

**Fundamentals of Puberty Core Concepts**

Puberty is a normal process for every human. Social, emotional, cognitive, and physical changes are something every person experiences in this stage of life and can vary from person to person.

**RATIONALE**

*How do we teach, and why do we teach that way?*

- Age-appropriate, accurate information about puberty provides a foundational understanding of human bodies that can reduce anxiety about changes and help students feel more prepared and confident.
- New educators often focus on the concrete, physical changes that occur during puberty, but it is equally important to provide information on emotional and social changes - not as secondary realities - but as equal elements that all influence each other.
- Inclusive instruction that normalizes puberty changes and the diverse range of human experiences builds empathy and respect for others and can reduce bullying.
- Because the timing of puberty changes can vary from person to person, it is important to normalize a spectrum of experiences.
- All young people deserve access to the same information about puberty. Segregating students by gender for sex education classes can perpetuate stigma and gender stereotypes, and harm trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming students.<sup>1</sup>
- Teaching about the natural variations in sexual anatomy, including intersex traits and identities, ensures puberty instruction is inclusive and reflects the diversity of human anatomy. Many intersex individuals may know they are intersex from birth, while others may not know until puberty when their secondary sex characteristics develop.

**TALKING POINTS**

*What do we say?*

- Puberty is the change from a young person’s body to an adult’s body.
- The two main hormones that are responsible for the changes in puberty are estrogen (which is primarily produced in the ovaries), and testosterone (which is primarily produced in the testicles). Everyone has different amounts of both hormones.
- Puberty prepares the human body for the potential to reproduce. For people with ovaries this begins with ovulation, and for people with testicles this begins when their bodies start creating sperm, and they begin ejaculating. Not everyone will want to reproduce, and some people have conditions that impact their ability to reproduce.
- Many puberty changes are experienced by everyone, regardless of their anatomy (for example: growing body hair, sweating more, growing taller, mood swings, and a desire to fit in with peers/sense of belonging).
- Social, emotional, and cognitive changes can include: crushes, uncertainty about social status, peer pressure, wondering “Am I normal?”, testing boundaries, and a drive toward increased independence.
- Most people begin having sexual feelings and physical reactions to those sexual feelings during puberty. That does not mean someone is ready to have sex or that they must have sex.

**KNOW THE FACTS**

**FACT:** During puberty, anyone can experience a wet dream. “Wet dreams,” or nocturnal emissions while sleeping. For a person with a penis, ejaculation is when a small amount of semen (the fluid that contains sperm) comes out of the penis. For a person with a vulva and vagina, it is produced by lubricating fluids while asleep. Wet dreams are a common and normal part of growing up. They become less frequent after adolescence.

**FACT:** It is normal for individuals to feel different emotions about the same thing during puberty. For example, a young person might feel excitement, worry, or ambivalence about their body changes, or all of these emotions at once. Individuals may also feel different than their peers do about those changes!

**FACT:** Puberty blockers<sup>ii</sup> delay the changes of puberty by stopping the body from making the sex hormones estrogen and testosterone. These medications simply pause puberty and do not have a permanent impact to allow time for trans and gender diverse youth to explore their gender identity and for families to create plans for other care they may need. Puberty blockers have been used to treat precocious puberty (early onset) since their FDA approval in the 1980s.<sup>iii</sup>

### COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PUBERTY

“If I haven't gotten my period yet, can I still get pregnant?”

- This is a common question. Yes, someone who has ovaries can get pregnant once they start ovulating, which happens before their first period. Ovulation occurs when ovaries release an egg. During puberty, the body's hormonal system is not yet regulated, so it's not possible to know in advance when a person's first ovulation will begin.

“Why do I have a crush and is it okay?”

- A lot of people are curious about this. Emotions and feelings can change as bodies and brains grow. Many people might start to experience feelings of attraction for others. These feelings are completely normal and a part of growing up. It's also okay if someone does not feel attraction to others—yet or ever.

“Why do emotions change during puberty?”

- This is a really important question, thanks for asking! Puberty is a time when hormones are changing and increasing, which can affect someone's feelings and reactions about things going on in their lives. Throughout puberty there are lots of things happening—someone's body is changing which can feel exciting, scary, or embarrassing. People also grow and change emotionally and in their relationships during puberty. Folks may want to be around their friends more than they did before, they may want more independence, or they may have their first dating relationship. All these changes and growth can bring a mixture of emotions with them too which can also influence their feelings.

What does it mean to masturbate?

- Masturbation is when someone touches their own body to experience sexual or pleasurable feelings. Masturbation is completely normal and people of all genders masturbate. It is an individual choice and should be done in private. Masturbation can help to relieve feelings of stress or anxiety by releasing endorphins and some people consider it to be a form of self-care. Masturbation does not cause harm and will not change a person's body.

<sup>i</sup> [Advancing Inclusivity: The Impact of Gender Segregation in Sex Education](#). SIECUS

<sup>ii</sup> [Puberty blockers for transgender and gender-diverse youth](#). Mayo Clinic

<sup>iii</sup> [About puberty blockers](#). Doernbecher Children's Hospital, September 2020.