

How Can I Help my Child Navigate Adolescence?

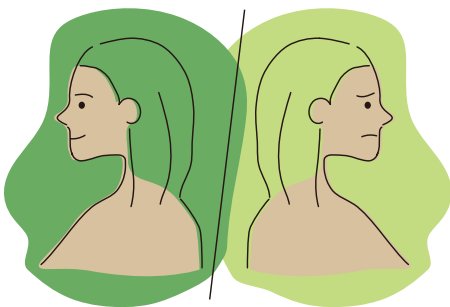
Helping Young People with Intellectual Disability and Autism Navigate the Social, Emotional and Physical Changes of Adolescence

WHAT IS ADOLESCENCE?

Adolescence is the time between childhood and becoming an adult. It starts when a child is around 10 -11 years old and ends when they are 19 - 25 years old.

During this time, big changes happen to the young person's body, their emotions (feelings) and how they interact with their friends and family.

Puberty is the physical and sexual development of a young person's body. It happens during adolescence.



CHANGES TO A YOUNG PERSON'S BODY DURING ADOLESCENCE?

Most young people will experience the following changes:

- **Body (physical) changes** in adolescence, such as:
 - bones and muscles get bigger as they become an adult.
 - changes in body shape
 - a deeper voice
 - skin conditions (pimples and acne)
 - more sweat and body odour in different parts of the body
 - hair growing in different parts of the body (on the genitals and under the arms)
 - for girls - menstruation (periods)
 - for boys- penis erections and semen ejaculations at night while they are sleeping (wet dreams).

- **Behaviour changes in adolescence:**

In adolescence the brain grows and changes. This can lead to behaviour changes such as:

- feeling strong emotions that can change quickly
- an increase in assertiveness and aggression
- wanting to spend more time with friends
- wanting to do more things on their own, try new things, and testing rules and boundaries at home and at school.

THE PHYSICAL (BODY) CHANGES- HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

It can be hard for young people with intellectual disability and autism to understand the changes they experience in puberty, and they may become anxious or worried.

Tips to help your child understand about puberty:

- **Talk to your child *before their body starts to change***- so they know how their body will change and to reassure them that nothing is wrong.
- **Use the *correct words* for body parts** (e.g penis and breasts) and body functions (e.g erection and periods). Using different words can be confusing.



- **Tell them why the body and behaviour changes are happening.** Explain that everyone goes through puberty and it is part of growing up.
- **Show your child what to do:**
Show your child how to:
 - Put deodorant on
 - Shave their face
 - Use sanitary pads and tampons when they have their period.
- **Use pictures** - Give your child pictures, social stories and books about puberty to help them understand. Think about how your child learns best. See the reading list on our [webpage](#).

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES. HOW CAN I HELP?

Social and emotional challenges are common in adolescence, particularly when it is hard for the person to communicate. Sometimes young people will show their emotions by being verbally aggressive, hitting out at others, damaging property or hurting themselves.

Tips to help with big emotions include:

- Adjust their schedule to keep stress low for them.
- Help them to name their feelings and to connect the feeling to a reason they are feeling that way.
- Think about activities that will calm your child when they're upset.
- Give them positive feedback when they try hard to manage their level of emotion.
- Teach your child to breathe in and out slowly to help them calm down when they are angry or upset.

STAYING SAFE. HOW CAN I HELP?

- **Make sure they have someone to talk to**- it can be hard for young people to talk to their parents. Help your child identify a safe person to talk to – e.g., a sibling, a friend or another family member.
- **Private parts:** Talk to your child to make sure they understand:
 - their private parts are always private, so nobody other than a safe person or health professional is allowed to see, touch or talk about them
 - they must never see, touch or talk about the private parts of anyone else
 - if anyone touches their private parts in an unwanted way, they should tell a safe adult straight away.
- **Internet safety:**
 - Check what your child is watching on screens (including their phone) and get filters on devices to restrict access to dangerous or inappropriate material. Sometimes young people learn

inappropriate sexual behaviour from TV, movies, or music videos.

- Sometimes young people can experience bullying by other children at school or online. Talk to your child and their school if you are worried your child is being bullied.



WHEN & WHERE TO GET MORE HELP:

If you are concerned about your child's transition through adolescence, talking to professionals may be helpful:

- **Your child's teacher and school** – using the same strategies across home and school can help your child's understanding.
- **A Behaviour Support Practitioner or Psychologist** can help with behaviour difficulties, including sexualised behaviours and teaching social rules.
- **An Occupational Therapist** can assist with teaching new hygiene routines.
- **A Speech Pathologist** can assist with making information about puberty and adolescence easier for your child to understand.
- **Medical Practitioners- GP, Paediatrician or Paediatric Psychiatrist** – if you are worried about your child's emotions, their mental health or behaviour difficulties, a medical practitioner may suggest support services and medication to reduce some symptoms in the short term.

If you have any feedback on this tip sheet please fill in our [feedback form](#). You can find readings, resources and links related to this topic on our [webpage](#).

If you are still concerned, contact your GP or Paediatrician about services that might be helpful.

