur (such as menstruation) so your child doesn't think there is something wrong with them when the changes begin. (Puberty usually starts when girls are between 10 and 16 years and when boys are between 12 and 18 years.)

Make sure you talk about hygiene; ways to recognise and say no to inappropriate sexual touching by others; how babies are made; sexual feelings; wet dreams and masturbation (yes, for girls too!)

Hygiene

Hygiene messages can be started early along with body parts, although as children begin to change shape, develop body odour and menstruate, you will need to give additional instructions other than washing (i.e., use of deodorant, how often to change pads, etc.).

How babies are made

This can be discussed from the time children begin to ask. If the child is asking, they want to know, so don't lie or tell them to "wait till they get older". Give them a minimal amount of information that is age appropriate. You might say: "When two people love each other they can do special sexy things that can make a baby. It will grow in a special place in the mummy's abdomen" (you can touch your lower abdomen to demonstrate). It is important to let children know that a baby does not grow in the 'tummy' as this can be confusing. If the child can deal with more information, say 'uterus' instead of abdomen, and discuss conception, pregnancy and birth.

Sexual feelings

This is one topic that some parents dread! Who wants to think about their 'little' boy or girl growing up into a fully-fledged sexual person? Very few people! But it happens to all of us, and the feelings that come along with these changes can be very confusing. It is important to discuss relationships with your children and let them know it's completely normal to have feelings for other boys or girls. This discussion could be opened by asking your teenager if he or she has a special boy/girlfriend. (Do not assume it will be an opposite sex attraction). This helps your child know it is okay to have sexy feelings about another person, even if they don't want to act on them.

Wet dreams

It is as important to explain wet dreams to your son as it is to explain menstruation to your daughter. You don't want your son to suddenly think he has

a bed wetting problem at 15 and be too embarrassed to ask about it! Reassure your son that it is completely normal and happens to most boys around this time. Explain that wet dreams only happen when he is asleep and let him know what to do if he has one (i.e., put sheets and pyjamas in the wash).

Masturbation

Masturbation is another topic that makes many people uncomfortable, but the fact is your child will probably masturbate at some time during their life. It is important for you to convey hygiene and privacy messages (such as wash your hands and clean up, and only do it in a private place like your bedroom). You do not need to explain the procedures for masturbating, only that it is normal to touch yourself when you have sexy feelings as long as you are in a private place with the door shut.

Menstruation

Every girl will one day have to deal with menstruation and its imperative you discuss this before it occurs. This will reduce your daughter's stress and fear and reassure her she is not 'sick'. Explain menstruation is a normal part of growing from a girl into a woman, and is her body's way of telling her she's healthy and can make a baby when she's an adult if she wants to. Explain that it happens about every 28 days. If your daughter is able to understand more, you can go into more detail. When she begins menstruating, it may be helpful to use a calendar to help her chart her cycle and prepare for the next period.

It is important to take a relaxed, honest approach when you talk with your children about puberty and all its related issues. If you have any questions or would like to refresh your skill in talking about these topics, please contact us at Family Planning Victoria on (03) 9257 0133.

I. Champagne MP & Walker Hirsch L, (1993). Circles I: Intimacy and Relationships Revised Edition. James Stanfield Company, Inc.