

Surviving puberty: A guide for parents and carers

This health information is general information only.
If you have any concerns about your sexual health,
please see a doctor or visit one of our clinics.

Family Planning Victoria clinics

For people aged under 25

Action Centre

Melbourne CBD
Level 1, 94 Elizabeth Street Melbourne
T/ 03 9660 4700 or
1800 013 952 (free call)
Clinic hours Mon–Fri 10.00am–6.00pm
Drop-in (no appointment necessary) 11.00am–6.00pm

Action Centre

Hoppers Crossing
Youth Resource Centre
82 Derrimut Road Hoppers Crossing
T/ 03 9742 8155 or 03 9660 4700
Clinic hours Tuesday 12.00–5.00pm
Drop-in (no appointment necessary) 12.00–5.00pm

For everyone

Box Hill

Ground floor, 901 Whitehorse Road Box Hill
T/ 03 9257 0100
Clinic hours Mon–Fri 9.00am–5.00pm
Mornings by appointment
Drop-in (no appointment necessary) 1.00–5.00pm

Cranbourne

Cranbourne Integrated Care Centre
140–154 Sladen Street Cranbourne
T/ 03 5990 6789
Clinic hours Tuesday 9.00am–5.00pm
Mornings by appointment
Drop-in (no appointment necessary) 2.00–5.00pm

www.fpv.org.au



At around 13 years, your child might appear to transform overnight from a sweet innocent to a raging hormone-fuelled stranger.

Well, it's kind of true. It's called puberty. Luckily, it's temporary and you and your child can survive with the right information and support.

Put yourself (back) in their shoes

You're a puberty survivor! Think back to when you went through puberty. How old were you? How did you first know it was happening? How did you feel? Who did you talk to? Did they help?

Remembering your own embarrassment and self-consciousness will help you sympathise with your child.

Be prepared

What is it?

Puberty is the process of changing from a child to an adult. Changes are physical and psychological, but the two don't always happen at the same time or rate.

Physical changes

See our *Puberty for boys* and *Puberty for girls* fact sheets for an overview of the physical changes your child can expect.

Psychological changes

At around 11 years, children begin to see the big picture, understand the world around them and think for themselves. This can come across as 'smart' or 'cheeky'. They also start wanting more independence from you and are desperate to fit in with their friends.

Your child will worry about lots of things, such as their new body shape, coping at school and what their friends think of them.

This can cause tension and arguments at home about their clothes, language, behaviour and friends. Pick your battles and remember how it was for you. Offer support and understanding without making a fuss.

Gaining independence means pushing boundaries. Your child wants you to set them. Involve them in setting clear boundaries with consequences for crossing them. If you think your child is out of control and risking their health or safety, your doctor can help or recommend appropriate services.

Preparing your child

Young people need accurate information about sex and sexuality to manage sexual relationships safely and responsibly. Parents and carers are their most influential role models. Before puberty starts, try talking with them about:

- periods, masturbation, wet dreams and other body changes
- ways to recognise and say 'no' to inappropriate sexual touching by others
- how babies are made and ways to prevent unplanned pregnancy
- sexual feelings and what makes a healthy and respectful relationship
- sexual diversity.

For more information, see our Better Health Channel fact sheet on sexuality education at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

Keys to communication

The best thing you can do to survive puberty is talk with your child... that's 'with', not 'at'! Even if you only get a grunt, always offer to listen if they want to talk.

Telling your child they have your support and love no matter what makes it easier for them to talk about the mistakes they'll inevitably make.

Your child might not tell you everything. Respect that right and steer them towards trusted people such as relatives, friends, professionals, youth services or trusted internet sites.

Together, you can find positive solutions to most problems and build a strong relationship.

Other issues

Puberty can raise other issues in some families.

Children with disabilities

Most children with disabilities reach puberty at the same time as others, even if they're intellectually younger. The following suggestions will help guide your child through puberty:

- Keep information at a level they can understand.
- Remember that they have the right to express their sexuality, so be clear about what behaviour is appropriate in different settings.
- If relationships start, make sure there is no power imbalance and consent is mutual.

Early puberty

Puberty that starts too soon is usually before eight years in girls or nine years in boys. The cause is often unknown, but it might be a problem in the brain's hormone-producing control centres.

Early puberty is usually a variation of normal, but if you're worried, see your doctor.

Late puberty

If your daughter hasn't had a period by 14 or 15 years but has other signs of puberty, such as breast growth and pubic hair, don't worry. Late puberty has no obvious cause and tends to run in families. If there is no sign of periods by 16 years, talk to your doctor.

Other medical conditions might delay puberty, including:

- past chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment
- being very underweight or over-exercising
- some serious long-term illnesses, such as cystic fibrosis or juvenile arthritis.

Breast development in males

It's common for one or both breasts to grow in boys around puberty. This is usually because of changing hormone levels and settles within 18 months to three years. Overweight boys can appear to have breasts. Sensible weight loss and exercise should help.

Extreme behaviour

Puberty can be an emotional and behavioral rollercoaster, often triggered by things adults consider trivial. Some young people do, however, struggle with serious problems. If your child's behaviour seems very different to their friends or your other children, they might be facing issues such as relationship problems, bullying, abuse, mental illness or the abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

Mental illness

Mental illness often starts in young people. Telling the difference between normal behaviour, such as moodiness, irritability and withdrawal and an emerging mental health problem can be very difficult.

If you think your child has worrying symptoms, see your doctor.

For more information, go to Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation at www.headspace.org.au

Abuse of alcohol and other drugs

Some young people experiment with alcohol and other drugs. Talking about these issues and setting clear boundaries with consequences for crossing them can help. Unfortunately, some young people will develop problems. Common signs of regular drug abuse include:

- unusual mood swings, irritability or aggressiveness
- lying and/or secrecy about activities
- lethargy, sleepiness or drowsiness
- falling school performance
- loss of interest in friends or usual activities
- altered sleep patterns
- inability to account for money spent
- disappearance of money or belongings.

If you think your child might be abusing alcohol or other drugs, try talking to them. If they deny it or seem unable or unwilling to stop, talk to your doctor.

Sexual abuse

Puberty increases vulnerability to sexual abuse. Most offenders are known to the victim and family. There is no such thing as a 'typical' child abuser.

Children do not lie about sexual abuse. If your child tells you they have been abused, take them seriously, be supportive and seek help immediately from your doctor or sexual assault service.

To contact the Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA) and the after-hours Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL), call 1800 806 292 or visit www.casa.org.au

Bullying

Bullying is deliberate physical, verbal or psychological harassment designed to hurt, threaten or frighten a person. Cyberbullying uses electronic technology such as email, SMS and social networking sites. Bullying is common and often found in schools, but it can happen anywhere and even come from adults.

Bullying must be taken seriously by adults. It can have devastating effects on young lives that can last into adulthood. Some young people become so desperate, they choose suicide.

Common signs of bullying include:

- not wanting to go to school or talk about it
- appearing stressed
- unexplained injuries
- loss or damage to property
- having no friends.

Talk with your child and the school. Seek professional help if needed.

Useful links

Children, Youth and Women's Health Service
www.cyh.com

Bullying No Way!
www.bullyingnoway.com.au