

THE BODY AGENCY'S GUIDE FOR PARENTS:
**HELP YOUR SON NAVIGATE
THE ONSET OF PUBERTY**

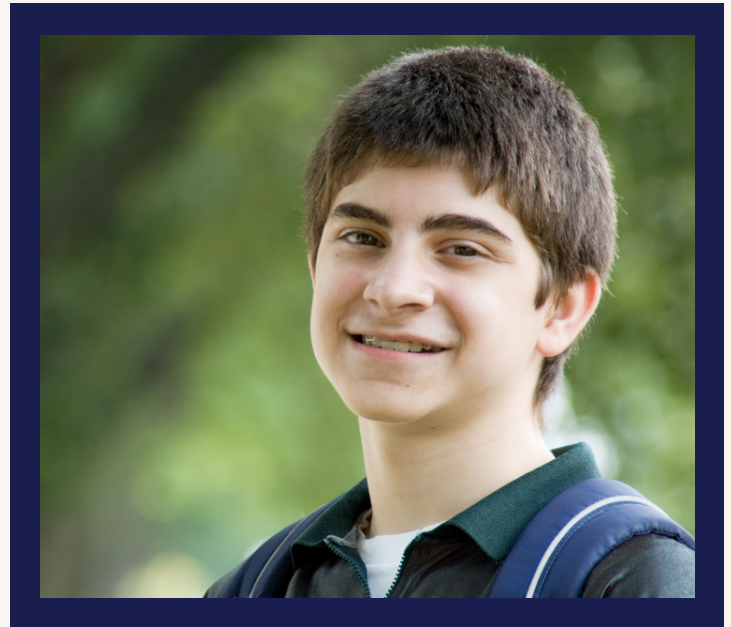


THE BODY AGENCY 

www.thebodyagency.com

A word.

Language Matters: He/him/his pronouns are used here to refer to a child who was assigned male at birth and whose gender identity is male.



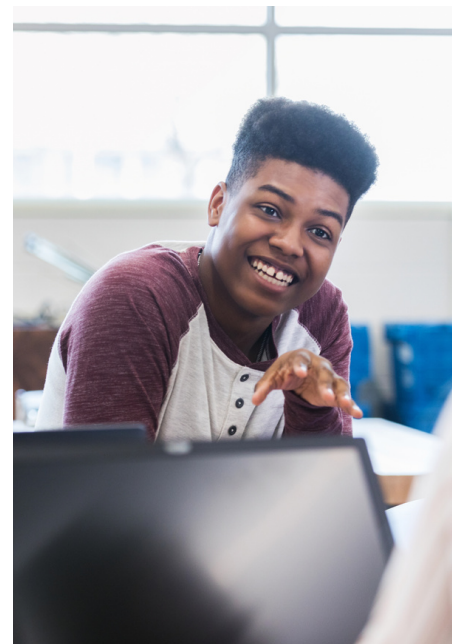
Parents of girls know they need to prepare their daughters for puberty and periods, and there are lots of resources to help parents and girls through this process ([including some excellent ones from The Body Agency, available here.](#)) Parents of boys, however, are often less engaged in their son’s growing up process. “He won’t listen to me,” parents often say, “And he certainly won’t talk!” It can also be harder to know where boys are in puberty because physical changes aren’t always as obvious as they are for girls, especially at first. But talk, you must. Often. Not only do they really need to know, they actually do want to know, despite all appearances to the contrary. This guide from The Body Agency is intended to help you develop an ongoing, judgment-free dialogue with your son early on so you can talk to him about any topic, any time. It is written for parents, guardians, or primary caregivers of preteen boys who are starting puberty or will start soon (around 11 or 12 years old). It covers physical and emotional changes, as well as important basics about how and when to talk to your son.

The Start

It's not always easy. Between ages 9 and 12 children have a greater need for independence, so you may find them less willing to listen to you as they get older. When this need for independence strikes, kids often start to gravitate more towards peers, where they may seek information that may or may not be accurate. If you wait too long to talk to your son, not only is he less likely to listen but you may also find he has done his own research from less credible, or possibly unintended, sources. Searching the internet for an innocent health question such as, "when will my penis grow" may turn up more adult sites he is not prepared for. Taking the time to talk with him now can help lay the groundwork for healthy communication moving forward. If you want your son to be able to talk to you and learn from you (instead of just his peers, social media, or even porn), this is the guide for you. The Body Agency is also developing health and wellness guides to help parents of older boys who are embarking on self-exploration or are becoming sexually active that will be released soon. Stay tuned!

“Awkward?!”

Many parents were not raised in families that spoke openly about puberty or sex, and consequently find it difficult to talk about these topics with anyone – much less their kids. Just do your best! Your son will pick up on any discomfort, perpetuating the common belief that these topics are taboo.



Is it time yet?

WHEN SHOULD I START TALKING TO MY SON?

Earlier than you think! It's never too soon to start to develop open, honest communication with your son. Of course, what you share at different ages will depend on where he is in his physical and emotional development. Boys who mature later are more likely to experience low self-esteem, depression, and general immaturity, so it's important to check in regularly to see how he is feeling.

IS MY SON IN PUBERTY?

It's hard to miss the fact that some boys your son's age are huge with visible armpit hair and acne, while others are still small in stature with no external evidence of puberty. There may be a six or seven year gap between the earliest blooming boys and the later ones! While there can be medical reasons for a pubertal delay, the most likely reason is just that every boy develops at his own pace.

The first physical sign of puberty in boys is growth of the testicles and lengthening of the penis, so it's not actually something many parents see with their own eyes. This change starts to occur when testosterone levels rise. Other effects of rising testosterone include the emergence of a sex drive and erections, increases in musculature, and deepening of the voice.



Other features associated with puberty such as armpit and pubic hair and acne are actually not the result of testosterone, but of hormones from the adrenal glands. When adrenal androgens ramp up, that's when your son will start to get hairier, greasier, and stinkier. Interestingly, while adrenal hormones and increases in testosterone tend to coincide, this is not always the case. What that means is that your son may be more advanced in adrenal maturity (hairy and stinky) than testosterone-driven maturity (larger sex organs) or vice versa. Until they are both present, he is not in full-fledged puberty (although it may feel like it to you). For most boys, this happens between ages 9 and 14. If your son's testicles haven't begun to grow by age 14, talk to his pediatrician



What to cover in your talks

BODY STUFF

There are so many changes around this age, it's hard to know where to start. You may want to follow your nose – literally. Growing children will have new hygiene needs (more frequent and rigorous bathing!). It's also time to transfer over responsibility for hygiene that still involves a parent.

KEEP IT CLEAN!

It's not just oilier hair that will need to be washed more frequently, but his body too. Make sure your son is bathing regularly with soap, and spending a little more time where his sweat glands are starting to work overtime – feet, groin, and armpits.

YOU CAN HELP YOUR SON BY...

- Buying deodorant/anti-perspirant if/when he needs it, and making sure he doesn't overdo it with scented body spray if he chooses to use it.
- Teaching him to wash his face twice a day with a warm water and a cleanser that suits his skin type. Also, if he gets acne, teach him what to do and what not to do to help keep it in check. If your son has bad acne that does not respond to over-the-counter face washes, pimple patches, or acne creams, talk to your trusted health care provider to review other options.
- Making sure he has appropriate products that will help with skin concerns, like moisturizer (to prevent skin from becoming too dry and flaky, as can happen with some acne treatments) and sunscreen free of carcinogenic benzenes. You may want to find products that are hypoallergenic, meaning they are free of irritating ingredients. If his skin is oily, you may want to find products that are oil-free or non-comedogenic (meaning they are less likely to clog his pores).
- Giving him chapstick with sun protection factor (SPF) and sunglasses with UVA/UVB protection to protect his eyes and lips from the sun.
- Keeping an eye on his shoes and clothes to make sure they still fit with his rapid growth, and are comfortable for his activities and interests. He may want tighter underwear (think boxer briefs) and looser clothing to conceal erections that can happen spontaneously (and frequently) once he is in puberty.
- Teaching him how to deal with his stinky clothes and shoes, including the need to change clothes every day and how/where dirty clothes get washed.

WHAT'S GOING ON DOWN THERE?

Although your son's body has been practicing erections since he was a baby, things are changing now. He may get spontaneous erections for no reason at all, and wet dreams that most believe are also not sexually motivated. He will also have erections in response to visual, mental, or physical stimulus that can result in ejaculation, and he may at some point begin to masturbate with a purpose. (For more on masturbation and pornography, read on.)

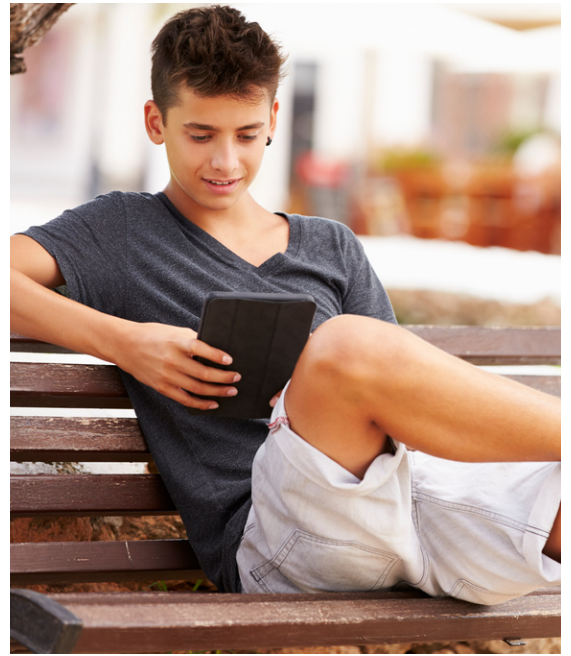


YOU CAN HELP YOUR SON BY...

- Normalizing it! Tell him (without embarrassment if you can) why you are suggesting he wear boxer briefs and why you will start to knock before entering his room. He may want and need more privacy than he did before.
- Discussing your household's approach to nudity with your son to make sure he feels comfortable at home.
- Talking to him about social media, sexy images and porn in an age-appropriate way.
- Teaching him how to clean semen from wet dreams (if he has them) off his sheets with a damp washcloth and reminding him how to do laundry.

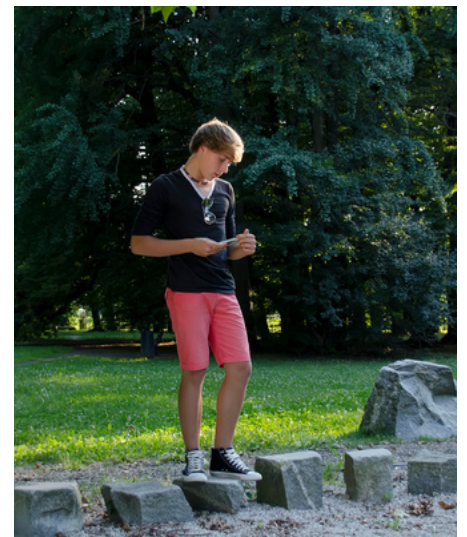
IT'S NOT JUST DOWN THERE- CHANGES HAPPEN ALL OVER

As if changes below the belt weren't enough, there are (or soon will be) also changes all over your son's body. For instance, about half of boys will see a mound of breast tissue under their nipple or experience tenderness in the area. Normal! Some boys will develop larger musculature than others regardless of their fitness regime. Normal!



YOU CAN HELP YOUR SON BY...

- Making sure he knows that the changes his body is experiencing are normal and are happening to his peers too, whether or not they show it or talk about it.
- Putting books on boy (and girl) development around your home to help normalize conversations about puberty and go into more detail on pubertal body changes. You can't go wrong with the Guy Stuff series for boys and The Care and Keeping of You books girls by New York Times bestselling author Dr. Cara Natterson. Adults will also be interested in her excellent book read Decoding Boys: New Science Behind the Subtle Art of Raising Sons.
- Having frequent check ins with him so he knows you are there for him and will answer his questions, no matter how embarrassing or unusual they may be. If he asks you something you don't know, tell him you'll find out – and then get back to him.



Healthy Basics

DIET

Advice for tweens is basically the same as it is for humans of all ages: try to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet (“eat the rainbow”), starting with a good breakfast. Your pediatrician can be a good resource who can talk to him about the benefits of a healthy diet generally. In addition, since tweens are building muscle and bone, they need sufficient protein and enough calcium. Children of all genders aged 9 to 14 need about 34 grams of protein (once they become adolescents, this number varies by gender with boys needing more), although those who are underweight or have certain conditions may need more. And yes, there is such a thing as too much protein. Kids and teens aged 9 to 18 need 1,300 mg calcium per day. Iron and vitamins A, B, C, D, E, and K are also particularly important for boys at this stage of development.

Ensuring your son has access to healthy snacks can also help keep him feeling good when he’s on-the-go. Go to www.choosemyplate.gov to learn with him about making healthy eating choices. In general, boys this age do not need dietary supplements unless his health care provider recommends them. Alcohol, cigarettes (including e-cigarettes for vaping), and marijuana (in states that have legalized it) are illegal for minors in the U.S.



It is important to know that many boys gain weight before they have a growth spurt – so they grow out, then up. Weight spurts, just like growth spurts, are part of normal growth. Nevertheless, you can help him by keeping junk food and sugary drinks to a minimum while allowing room for treats in moderation. In general, sports drinks, smoothies, sodas and juices are better as a treat than part of a regular diet because of their high caloric/sugar content and lack of virtually any other nutrients. What he really needs more than the “vitamins, minerals, and proteins” these drinks often tout is hydration, which he can get through plain or flavored/carbonated water or milk.

When talking to your son about food, it can be helpful to focus on health rather than weight. Instead of making comments that could impact his self-image and esteem, you can set him up for success by emphasizing the importance of healthy eating for the whole family and making it easy to eat healthy foods and move often. If your son is already anxious about weight or makes comments about his own weight, you should respond right away, particularly if he is being bullied in any way about it.



CONSISTENT EXERCISE

One of the best gifts you can give your son is to help him find ways that keep his body moving in a way he enjoys. An active lifestyle can help him stay healthy throughout adulthood! If he is not a big fan of exercise, know that all movement throughout the day can add up. However, because eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia can also manifest in all genders at a young age, it may be helpful to set healthy fitness goals, rather than aspire to a set weight. You can exercising with him to make sure he is getting enough movement in his life. This has the double benefit of creating good bonding time where you can have fun and/or broach sensitive topics...like puberty!

SLEEP

While many tweens are notably different and more mature than younger children, their sleep needs are still similar. Between ages 5 and 12 most children still need 10 or 11 hours of sleep a night. Sleep is important not just for relaxation and happiness, but also for core health and growth (growth hormone is released at night). Teaching your son good sleep hygiene will serve him well. This includes strategies such as maintaining a regular bedtime schedule with daily exercise, keeping electronics (especially smartphones) outside the bedroom, and turning off all screens an hour before bedtime. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under age 12 avoid caffeine, and those aged 12 to 18 limit their intake to no more than 100 mg per day (about what they would get in two caffeinated sodas). Even small amounts of caffeine can create dependence.



Emotional Health & Well-Being

It's not enough anymore just to teach your son about his body, how it works, and how it will change, although those are critical first steps. It's equally important to make sure he is emotionally prepared. Parents are often so busy dealing with physical changes in their sons that they don't spend much time focusing on emotional health and well-being. True, most kids this age don't make it easy for well-intentioned adults to connect, but it's so important that it's worth the extra effort. Plus, establishing and maintaining a close connection with a parent or trusted adult can help them navigate hormones, school, peers, and other pressures (including peer pressure) more easily – or at least, with more support.

Unfortunately, boys' feelings and emotional health aren't covered in most puberty books but they absolutely should be! Dr. Cara Natterson's *Guy Stuff: Feelings* is an absolute must for parents of boys. Mood disorders including anxiety and depression may start to manifest as early as grade school, sometimes in conjunction with body changes and preoccupation with body image. The good news is that mental health disorders in adolescence (which are actually relatively common) are generally amenable to treatment or intervention, especially when identified early.



YOU CAN HELP YOUR SON BY...

- Helping him learn to express their feelings, boundaries, and expectations clearly before he starts to use social media and texting.
- Teaching him how to recognize his own emotional needs and how to give himself a time out when he needs to (like when he is angry). Helpful tools can include taking time to cool down, going for a walk, playing with a pet, or learning how to talk it out respectfully.
- Modeling healthy and respectful emotional behavior by talking about your emotions and making space for him to share his. Using “I” statements is a great way to do this without casting blame. For instance, “When you _____, I feel _____ because _____. I would like _____.”
- Checking in with him regularly with a variety of different approaches, not just “How are you doing?” but also using prompts to elicit more response than a grunt. You can try conversation starters like “It must have felt good when your team won the game” or “I noticed Eric is a lot taller than when I saw him last” to see if he will open up about his experiences, mood or feelings.
- Paying attention: if you notice changes in mood, talk to your son’s pediatrician. If you have concerns about his mood or emotional health, consult a mental health specialist immediately. If he shows signs of experiencing excessive worry, anxiety, or depression, make an appointment with a therapist.
- Showing him the benefits of positive talk, trying new things, ditching negative friends, and speaking up for himself.
- Relating to him by telling them how you dealt with difficult situations and people. Help him brainstorm for ways he might deal with difficult situations in his life.



- Listening to his concerns and validate them (“That sounds hard”).
- Recognizing he is growing up and allowing him to make his own decisions (and mistakes) with your guidance when necessary.

Many situations and conversations (including “conversation crashers” that demonstrate unhelpful ways to broach subjects with your tween or teen) are covered in the excellent book “Fourteen Talks by Age Fourteen”.

Boundaries & Consent

Teaching children skills around boundaries and consent can help reduce the incidence of undesirable situations including sexual coercion, harassment, and even assault. All humans are entitled to set boundaries that should be respected. It is never too early to start teaching your child about consent.

What is a boundary? Boundaries are the practical and personal limits you set that protect and define what you will and won't accept in your relationships with other people.

BOUNDARIES

Starting at a young age, it's important to teach your son what boundaries are and that he has the right to set boundaries for himself and his own body, as do others. Ensuring his boundaries are respected requires him to be clear about what he does and does not want, and what he expects. You can begin teaching children as young as toddlers by empowering them to choose who may or may not touch them.

You can also help them develop an awareness of their feelings (including any “uh oh” vibe they may get around certain people). This allows them to develop their intuition of safe and unsafe adults with your assistance. This is also a good time to cover other important safety information, such as not to give person information to people who don't need it, and never to hide relationships from you, especially if someone says “it's a secret” or “it's just between us.”

If your son ever feels uncomfortable about what someone asked him to do, from risky behavior, a physical act, or sending or forwarding a sexy photo, he can and should talk to you (or another responsible adult) immediately. You must ensure that you respond without judgment. If he is willing to try, you could consider role-playing how he could respond if/when he is put in an undesirable situation. It can be hard in the moment to push back against being uncool, so any practice he can get can only help.

CONSENT

Starting at a young age, children should be taught to recognize the power behind the words “no” and “stop” and that these words must be respected. If those early steps are taken, talking about consent later between people in sexual situations should seem more natural. One of the most important things to teach your son as he starts to think about relationships is how to ask for and communicate consent. What is it? What it is not (for instance, previous consensual activity like kissing does not convey automatic consent)? How should it be conveyed? When can it be revoked? What are some ways to say no comfortably? Depending on the maturity of your child, your discussions may involve non-romantic/sexual scenarios at first, and become more complex over time. Remember, these conversations should be ongoing! This is not a one and done.

“ Before engaging in any type of dating/sexual activity both partners should be age-appropriate and give their affirmative and enthusiastic consent. To give legal consent a person must be able to exercise reasonable judgment. Consent can be revoked at any time, even after previous consensual encounters. Non-consensual contact may be considered sexual assault.

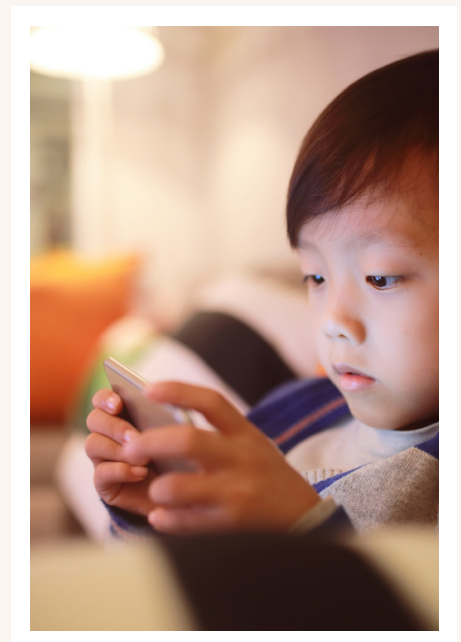


Protect Your Child Online

In addition to normalizing and discussing body talk, boundaries, consent, and puberty it's also vital to teach your son to protect himself online. Kids are curious! They are bound to hear things from their friends, in books, and on TV, and the first thing they are likely to do is Google it. Unfortunately, this can lead to accidental exposure to material far beyond what he is seeking in that moment. When it comes to internet use it's important to agree on boundaries with your son and stay in close communication with him about technology – especially his phone, if he has one. Federal law prohibits people under age 13 from signing up for accounts on social media platforms and apps like TikTok and Instagram, although this age limit is widely ignored. If you want to use this law as a legitimate excuse to keep your tween from signing up, you can learn more about the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule [here](#).

Below are some tips for parents of tweens and younger teens.

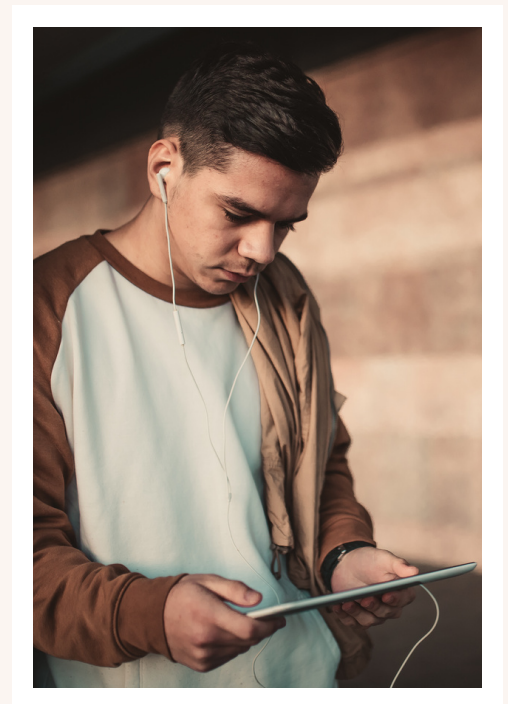
Common Sense Media, NetSmartz, KeepSafe, and Internet Matters are sites that can help parents get up to speed on how to help children identify inappropriate material online and what to do when they find it (because it is a “when” and not “if”). These organizations also share information about a wide variety of parental control options you may want to explore, such as shutting off the internet for your child's devices after 9pm.



Passwords/Social Media Contracts

Although it's helpful to know your son's passwords, he is probably much more digitally savvy than you and can easily change them. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't require him to share them. Instead of developing an adversarial relationship with your son over technology use, you may want to have regular check-ins with him, review his privacy settings, and let him know you have the right and responsibility to access his accounts— if needed. For instance, some parents ask children to put their passwords into a sealed envelope that can be accessed only under certain circumstances. Organizations like Common Sense Media and Culture Reframed have model [social media contracts](#) and [tech guides](#) parents can use to make these smartphone agreements with their children. Excess use of technology at the expense of face-to-face interactions can result in isolation, withdrawal from activities, anxiety, depression, and feeling less connected, so setting limits can be very helpful.

To minimize the physical and emotional adverse effects of screen time and to maximize the healing power of sleep, many parents make the decision to not allow technology in their child's bedroom at bedtime. This can reduce stress associated with engaging in social media as their bodies should be winding down for the day, while eliminating the temptation to scroll, post, and comment into the late night hours. You can also have them turn off color so all text/graphics are grey, which has been demonstrated to reduce interest and engagement.



Be On the Lookout For Certain Apps

The Body Agency is partnered with Culture Reframed to build resilience and awareness among young people about how to navigate a hypersexualized online world safely and with confidence. They suggest asking your child about any apps you don't recognize on your or their devices. Some apps can mask predators, who may be other kids or adults. What do the apps do? Have them show you.

Additionally, you should be on the lookout for apps:

- With “content that disappears” after a set period of time. These apps can give the user a false sense of security because the recipient can always save or screenshot the material.
- With location/check-in features that would allow unwanted people to find or follow them. Posting locations in real time can lead to stalking or invite predators. In most cases, location features can be turned off or he can wait until he has moved to a different place to post location-specific content.
- That allow users to ask and answer questions anonymously. These apps such as YikYak can lead to hurt feelings, drama, and bullying.



Online Communication Including Texting and Sexting

Unfortunately, it is not too early to start having the discussion about texting and sexting (the sending of suggestive or sexually explicit texts or photos) with your tween. In the United States, children get their own cell phones at age 10 on average, so these conversations should be underway well before then. Teach him to stop and think before he posts or forwards anything. Is it necessary? Is it kind? Will anyone be hurt? You can start by sharing your posts with your son and explaining why you feel they are acceptable, and why you feel some others are not (for instance, negative comments that might hurt others' feelings). Teaching him to ask permission from friends and family before posting photos or content about that person is also a good practice, and you can model this by asking him before permission before posting content about him.

Any picture, video, text, or email exchange he has with one person may not be private and can be permanent, even if it's on an app (such as Snapchat or vanishing texts on Instagram) that deletes content after a short period. Once it leaves his device, he no longer has control over where it goes or how it's used. People can, and do, share screenshots of posts, and friendships and relationships can change. One rule of thumb you might consider suggesting is that he never send a photo, video, or message by email or text that he wouldn't want a grandparent, future employer, or all his peers to see—no matter how much he trusts the recipient(s). And never send one of somebody who is unclothed (including themselves)!

Because sexting, including the sending of suggestive or sexually explicit texts or photos (including nudes/partially nude pictures), is increasingly common, even among younger tweens and teens, you may want to start by giving him the facts: federal law prohibit both sending and receiving of explicit images.

If he receives a photo of anyone under 18 who is unclothed, this he must delete it immediately and tell a trusted adult. Creating, possessing, or distributing nude or explicit photos of someone under 18 can result in charges of child pornography or sexual exploitation of a minor, even for those under age 18. And yes, “possessing” means just having it on his phone. If your son is being pressured to participate in sexting because “everyone cool is doing it”, talk to him about how to respond (or not) to the person asking. Giving him these tools can empower him instead of making him feel embarrassed or victimized.

“A picture of a naked child may constitute illegal child pornography if it is sufficiently sexually suggestive. Child pornography is a form of child sexual exploitation. Federal law defines child pornography as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (persons less than 18 years old). Federal law prohibits the production, distribution, importation, reception, or possession of any image of child pornography. A violation of federal child pornography laws is a serious crime, and convicted offenders face fines severe statutory penalties.

Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation

At some point during puberty, boys will start to recognize sexual feelings as the amount of hormones circulating in their bodies grows. Unless you want them to be “informed” by their often clueless peers or porn, it’s important to step up and talk to your son about these sometimes difficult topics. Fortunately, youth today generally have a far more nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation than previous generations – so much so that you may learn from him when in your discussions!

Unfortunately, being more knowledgeable about these constructs doesn't make it easier to deal with sexual and romantic feelings when they strike. That awkwardness has not changed.

Here is a brief primer on gender identity, sexual orientation and sexuality as they are currently conceptualized. For more detailed information and terminology, check out [The Body Agency's Terms and Definitions](#), developed from [Amherst College Queer Resource Center](#).

GENDER

Gender identity is a person's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither. It's how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. A person's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth. For some, this realization happens as early as 2 or 3 years old; for others, it can take many years to recognize. Gender identity is different than sexual orientation (see below). Most people categorize their gender identity as:

- Man or boy
- Woman or girl
- Transgender: someone who is born with the body of one gender, but feel they are the opposite gender, like they were born into the wrong body.
- Gender nonconforming: someone whose gender identity or expression doesn't match traditional dichotomous man/woman nomenclature. Examples of how some gender nonconforming people may describe themselves include non-binary, genderqueer, gender expansive, and gender creative.
- Gender questioning: someone who is exploring their gender identity as a boy, girl, or another gender. They might also be experimenting with different genders.

Gender expression refers to how people express their gender identity, such as the way they dress, the length of their hair, the way they act or speak, and whether they wear make-up. This may change from day to day.

Sexual orientation is an inherent or immutable emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Being interested in someone of the same sex doesn't necessarily mean a person is gay (similarly, an opposite sex attraction doesn't mean a person is straight). Most people become aware of their sexual orientation during the preteen and teen years. During the teen years, when sexual thoughts and attractions are new, it can be common to have sexual thoughts about different genders. In general, these are categorized as:

- Heterosexual (straight): People who are romantically and physically attracted to individuals of the opposite sex. Heterosexuals are sometimes called "straight".
- Homosexual (gay/lesbian): People who are romantically and physically attracted to people of the same sex. Females who are attracted to other females are lesbian; males who are attracted to other males are often known as gay. The term gay is used to describe homosexual individuals of either sex.
- Bisexual: People who are romantically or physically attracted to individuals of both sexes.
- Asexual: People who may not be interested in sex, but they still feel emotionally close to other people.



“LGBTGQIA+ stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, and asexual and/or ally". Intersex is a general term used for a variety of situations in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't neatly fit the typical binary boxes of "female" or "male."

SEXUALITY

Regardless of your child's sexual identity or orientation, as hormones start to accelerate in late tweens and early teens, your child is likely to start having romantic feelings towards others and may start to notice pleasurable, physical feelings during certain activities.

While this guide is intended to help parents have the puberty talk with their younger son, learning about sex, including what to expect, how to protect themselves, and also how to create pleasure (both alone and with a partner) is an important part of growing up. These topics are covered more comprehensively in The Body Agency's forthcoming guide for parents of adolescents (males and females). Stay tuned!

In the meantime, you should continue to find opportunities to talk to your son about sex, sexuality, and things to come that will help him develop a healthy attitude as he matures. There is so much more to sexual education than prevention of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy!

MASTURBATION

Parents often struggle with the question of how early to talk to their sons about masturbation. Many children have been self-touching for years, not for sexual gratification, but because genitals have a lot of nerve endings and it feels good. As with many of the topics explored in this guide, it is helpful to communicate to your child consistently and early on that self-touch is pleasurable, not shameful and it is very normal. It is also something that should be done in private. The first few times they ejaculate in their sleep or from intentional touch, they may be surprised by the volume of semen they produce, so you may want to ensure they know how to clean up after themselves. It's also critical that you talk to them about porn.

PORN

In addition to social media, technology has given rise to a whole new era in pornography. While porn has always been around it has never been as widely and easily available as it is today, including on handheld devices like smartphones and tablets. Children today don't need to look for porn – it finds them. In fact, despite parents' best efforts and internet filters, children first see porn at the average age of 11, when they are still in elementary school. It often happens accidentally, when they are searching for something else online.

Not only is porn widely available but its images and content today go far beyond the old Playboy or Playgirl magazines you may have seen when you were growing up. Porn today is online and accessible to your son and his peers. You can install parental controls and monitor your son's internet use and browsing history, but you can't be with him everywhere all the time. Remember when you were a kid and used to go to your friend's house to get the sugary cereal your parents wouldn't buy? Porn is the new sugary cereal. So, in addition to parental controls and monitoring his internet use, you must should talk to him about pornography– what it is and what it isn't. More than once.

It's unreasonable to assume your son will never see (or even enjoy) porn at some point in his life so the trick is to talk to him without instilling guilt or shame about sexual feelings and pleasure. But he needs to understand that porn is not real and that much of it depicts sex that is not loving or even consensual. It may also portray violence against women and/or be degrading to women. And it is almost guaranteed to contain highly unrealistic portrays of female pleasure – so it should never be mistaken for a form of sexual education. You should also have a plan for how to respond when he does see porn, by mistake or on purpose.

The good news is that communicating about sex and sexuality in a non-judgmental and age appropriate way can help protect children from potential harm in the real world and online. You can learn more about how to talk to your child about porn from our partners at Culture Reframed.

Setting the Stage

Realistically, as children get older and more independent they are less likely to stick around when you start to talk about uncomfortable topics. It can help to establish a special time, private place, or name for these conversations (for instance, the "Circle of Trust"), with snacks, if appropriate, to help provide a positive association. That way when your son sees you approaching with a bag of his favorite snack, he knows what's coming, or he can grab the bag and approach you if he wants to initiate a chat. You may even want to have a set of agreed-upon ground rules such as respectfulness, full-body listening, no technology and, of course, no judgement.

This is easier said than done – especially the “no judgment” part. You may hear some unexpected things, so practice your poker face and mindful breathing to avoid responding in a way that will shut down the dialogue. You are human but it's your job in this space to remain calm and listen instead of reacting hastily, harshly, or with an "I told you so" attitude. If you need time to respond appropriately or to research something let him know and explain that you will get back to them – then follow through. If you cross a boundary or break a rule apologize sincerely and commit to him that you will try to do better. Building strong relationships takes trust and time but it is possible, even with teenagers.



Following these guidelines can help develop and maintain open communication with your son:

- Start young. Try to be as open and honest as you can from the time he is young so he sees you as a trusted source of information. Answer his questions and teach him the proper names for natural functions, including body parts and changes, how babies are made, and adding more detail as you feel appropriate and if you feel he is capable of understanding and appreciating more.
 - Real world stories or issues that have arisen in his school or community can be a great starting point for these teachable moments. Ask him questions like, “Was that appropriate? Why or why not? What could have been done differently?”
 - You can also use movies or TV shows you have watched together to reflect on a plotline or character. Solicit his views or share your own on images, consent, respect, or other key issues portrayed. For instance, “Do you think that would have happened if she had been a boy?” or “What would you have done in his situation?”
- Empathize. You should be sure your son knows that all teens experience confusion about their bodies and sex because they are all going through the same hormonal changes and trying to answer many of the same questions. This is perfectly normal, even though it can be hard.
- Reflect on Lessons You’ve Learned. Think back to your childhood and how your family addressed (or avoided) discussions on puberty and sex. What worked well? What do you wish had happened differently? What do you wish your younger self had known? You can weave some stories about yourself into your narrative during these talks or any other time as a way of teaching him indirectly what you’d like him to know. Talking about yourself, without talking at him, is an easier way for him to absorb the message, and possibly relate to you.

- **Strengthen Your Bond.** Spend time doing activities he enjoys. This time spent together can create informal opportunities to chat about issues or questions as they arise without setting aside time for a serious talk.
- **Don't Lecture.** When you answer a question or try to get something across, skip the long-winded lecture. Instead, get to your main point and share any useful, supportive information. Make sure to pause as you speak to gauge his response. At the end, you don't want to assume that you have addressed his questions so ask, "Does this answer your question?"
- **Actually Listen.** Above all, listen. Listen to what he is asking you and pay attention if there are questions between the lines. Ask clarifying questions so you understand what he really wants to talk about, but don't interrogate. When he is finished speaking try to summarize what he has said based on your understanding and mirror it back. For instance, "So you're telling me that ... and that makes you feel uncomfortable." This echoing or mirroring shows that you are listening and are understanding what he is saying.
- **Ask How You Can Help.** It may not be immediately clear if he is just venting or if he is actually asking for help. You may want to ask him, "Would you like feedback?" or "How can I support you?" "Would you like me to help come up with some options or solutions with you?"
- **Be Open and Express Care.** Always leave the door open for future discussions. If he told you something uncomfortable or private say something like, "Thank you so much for sharing that." If he asked you an uncomfortable question you can say, "I'm so glad you asked me about this. It can be a difficult thing to understand and I'd be happy to talk to you about it or anything else that's on your mind." At the end of every conversation an "I love you and I won't judge you or get mad" goes a long way.

- Know When to Stop. After you've communicated what you want to get across, if he isn't sending signals that he is looking for more, then pause (for now). You might conclude with a hug to reinforce your bond. Then make your exit, fall silent, or change the subject as appropriate. At this point, most boys are ready to move on, so don't ramble!
- Capture him – literally. If you would like to discuss something with him before he has asked any questions, and you want to make sure he doesn't flee the scene, you might try bringing it up on a car ride when other siblings, friends, or family members aren't present. This way you have privacy but don't need to make eye contact. It helps to know there is an end just around the corner.
- Stay in the Know. Educate yourself using The Body Agency's parental resources so you're ready for the next time. We have lots of different topics, and if you don't see your question or concerns addressed, email us at info@thebodyagency.com.

While sexuality may not be the most comfortable topic to discuss with your child, it is so important that they know you can be a judgment-free resource to help them navigate puberty and beyond. The Body Agency is here for you with educational materials based on research and science. Drop us a line, let us know how we are doing.

