
Early Puberty in Girls



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Early Puberty

Most girls begin puberty between 8 and 13 years. Your daughter is starting puberty early. Starting early may be socially awkward for your daughter but it does not mean that there is anything wrong.

- ▶ Any girl who shows the signs of puberty before 8 should have a checkup by an endocrinologist (doctor who is a specialist in the hormones of the body). Tests will tell if this is the early side of normal or something else.

What happens during puberty?

Puberty is when sexual development starts. Hormones trigger changes in the body during this time and:

- Breasts start to grow
- Hair grows in the armpits and around the pubic area
- Acne starts showing
- The body grows taller
- Menstrual periods usually begin 18 months after breasts start growing

Puberty also affects feelings and behaviour. Your daughter may start to be:

- Moody - feeling happy and then sad or angry within a short time
- Irritable for what seems like no reason
- Concern about her body and her appearance
- Interested in dating

What causes early puberty?

There is no way to explain why some girls start puberty early. Some people think it is inherited or that something in the food or air causes early puberty but there is no evidence for this.

- ▶ We do know that once this natural process starts, it continues until menstration (periods) begin and puberty is complete.

How can we be sure that my daughter is healthy?

Your family doctor can set up a visit to a specialist - a pediatrician (doctor specializing in children's health) or pediatric endocrinologist (doctor specializing in children's health and hormones). The specialist will:

- Test hormone levels in the blood
- Order a wrist X-ray to look at bone age. This will show the doctor how long ago your daughter started puberty.

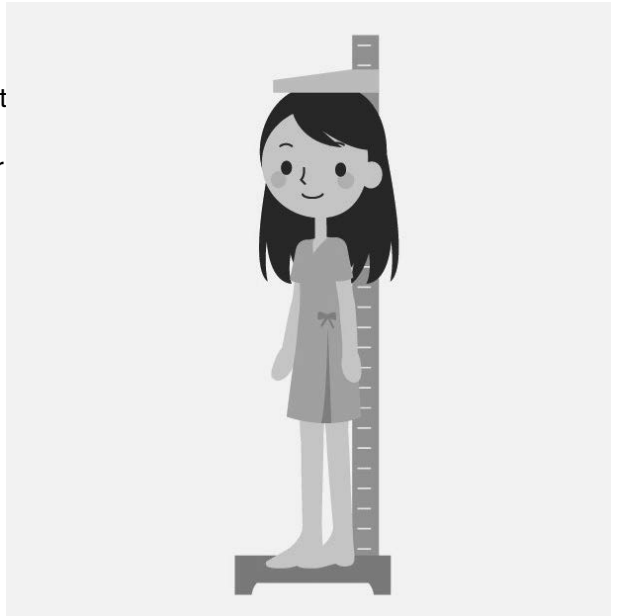
Bone age also shows how much taller your daughter will grow. She may be tall for her age now but a shorter adult.

The specialist may also order:

- An abdominal ultrasound to give a picture of the ovaries
- An MRI of the brain to give a picture of the brain

The doctor will need to check your daughter's breasts for development and look at pubic hair. However, your daughter will not need to have a vaginal exam to check for early puberty.

Please let your doctor know about the questions you have.



How can I deal with the challenges of early puberty?

Early puberty is often a social and emotional challenge. Parents and daughters are sometimes uncomfortable with being ahead of their age group. These challenges are social rather than medical.

Some parents react by wanting to delay puberty. We ask these parents to think about what is best for their child. There are medications that can block the hormones that start puberty but early puberty is not a medical condition that needs treatment. Your pediatric endocrinologist can discuss the risks and benefits with you. You can also talk with your doctor to help you understand your feelings and think through what is best for your child.

- ▶ Early puberty is often a social and emotional challenge. It is seldom a medical condition or disease. There is however, a medical condition called “**central precocious puberty**”. With this condition, puberty starts outside of the range of **normal early** and moves quickly. Treatment is suggested for this diagnosis.
- ▶ Puberty holds a lot of meaning. It seems like the ending of childhood. Often parents say, “I’ve lost my little girl. I feel like she’s lost her childhood.” It also brings into focus the young person as a sexual being. Often parents say “I am afraid that I can’t protect her as well from the adult world and she is still so young!”

What can I do to help my daughter feel comfortable with starting puberty early?

Children look to their parents for how to react. If you talk directly to your daughter about the changes in her body with respect and understanding, you will make her feel supported. This is what adults who have had early puberty tell us now.

We talked with many families who have supported their young daughters through early puberty. Here are some suggestions in their own words.

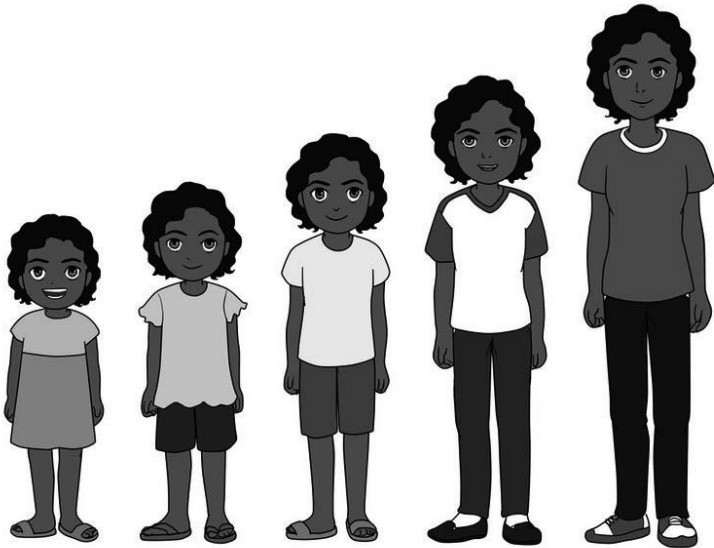
Make sure she understands what is happening to her body.

“There are a few good books and videos at a 7 - 9 year level of understanding. Our favourite was *What’s the Big Secret?* by the authors of the “Arthur” series. It eased us into talking about puberty and about sexuality (see the last page of this booklet for other suggestions). But, we made sure to take every chance we could to talk about natural changes and feelings in our every day chats.”

- ▶ “The best way to make it easy for your daughter to talk, and ask, and share concerns is to give openings for this. My mother never mentioned her periods to me. She certainly did not use words like “breast”. When she explained the facts of life, it was in a tense, private conversation. Little girls, unlike 12 year olds, do not have friends to talk to about puberty. They need to talk to their mummy or older sister.”

Prepare her right away for her first period.

“Blood means injury to a child. I explained that one day she would see blood that came from a place inside her that was not hurt at all. She would see it in the toilet, or in her panties, or on toilet paper. I told her about the first time it happened to me. I told her that it may be a lot of blood or a little. How ever much it was, it did not mean she was sick or hurt. I showed her with pictures where it was coming from and what it meant. I gave her a calendar and promised to write in the day each month it came for me. I said that when her “period” came we would write in her days and mine on the calendar. I did this as a way of bringing up the topic at least once a month so that she was reminded about it. Writing in the calendar also turned out to be the time she asked questions about it. What is more, it made her think about the period as something we shared as women.”



Consider that the first period may come when she is at school or at a friend’s house rather than at home.

“I remember, in my teen years, that I would break into a sweat when I had to buy sanitary pads. So, I took my daughter with me to the drug store to buy pads for me and for her. I was relaxed and she could see that. We then made a “period plan” together. We planned where she could keep her pads. We bought her a knapsack that had a zippered section that locked. We packed pads, brown paper bags for used pads, clean panties and a spare pair of pants into it in case of stains. We thought about what the school toilets are like in terms of privacy. We discussed what she should do with a used pad. I went to the school with her and we checked the best toilet to use and a bin for discarding pads.”

- ▶ It may be helpful to include the teacher in the plan for how to manage your daughter’s period at school

Help her learn to deal with new body care and hygiene issues.

“With puberty comes more body odour. Our daughter was not aware of her own body smells. We felt she had enough to cope with and did not want her to be teased about that! We made sure she had a bath or shower every day. I showed her how to use a non-perfumed deodorant. When she said that she did not like the hair in her armpits I told her that I would show her how to take it off. I made sure to tell her that some women took away the hair but others did not mind it. Since she did not like it we could take it off. When it grew back she could decide again if she wanted it off or not.”

- ▶ Note: Removing the hair in the armpits will not make the hair grow in coarser. The coarseness of the hair is caused by the hormones of puberty. Nothing will change its texture, thickness or how fast it grows.

Train her to respond with confidence to teasers and the questions of her curious friends.

“Without question this was the hardest aspect of early puberty for our daughter. What helped most was practising how to respond. First we explained that what was happening to her would happen to her friends also but later. We talked about how we are all interested in something that is new or a bit different. We want to know about these things and do our best to find out. We gave her some examples of this from her own



life. It helped her realise that those who stared and asked were interested rather than mean. We suggested that when her friends or school-mates made comments or wanted to see, touch, or talk about her body, she could tell them a little so that they understood. Explaining is one way of dealing with comments. I said we could talk about other ways too. We tried out things she might say like: “Some girls grow bigger when they are 7, some don’t grow much until they are 12. But we all get bigger - sooner or later. I’m starting to grow earlier. I have little breasts already. I’m the early bird.” We tried saying this in a strong voice with good eye contact. My daughter became quite comfortable with it after a while. She felt brave and strong. I think not everyone can do this though. I told my daughter that she certainly did not have to give everyone an answer if it made her feel uncomfortable. She could just say, “staring and touching people is not polite. Could we just get on with...” or “This is my body, and I don’t want you to touch me.” She could even just ignore those questions and move on with her chin up. An 8 or 9 year old needs lots of low-key rehearsal at home. It helps her have the right words and tone ready. If teasing becomes a real problem, there are several good books that give ideas to manage teasing. Ask at the children’s section of a library.”

- ▶ Note: You can also enlist the help of the teacher. This may be a good time for all in the class to begin learning about growing up, privacy and saying “no” to unwanted touch. After a while, friends and classmates will lose interest in your daughter’s growth and just respond to her as any other person.

Be mindful of her need for privacy.

“I made a point of not talking about her to others without asking her if she felt OK about it. She preferred to change for the pool and ballet at home. We bought her a loose fitting track suit to wear over her top. We let our son know that the time had come for him to knock before going into his sister’s room. We took our cue from our daughter - if something bothered her, we helped her find a solution.”

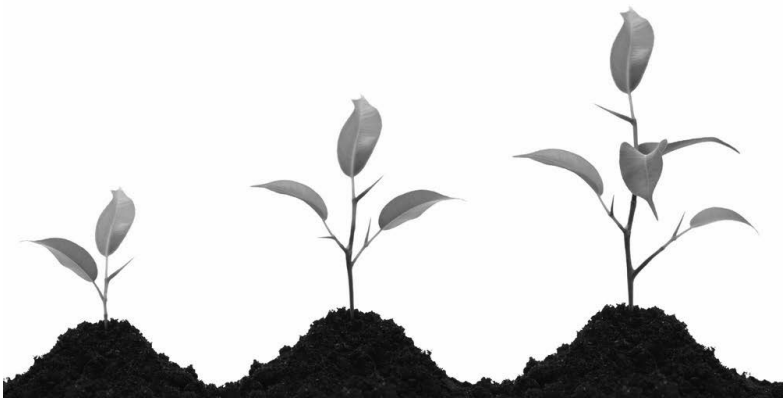
Remind yourself, and others, that she is not as mature as she looks. Expect her to behave like other children of her age.

“Parenting was a little confusing until we realised that her mature looks were tricking us. We returned to expecting 8 year old behaviour and needs. We gave her back her childhood. We had 8 year old laughs, cuddles and rules. We drew the line on behaviour just where we had a few months back.

Period (menstrual) care products

There are many options for period care products: pads, tampons, and menstrual cups are the most commonly used. If your daughter is very involved with sports she may be more comfortable with a tampon or a menstrual cup. There are tampon and menstrual cup learner’s kit from companies such as Tampax and Diva Cup.

Your daughter may also find it easiest to use padded cotton underwear, such as those made by Luna Pads.



Frequently asked questions about sexuality

Q: Is my child having sexual feelings?

A: Hormones increase feelings in genital areas. Most girls and boys touch their genitals. This is a natural, good feeling that some adults deny themselves because they were taught that is was bad. The important thing is to teach her that touching genitals is a private activity.

Most girls ages 7 - 10 have no interest in having sex with another person.

To help her understand sexual feelings you can read a book on the topic together. See the list on the last page for recommendations. Giving your child more knowledge will give her the power to make good choices. It will not lead to being more sexually active.

Q: How do I handle her interest in dating?

A: Help your daughter understand showing interest in dating by talking with her about it. Most children have an understanding of the idea of “showing off.” You can talk with her about how the way to make friends is to let others have attention.

We teach our children how to behave in all kinds of situations. For example, we teach our children table manners by modelling the behaviour, praising good behaviour, and showing disapproval at unacceptable behaviour and explaining why.

In a few instances flirting may lead to sexual interest from an older boy. Have a serious talk about sexual behaviour if this happens. See the resources list on the last page for ideas on how to have this talk. Also ask your healthcare provider for guidance.

Q: I'm worried about older boys or men being interested in my daughter.

A: Teach your daughter to tell the adults in charge right away is she feels something is not right or if she feels uncomfortable. Tell her to tell you if the adult in charge asks her to do anything strange.

No one should be touching any parts of her body that are covered by underwear.



Resources

Early puberty has its challenges. But if you are supportive and accepting, your daughter will enter this part of her life with a positive attitude rather than fear or worry. We hope this resource has been helpful to you and your family. Let your doctor know of all your questions.

Puberty resources for parents

Haffner D. W. From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children. NY: Newmarket Press, updated version, 2004

Hickling M. More Speaking of Sex. Vancouver Canada: Northstone, 1999.

Puberty resources for young children

Brown L, Brown M. What's The Big Secret? Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1997.

Hickling M. Boys, Girls and Body Science. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing. 2002

Hindman, J. A Very Touching Book. Baker City, OR AlexAndria Associates. 2002

Schaefer, V. The Care & Keeping of You. Middleton, WI. American Girl. 2012

Silverberg, C , Smyth, F. Sex is a Funny Word. New York, NY. Seven Stories Press 2015

e-book Let's Talk about the Birds and the Bees - Molly Potter, 2017

pubertytoosoon.com

thenewpuberty.com

Resources to manage teasing

Huggins P., Manion D.W., Shakarian, L Helping Kids Handle Put-downs: Teaching Assertion, Use of Humor and Self-encouragement. Longmont CA: Sopris West, 1998

Robbins J., Vanderslice, C. Stop Teasing Me! Pleasantville, NY: Sunburst Communications, Inc., 1995 (Video and manual)

Durbach, E., Mackenzie, B., Puder, C., Ternis, J. Teasing and How to Stop It. Vancouver, BC: British Columbia's Children's Hospital, 1993 (Video and manual)

nobullying.com

www.dove.com/self-esteem/bullying

To check out any of these resources, visit the Family Support & Resource Centre library on the second floor of the Ambulatory Care Building (above the Starbucks).

Acknowledgements

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