

Planet Puberty

A guide for parents and carers of
children with intellectual disability
and autism.



Welcome to Planet Puberty

Puberty is a time of big change. Changes happen to the body, emotions and social interactions. It's a new and exciting time, but can sometimes be a bit disorientating, for parent and child. For children with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder, puberty can be a journey with lots of stops, starts and detours. And for a few years at least, it might feel like they're living on a different planet - Planet Puberty.

Supporting your child during this time will allow them to live a more independent, happy and healthy life as they grow. But as a parent, it can be difficult to know where to start. That's why we've developed Planet Puberty.

Planet Puberty is a digital resource suite that aims to provide parents and carers of children with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder with the latest information, strategies and resources for supporting their child through puberty.

This booklet is a summary guide designed to help you to plan how you're going to support your child as they transition from childhood into adulthood. The more prepared you are, the more confident you will feel in supporting your child through puberty.

For further information you can visit the Planet Puberty website, view the webinars or listen to the podcast.

planetpuberty.org.au

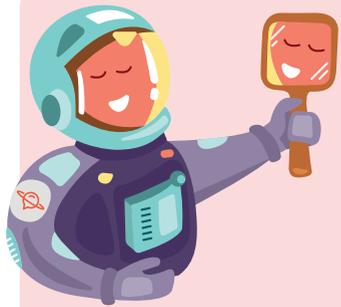


Table of Contents

1. Reflecting on puberty	04
2. Getting started	07
3. Planning your approach to Planet Puberty	10
4. Talking about puberty	12
5. Frequently asked questions	15
6. Useful contacts	20



Reflecting on puberty



What was life on Planet Puberty like for me?

Before talking to your child about puberty it can be a good idea to think about your own puberty experience. This will help you to understand what you can do to make your child's puberty experience as good as, or better than, your own.

Here are some questions for you to think about:

What are some of the key puberty experiences that stand out in your memory?

Is there anything that you wish had been done differently?

What do you want your child's puberty experience to look like?

What values do you want your child to have about their body and relationships?



Getting started

There isn't a standard format in which parents should teach their children about puberty. Each child is different and will need to be supported in different ways.

You are the expert when it comes to your child. You know what works and what doesn't work when teaching your child new skills and information. Things like social stories, visual schedules and games can all be adapted to teach your child new information about the different topics related to puberty.



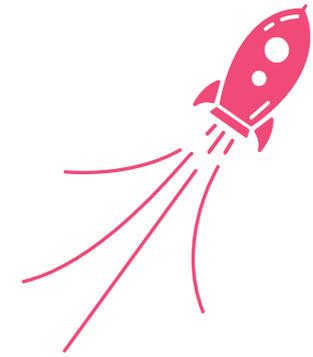
Keep calm and start with the basics

There is no need to jump straight into the difficult topics. Start with basic information and slowly build on this as your child grows. The following pages act as a general guideline for topics to introduce to your child at different stages of their life. If your child is older and has missed some of the things listed under 'early years' that is OK. Keep progressing with what they do know and introduce them to the basics of what they have missed.

For strategies on teaching your child about these topics go to:

planetpuberty.org.au

- Use the check boxes to keep track of the skills your child has learned already, and the skills you need to focus on next.



Early years

- Correct names for private body parts
- Basic consent skills - saying 'yes' to wanted things and 'no' to unwanted things
- Difference between boys' and girls' bodies
- Public and private places and body parts
- Where babies come from
- Different types of relationships (e.g. mother, father, sibling, friend etc.)
- Basic hygiene

Pre-pubescent

- Basic introduction to periods - what they are and when to expect them
- Wet dreams - what they are and when to expect them
- Introduction to body changes - growing taller, pubic hair, changes to private body parts
- Different relationships and appropriate types of touch
- Ways to recognise and say 'no' to unwanted touch
- Different types of relationships (e.g. mother, father, sibling, friend etc.)
- Basic hygiene

Puberty

- Practical management of periods
- Wet dreams - why it happens and how to clean it up
- Ways to recognise and say 'no' to unwanted touch
- Consequences of inappropriate touching of others
- Body changes - acne, body odour, mood changes
- What sex is, including how babies are made
- Changes in feelings and emotions, including sexual feelings
- Masturbation - what is it, identifying a private place to masturbate, hygiene

Older teens and adults

- Sexual feelings
- What it means to be lesbian, gay or bisexual
- Sexual relationships - dating skills, rejection, sex and consent
- Safe sex - how to use a condom correctly
- Contraception
- Sexually transmissible infections (STI)
- Sexual health - cervical screening, STI checks, breast checks etc.
- Parenting - the good and hard things about being a parent



Planning your approach to Planet Puberty



Now that you've read about where to start in supporting your child with puberty, it's time to plan your approach.

Think about what skills, resources and knowledge you already have and create a list of things you might need to make the journey easier.

Here are some questions for you to think about:

What are some of the things that your child already knows?

What are they currently learning about?

What will you work on learning next?

Talking about puberty



The earlier the better!

Children with intellectual disability often take longer to learn new things. This means that it is better to start talking about sexuality early and prepare your child well in advance for things they will experience in their lifetime (puberty, dating skills, safe sex or menopause).

The following are tips for talking about sexuality with your child:



Be open to answering questions.

If you don't know the answer to a question, it is OK to say "I don't know how to answer that, I need to get back to you". Maybe you can find out the answer together.



Seek help.

Don't be afraid to seek help if you are finding teaching your child about puberty challenging. This is OK. Go to the end of this booklet for some helpful resources and services.



Include sexuality symbols on communication boards.



React calmly and without judgement to your child's questions.

Doing so will make it more likely that they will come to you for information and advice in the future.



Using games, models and demonstrations are a great way to help your child learn and practice new concepts.

This can be particularly useful if your child uses non-verbal communication or finds it difficult to learn through talking.



Talk soon, talk often.

The one off 'sex talk' at puberty should be a thing of the past. Children with intellectual disability learn best with repetition. Revisiting discussions can take away some of the embarrassment and encourage your child to come to you for information and advice.



Take advantage of everyday opportunities to talk about sexuality.

For example, someone in the family may be pregnant or characters in a TV show may be starting a new relationship, take these opportunities to engage your child about these topics.



Frequently asked questions

My child hasn't started school yet. I don't think it is necessary to teach sexuality at such a young age. What if I tell my child too much too soon?

Often when people think about sexuality they think about sex and attraction. In reality this is only one part of sexuality. Sexuality includes the whole person and covers a range of topics to prepare a child for adult life and decisions. When children are young they begin to learn about their bodies, the difference between boys and girls bodies and how to socialise with other people. Ideally, education should start at a young age and be taught in stages according to the child's age and ability.

Parents are often concerned about the appropriate time to begin sexuality education. Education can start as early as bathing and toilet training. It can be as simple as teaching the correct names of the private body parts. Information about sexuality will not shock or embarrass them if started early and given in a matter-of-fact and sensitive way. Having frequent conversations can build knowledge over time as is age appropriate. The rule of thumb is 'talk soon, talk often'.



Frequently asked questions continued

My child is a teenager but has the mental capacity of someone much younger. I'm worried they won't understand what I am trying to teach them about puberty. How can I help them to understand what's happening to their body?

Regardless of a child's disability, their body will inevitably change at puberty. These changes can be scary and overwhelming for your child if they are not prepared for them to happen. It is important to start talking to your child about puberty and body changes as early as possible. This will give your child time to understand the changes that will happen to their body and feel prepared for when they start to happen. Many children with disability can learn a great deal if education proceeds slowly and repetitively in small steps.

It is also important to recognise how your child learns and choose resources and materials that work best for them. For example, if your child reads at a first grade level, the books and information you provide will need to match that level. If your child does not read, try picture books, dolls and demonstrations.



My daughter will be getting her period shortly and I worry about how she will cope once they start. How can I help prepare her for what's to come?

Starting periods can be a difficult and anxious time for any girl and her parents. However, research shows that when young women with disability are supported to understand their periods and given the opportunity to practice using period products, they are very often able to successfully manage their period.

Some things that you might like to try with your daughter to help prepare her for her first period are:

- Talk soon, talk often. Allow your child as much time as possible to learn about periods. This means talking to your child about growing up and their changing body at an early age. The more time your child has to learn about their changing body, the more prepared they will be for the changes to come.
- Practice wearing pads. Try out different styles of pad to find the most comfortable fit.
- Associate periods with things your daughter enjoys e.g. wear a pad and go out to the park.
- Use dolls, books and DVDs to talk about and explain periods. Explain that it is part of growing up for all girls and it is normal.

If your daughter has irregular periods, painful periods or other issues that make it difficult for her to manage her period, you should speak to a doctor.



Frequently asked questions continued



My child communicates non-verbally. How can I teach them about sexuality?

Every person communicates in some way whether with facial expressions, sign language, a communication device, gestures, or words. Teaching your child about sexuality is the same as teaching them any other skill or information. It is about adapting information and presenting it in a way that suits your child's learning needs.

There is communication software available that include images depicting various reproductive and sexual health words. These can be added to communication boards and used to familiarise your child with different terms and their meanings. These pictures can also be printed out and used in sorting and sequencing activities. For example, you can use the pictures to talk to your child about private and public behaviours and ask them to sort the picture cards into a 'private' pile and a 'public' pile.

Social stories can also be a useful tool for teaching children who use non-verbal communication about sexuality. Creating stories about topics like getting undressed or masturbating and listing the steps involved in story format can be a useful way of teaching privacy and social rules related to a specific behaviour.

My child sometimes takes their clothes off or touches their private parts in inappropriate places. How can I help them to stop this behaviour?

Generally, children begin to develop a sense of modesty at the age of 5 or 6. For children with intellectual disability and/or ASD learning about private and public body parts, places and behaviours may require some extra guidance.

There are a number of ways that you can help your children to understand private and public.

- Teach your child that private body parts are those that are covered by your underwear or swimmers.
- Model the behaviours you want your children to learn. For example, being fully clothed in shared (public) areas of the home and getting undressed in your bedroom with the door closed (private).
- Identify private and public spaces in the home. Take photographs of different places in the home and ask your child to sort the pictures into public and private places.
- Use sorting activities using pictures of public places and behaviours to help your child learn where it is ok to do a private behaviour like touching their private body parts.

These are just a few examples of how parents can teach their children about private and public. Depending on your child's learning needs, some strategies may be more successful than others. It's worth using a few different strategies so the learning is reinforced through different activities. The important thing to remember is that repetition and allowing your child time to learn is the key. Behaviour change won't happen overnight.



Useful contacts



For resources and further information go to the Planet Puberty website planetpuberty.org.au or contact your local service from the list below.

New South Wales

Family Planning NSW
fpnsw.org.au/disability
1300 658 886

Parentline NSW
parentline.org.au/
1300 130 052

Queensland

True Relationships and Reproductive Health
true.org.au
07 4051 3788

Parentline QLD & NT
parentline.com.au
1300 301 300

Victoria

Family Planning Victoria
fpv.org.au
03 9257 0100

Association for Children with a Disability
acd.org.au/support-line/
03 9880 7000 or 1800 654 013 (regional)

Parentline VIC
13 22 89

ACT

Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT
shfpact.org.au
02 6247 3077

Parentlink ACT
parentlink.act.gov.au/
13 34 27

South Australia

Shine SA
shinesa.org.au
8300 5300

SERU - Special Education Resource Unit
web.seru.sa.edu.au/
08 8235 2871

The Parent Helpline
1300 364 100

Western Australia

People 1st Programme
people1stprogramme.com.au
08 9227 6414

SECCA
secca.org.au
08 9420 7226

Ngala Parenting Line
ngala.com.au/service/ngala-parenting-line-2/
08 9368 9368 (metro and mobile phones) or
1800 111 546 (regional from a landline)

Northern Territory

Family Planning Welfare Association of NT
fpwnt.com.au
08 8948 0144

Relationships Australia NT
nt.relationships.org.au/about-us/what-guides-us/
1300 364 277

Parentline QLD & NT
parentline.com.au
1300 301 300

Tasmania

Family Planning Tasmania
fpt.asn.au
03 6273 9117

Respectful Relationships Tasmania
respectfulrelationships.education.tas.gov.au
1800 816 057

Parentline
1300 808 178



Acknowledgements

This resource suite was co-designed with adults with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder across Australia who guided the design and development of the project at all stages.

We worked closely with parents and carers to create a resource that provides relevant and useful information to help parents and carers support their child through puberty. We also worked with a variety of organisations with experience and expertise across a number of different fields.

We thank all these people for their time, feedback and contributions.

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Visit dss.gov.au for more information.

Planet Puberty

Contact Us

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