



# Puberty

The onset of their child's puberty can be a concern for any parent, with their child undergoing many physical and emotional changes. When the child has additional needs, especially learning or communication difficulties, understanding this phase might be more challenging.

At The SNAP Centre and on the SNAP helpline we are often asked for help with this particular issue. Although sex and relationship education (SRE) is part of the National Curriculum, it is often not delivered at the correct time for a child with additional needs or not differentiated to the appropriate level. Both mainstream and specialist schools tend to struggle with lesson planning and delivering appropriate SRE materials for different levels of understanding and each child's individual needs. The school nurse should also be a good source of information, but it can be difficult to offer the right support for each child's individual needs at a specific time. This means that more conversations about puberty may be needed at home instead.

## Some Common Challenges in Puberty

- Mood swings
- Acne and spots
- Pubic hair and learning to shave
- Understanding physical changes to their body
- Personal hygiene and the need to wash more carefully
- Masturbation and when or where it is appropriate
- Privacy and learning what behaviours are appropriate
- Understanding around relationships, identity and rights and wrongs
- When to share information with your child



**Typical challenges for biological males** include physical changes such as visible facial hair, their voice breaking, wet dreams and erections, which may become a source of anxiety.

Talking to the young person about what to expect, how to clean up and getting a good mattress protector may help reduce this. Normalise it as much as possible!



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**Typical challenges for biological females** during puberty might include growing breasts and needing to go for bra fittings, as well as navigating periods and physical symptoms associated with the menstrual cycle. Both can bring new sensory experiences and challenges.

Trying different period products and brands to find what is most comfortable for your young person might take some time but is worth doing to make the experience as easy as possible. Period underwear may also be an option, as they feel more like normal underwear than putting a disposable pad in and may be easier for those who find putting a tampon in difficult. These are becoming increasingly popular and are available online and from a wide range of clothing shops.

## Top tips for talking to your child about puberty and relationships

- Use clear language and scientific names for body parts. Keep the communication clear and direct so that your young person can understand more easily.
- When using visual resources, make sure to use anatomically accurate diagrams.
- Normalise it! Let your young person know that everything happening is natural and will be okay.
- Try to tackle one challenge at a time! It is a big life change to tackle so it will take time.

## Useful Resources

### General puberty resources for adolescents with additional needs:

#### Books (all available in the SNAP library):

‘Let’s Talk About the Birds and the Bees’ by Molly Potter

‘Taking Care of Myself 2’ by Mary Wrobel

‘Brilliant Questions About Growing Up’ by Amy Forbes-Robertson and Alex Fryer



Imagine: Freepik.com

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The following books are workbooks that contain activities or cartoons that might help to aid understanding:

‘Talking together... about growing up’ by Lorna Scott & Lesley Kerr-Edwards

‘Talking together... about sex and relationships’ by Lorna Scott & Lesley Kerr-Edwards

‘Exploring Friendships, Puberty and Relationships’ by Kate Ripley

## Websites

[Sex education - a guide for parents \(autism.org.uk\)](https://www.autism.org.uk/sex-education-a-guide-for-parents)

<https://www.ldexplained.org/social-inclusion/teenagers-with-adhd/puberty-and-teenagers/>

<https://www.uwhealth.org/news/puberty-teens-special-needs>

<https://www.autismcentral.org.uk/guidance/puberty>

The circle project is another useful resource that helps explain what behaviours are appropriate in different social groups: <https://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/visual-resources-intimacy-circle.pdf>

## Resources for biological females:

### Books (available in the SNAP Library or to buy online):

‘The Autism-Friendly Guide to Periods’ by Robyn Steward

‘What’s Happening to Ellie?’ by Kate E Reynolds

‘The Growing Up Book for Girls’ by Davida Hartman

## Websites:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/menstruation>

<https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/autism-space/health/menstruation-periods-for-autistic-people/#:~:text=Sensory%20issues&text=You%20need%20to%20do%20what,of%20microfiber%20polyester%20or%20bamboo>

<https://www.myfamilyourneeds.co.uk/support-child/puberty-and-periods-in-girls-with-developmental-delay/>



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## Resources for biological males:

### Books (available in the SNAP Library or to buy online):

‘What’s Happening to Tom?: a book about puberty for boys and young men with autism’  
by Kate E Reynolds

‘The Growing Up Book for Boys’ by Davida Hartman

‘What’s Happening to Me?’ by Alex Frith – *this book mostly focuses on puberty in males but also has a smaller section about how females are different.*

### Websites:

<https://www.myfamilyourneeds.co.uk/support-child/puberty-in-boys-with-additional-needs/>

[https://library.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/puberty-in-boys-with-learning-disabilities/#cmtoc\\_anchor\\_id\\_3](https://library.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/puberty-in-boys-with-learning-disabilities/#cmtoc_anchor_id_3)

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[Downloadable Survival Guides, Information and Resources from SNAP](#)

