

Helping Your Child Understand Body Changes

Liz Harstad, MD, MPH, Developmental Behavioral Pediatrician
DeWayne Lazenby, MD, Developmental Behavioral Pediatric Fellow
Division of Developmental Medicine
Boston Children's Hospital

Goals for this session:

- Discuss ways to share information with your child about his/her body and physical development
- Understand children's thinking abilities at different developmental age
- Discuss how to talk about several difficult topics
- Review resources to aid discussions

We all come in as experts



Background

- Why have this talk?
- Parent factors
 - Consider your own experience
 - For many - not much was directly taught
 - Consider your own values and how they apply to your child
- Child factors
 - Developmental level (separate slide)
 - Temperament
 - Showing signs he/she wants more information

Thinking/reasoning abilities evolve over time



Sensorimotor

Exploring objects through touch, only think about things in the present

Birth -
Toddler

Preoperational

Think and talk about things beyond immediate experience

Toddler -
7 years old

Concrete operational

Can now reason, but only about concrete, real life situations

7-12 years
old

Formal operational

Abstract thinking, critical analyses of different points of view

≥12 years
old

Pubertal Onset (average ages in years)

- Onset 10-11 in girls
- 1st sign thelarche (breast development) 10.5
- Menarche (period) 12-13; usually 1-2 years after breast buds
- 11-12 in boys
- 1st sign penile and testicular enlargement
- Ejaculation 13

- May begin early
 - Cerebral palsy
 - Spina bifida

General Principles

- Start early, before the onset
- Teach body parts (penis, erection, ejaculation)
- Teach the way your child learns best
- Teachers, providers, therapists can help

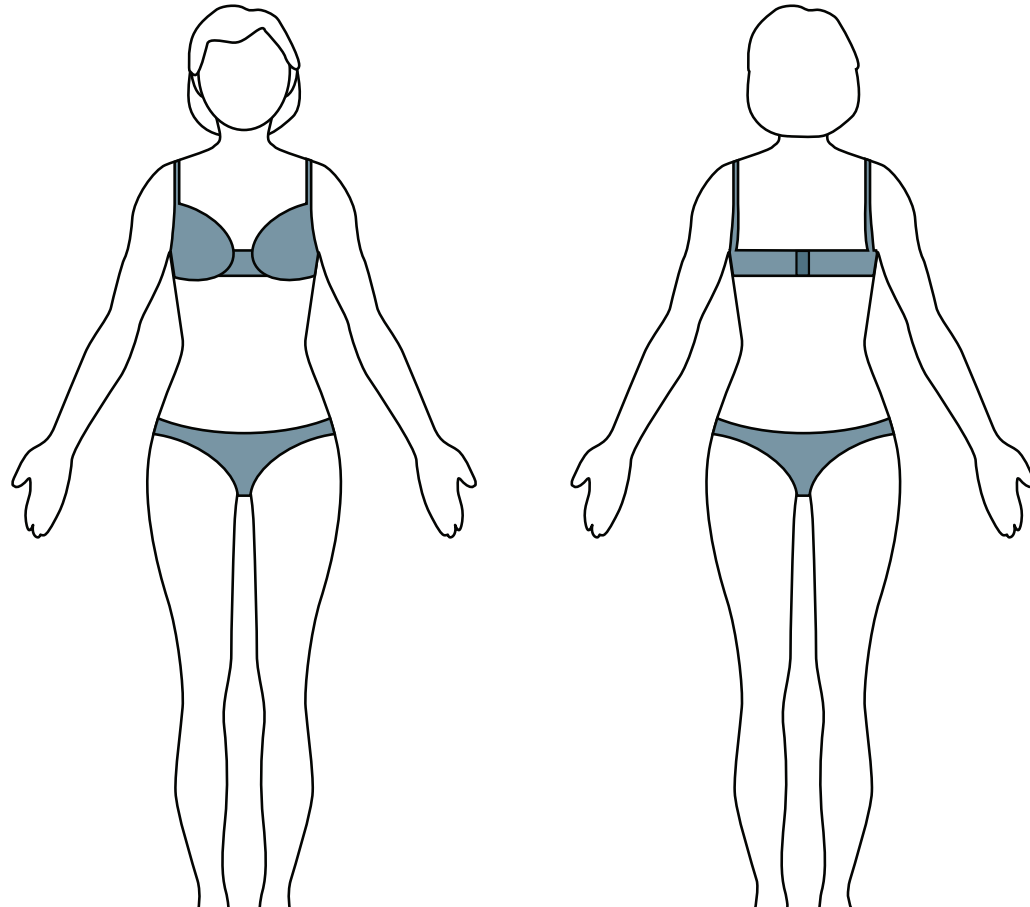
Public and Private Behavior

- Start early - talk about it when dressing, in bathroom
- Use visuals
 - Sort activity
- Redirect when in public
 - Use a picture cue, discrete verbal prompt
- When private can't be private
 - If assistance needed with toileting, hygiene
 - Teach appropriate/inappropriate in that setting

Private parts are covered by underwear

Teach your child where she can touch others and where it is okay for others to touch her by using these figures. Point to a body part and say "Can we touch?" If yes, put a green circle on that body part for "go." If no, put a red circle for "stop."

For example, your daughter should put a green circle on the hand but a red circle on the bottom. You can use the same activity and ask "Where can people touch me?"



Intimacy and Relationships

- Discuss social boundaries
- Who in your life can kiss you, hug you?



Talking about Sexuality

- Why do it?
 - Children deserve to know correct information
 - Can help them to identify their own feelings
 - Can help protect from abuse
- How to do it?
 - Teach age-appropriate information at developmentally appropriate level
 - Be as concrete as possible
 - Use visuals, body charts
 - It is okay to say “I don’t know but I’ll find out the answer and get back to you”.

Touching Private Parts

- Normal behavior
- Almost impossible to stop this behavior completely
- Where and when it is allowed may be best option
- Punishing, shaming, giving a lot of attention may increase the behavior
 - Less likely to ask questions
- Touching might not be associated with sexual thoughts
 - Sensory soothing, itch, pain (sign of infection)

Nocturnal Emissions

- Ejaculation during sleep
 - Normal process and not in your son's control
- Important to prepare - avoid feeling he is doing something wrong
- Some conclude they wet the bed
- Make connections with other body changes
- Encourage independence
- Use visuals/keep it private

Erections

- Most teenage boys have several throughout the day
- Normal part of puberty - often out of son's control
- Discuss what to do when it happens in public

Period

- Often happens 1-2 years after breast buds and/or similar age as for mother
- Many kids think blood = bad/pain
- Can use red dye to show what blood looks like on underwear
- Practice using pads/tampons before period comes

Good Hygiene

- Improves self-esteem and independence
- Make a picture book with your child
- Make hygiene kits
 - Shower, dental, shaving, morning routine
- Create routines
 - Shower CD (different songs for activities)
 - Use visuals - visual schedules
 - Try different brands, let your child choose



Moods and Feelings

- Label feelings
 - Or use visuals, cartoons, photos, sign language
 - Working with a counselor often helpful
- May indicate a medical issue



Physical Activity

- Boosts self-esteem and mood
- Schedule physical activities
- Make exercise rewarding (preferably not food)
 - If you..., then you can play more Minecraft
- Risk for obesity



Question

- “At what age should puberty be discuss versus the sexual act in children that are emotionally young?”
 - If cognitively at least at the preoperational stage, then we recommend starting the discussion prior to the onset of puberty.
 - Once a child is physically able to reproduce, he/she needs to understand as well as they are able.

Question

- “Regarding the sexual question how do you explain to a child that there is a genetic link that the disorder would be passed forward, such as for Duchene muscular dystrophy?”
 - Genetic counseling, X-linked recessive, make sure you have a clear understanding before explaining
 - www.kidshealth.org has medical wording for kids (including about genes)

Questions?

Resources to take home...

