

Autistic Spectrum Disorder and puberty

The importance of talking

- It's important to answer questions about puberty honestly and openly — but don't always wait for the young person to initiate a discussion. By the time children are 8 years old, they should know what physical and emotional changes are associated with puberty. That may seem young, but consider this: some females are wearing training bras by then and some males' voices begin to change just a few years later.
- With females, it's vital that they have been told about menstruation before they actually get their periods. If they are unaware of what's happening, females can be frightened by the sight and location of blood. Most females get their first period when they're 12 or 13 years old, which is about two or two and a half years after they begin puberty. But some get their periods as early as age 9 -- and others get it as late as age 16.



Hormones and behaviour

- All teens want more control over their lives, but the problem is that most children or teens on the spectrum don't usually negotiate new rules of behaviour with adults. Then, adults start seeing non-compliant behaviour as the teen tries to assert him or herself. Giving teens more control by enlarging the parameters, finding ways to provide them with opportunities to make their own choices, and giving them more responsibility, will lessen their need to be non-compliant.
- Adults may think a child's autism is getting worse, when in actuality it's their hormones that are fluctuating. Puberty is a time of huge change, and children on the autistic spectrum do not enjoy change. Parents can help their children by explaining it all by using social stories and books about the changing body. It is important that they understand that these body changes happen to everyone and are a part of life.



Self-Care and hygiene

- Teens on the autistic spectrum may not understand the importance of grooming to social acceptance, or they may have less social motivation to smell and look clean.
- Many ASD teens have challenges in the self-care routine, and it is important to make clear the steps involved in routines, e.g. having a shower. Where a teen is struggling, a task analysis can help – look at each step and identify any problems. For example, if they don't like the shampoo or getting water in their eyes. Laminated pictures can help if steps are being missed.
- Talk about where body odour comes from and why, be sure to mention that sometimes we can't detect our own body odour but others can. Emphasize the importance of daily showers, tooth brushing, mouthwash, deodorant and changes of clothes in preventing body odour. You may have to repeat hygiene instructions or reminders many times. You may need to come up with a visual or text schedule to hang in the bathroom. Social stories of fact sheets can help with explaining why this is important.



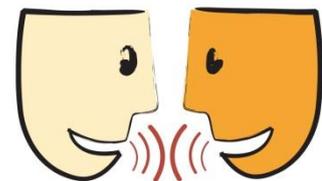
Understanding of private and public

- Many children and teens with autism don't naturally have the notion of "private" and "public" and that some behaviours are only done in private. This is a challenge for many. If a teenager is showing tendencies of wanting to masturbate at school or in public, he/she needs to be told that that is a behaviour that takes place in private at home. At home, the teen needs to have his "private" place (his bedroom) where he is redirected if he is engaging in this behaviour. It's very helpful as well to ensure your child is getting plenty of exercise—that helps in lessening the need.



Talking about sex

- Even a teen isn't interested in sex, he/she needs to understand what sex is. In high school, there's a lot of talk among peers about dating and having sex. Teens with autism are at risk for getting abused by others if they don't understand what constitutes a sex act, and what is appropriate and inappropriate touching by other people. The hard-and-fast basic rule to teach them is that no one should touch them and they should touch no one on the body parts normally covered by a bathing suit, without permission. Children who are fully included in school will be attending health



classes where they will learn about sex and related topics, but you'll still need to go over the information to ensure that they have understood how it relates to them personally. Do not assume that children with ASD will understand how to apply the lessons of school health class to themselves

- Give opportunities to talk about appropriate/inappropriate ways that people express interest in each other. Give specific age appropriate verbal and nonverbal examples. Talk about how to say no and what to do if someone doesn't take "no" seriously. Explain what flirting is. Give age appropriate examples of verbal and nonverbal flirting cues that people use. Explain the concept of personal space/boundaries, including how a person signals that they don't want another person to come closer or to touch them. Talk about types of touch, specifically the differences between how friends touch each other (on the arm, on the shoulder, quick platonic hugs) and how boyfriends/girlfriends touch each other (holding hands, on the face, longer hugs).

Sensory issues

- Include teens in choices of new hygiene products like deodorant, pads or tampons. Sensitivity to smell can make perfumed items (yes, even tampons) hard to tolerate. Tactile sensitivities may impact people's choices and comfort level with clothing, especially a newly introduced bra for girls. Help teens find age-appropriate clothing that's comfortable. Be alert to the role hypo- or hypersensitivity to pain can play in menstruation.

