

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

### Introduction

#### Why do I need to teach my child with DD about puberty and sexuality?

Children with developmental delays (DD) usually go through puberty at the same age as their typical peers. This is **as early as 11 for boys**, and **as early as 9 for girls**.

But because your child may have delays in other areas such as thinking, learning, and social emotional functioning, **they will likely take longer to:**

- understand bodily changes,
- gain self-care/hygiene skills,
- manage appropriate public and private behaviors,
- and learn about sex/sexuality including safe and unsafe touch.

All of these topics are very important for your child to understand in order to function at their best as adults.

#### What topic do I start with?

Start by teaching your child the appropriate names for body parts. This prevents confusion and gives your child words to use later when learning about puberty, cleanliness, and reproduction.

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

### Body Changes and Puberty

#### How do I teach my child with DD about puberty and sexuality?

You will need to teach your child about puberty and sexuality the same way that you teach about other important topics. For example, if your child learns best with repetition, break information down into simple facts and review them often. If he learns best with pictures, try using visual supports (pictures). Visual support makes hard-to-understand topics clearer.

#### When do I talk to my child about the bodily changes that come with puberty?

This talk should start early, **before** major body changes occur.

#### How do I start the conversation about body changes that come with puberty?

- For verbal children:
  - *“Let’s talk about body changes. Body changes happen to everyone when they grow up. My body changed, and yours will too. It happens differently for everyone, and that’s okay. The important thing is that you know you can ask me questions whenever you want.”*
- For nonverbal children:
  - Adjust language and information to the level of the child and add visual support.
  - Start saying something like: *“Your body looks different when you become a grown up. Your body is going to change like this (using pictures). You will start to look more like a grown-up body like me (or another person).”*

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

#### Visual Support 1.

Girls: <https://vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/files/HealthyBodiesAppendix-Girls.pdf>

Boys: <https://vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/files/HealthyBodies-Boys-web.pdf>

#### Hygiene

##### Why does my child need to learn about hygiene?

Just like for any child, learning good hygiene is important in order to help your child develop healthier life skills. It is also helpful for them, so they rely less on others for help with taking care of their own bodies.

##### What is a good way to teach my child about hygiene?

The amount of information you provide depends on your child's reading level, vocabulary, and memory. A picture schedule is a good start. Include pictures of supplies needed (for example, specific body wash, deodorant, razor), and a visual picture schedule of the steps to use them.

See the following page for a picture schedule for showering.

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers



- Courtesy of Vanderbilt Healthy Bodies Toolkit.
- Other examples can be found at: <https://vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/>

## Puberty and Sexuality A guide for caregivers

### Appropriate and Non-Appropriate Behaviors

#### Why does my child need to learn the difference between appropriate and non-appropriate behaviors?

Children who know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate public behavior are less likely to get in trouble with the school or police as they get older. Using socially appropriate behaviors will also help your child fit in with their peers and reduce the chances of being bullied or abused.

#### What are appropriate vs. non-appropriate behaviors?

These are behaviors that are okay to do in public and what is okay to do only in private.

Private behaviors include things like going to the bathroom, passing gas, touching private parts for any reason, and changing clothes, just to name a few.

There are also behaviors that were once appropriate to do with peers and adults outside the family but are no longer given your child's older age. For example, hugging others.

#### What do I do when a private behavior becomes public?

Redirect your child quickly. Tell your child where to go to perform private behaviors using simple words or pictures. For example, say something like: *"You can do that in your (bedroom, bathroom)."* Or show him a visual labeled *"Private."*

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

#### What do I do when a private behavior cannot be private?

Some children will need help with private tasks, such as getting dressed, bathing, or toileting. Teach your child how and who to ask for help with these private behaviors when he is in public places, such as a school or a restaurant. This could include teaching him to plan ahead, ask quietly, or use picture cards or gestures.

#### What are some guidelines on talking to my child about this?

Start the conversation early. Talk about public and private behaviors as a family and set some ground rules. Example: *"We are only naked in the bathroom or in our own bedroom with the door closed."*

Use visuals: Examples can be found at: <https://vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/>

### **Sex Education/Abuse Prevention**

#### Why should I teach my child with DD about sexuality?

Individuals with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual abuse because of dependence on others for intimate care, increased exposure to a large number of caregivers and settings, inappropriate social skills, poor judgment, inability to seek help or report abuse, and lack of strategies to defend themselves against abuse.

When sexual questions and behaviors of individuals are freely discussed within a family, healthy sexual development is promoted. Some may fear that talking about sexuality will promote sexual behavior. In fact, it is lack of education that poses greater risks for abuse and exploitation. Child abuse happens, but informed children are less likely to be abused.

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

#### What are some lessons I might teach my child?

##### **Teach your child that they are the “boss” of their body.**

Let them know that they are in control of who touches their bodies and how they are touched. This can be taught in the following ways:

- Model the behavior for them: *“I don’t want you to pull on my hand right now. Please stop.”*
- Immediately respect their request to not be touched in certain ways: *“Okay, it looks like you don’t want me to hug you/pick you up right now.”*
- When monitoring play, make it clear that tickling or roughhousing needs to stop immediately if a child says *“Stop!”*
- Do not insist on children giving/receiving hugs/kisses from relatives or family friends if they do not wish to. Alleviate offense by telling relatives and friends that you are teaching “safe touching” to your child by allowing them to be “bosses of their bodies.”

Note: An adult caregiver should always be present at doctor’s appointment examination, until they are older (usually 12 years old).

##### **Teach your child that others are the bosses of their bodies, too!**

The rules go both ways! Teach your child to ask before touching, to listen to what others have to say, and to think about what others are feeling.

##### **Empower your child to report and refuse sexual abuse.**

Connect and build trust in everyday moments so your child feels comfortable coming to you openly if they have questions or have experienced abuse. Teach your child simple, age-appropriate body safety rules. Keep conversations simple, be specific, and continue to review safety tips over time.

## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

### Call to Action!

#### Thinking about what your child needs to know about sexuality and puberty

What kind of conversations can you start having with your child about puberty and sexuality? Sometimes these talks can be simple, such as naming body parts, or telling them that *“private parts are the parts of your body that your underwear covers.”*

Jot down some thoughts here:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---





## Puberty and Sexuality

### A guide for caregivers

#### Websites/Toolkits:

- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Health and Development
  - <https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/resources/healthdevelopment/>
- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Healthy Bodies Toolkit
  - <https://vkc.vumc.org/healthybodies/>
- Parent Center Hub
  - <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/sexed/#materials>
- Committee for Children Hot Chocolate Talk® Campaign
  - <https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/>
- Organization for Autism Research
  - <https://researchautism.org/self-advocates/sex-ed-for-self-advocates>

#### Books:

- *You-ology: A Puberty Guide for Every Body* by Trish Hutchison, M.D. and Kathryn Lowe M.D.
- *The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls* by Valorie Schaefer and Josee Masse
- *Guy Stuff: The Body Book for Boys* by Cara Natterson