

Talking about Puberty, Sex Education and Growing Up with your child

Jigsaw+ Support for parents

Talking about puberty with your child

As your child starts to grow and mature, they may begin asking questions or show curiosity about the changes they see in themselves, and many parents struggle to find comfortable, honest ways to address sensitive topics like puberty. It's completely normal to feel uncertain about these conversations and even the most prepared parents sometimes find themselves searching for the right approach.

Jigsaw has always approached the topic of developing bodies for primary school aged children in an age-appropriate way, starting with the names for all body parts from ages 4-7 (including correct names for genitals from ages 5-6 yrs) and moving on to helping children understand what is happening to their bodies as they approach and start to go through puberty from ages 8-11.

UK schools are required to teach children about puberty in accordance with each country's educational guidance. While the core requirements are consistent, specific details vary based on the legislation of different UK nations. Schools must adhere to these legal frameworks while carefully implementing the guidance in ways that are appropriate for their particular student population and responsive to the developmental needs of the children in their care.

Your child's school may have already shared information about what is taught regarding puberty and other topics in PSHE. If not, do ask your child's teacher to find out more about what your child will be learning so that you can support and extend these conversations at home.





Advice for talking to your child about puberty changes

Terminology

You might feel very comfortable discussing growing up and puberty with your child, or you might feel less confident. Knowing what terminology to use is really helpful, so it's worth finding out from your child's school what words they use to describe genitals and other body parts associated with puberty.

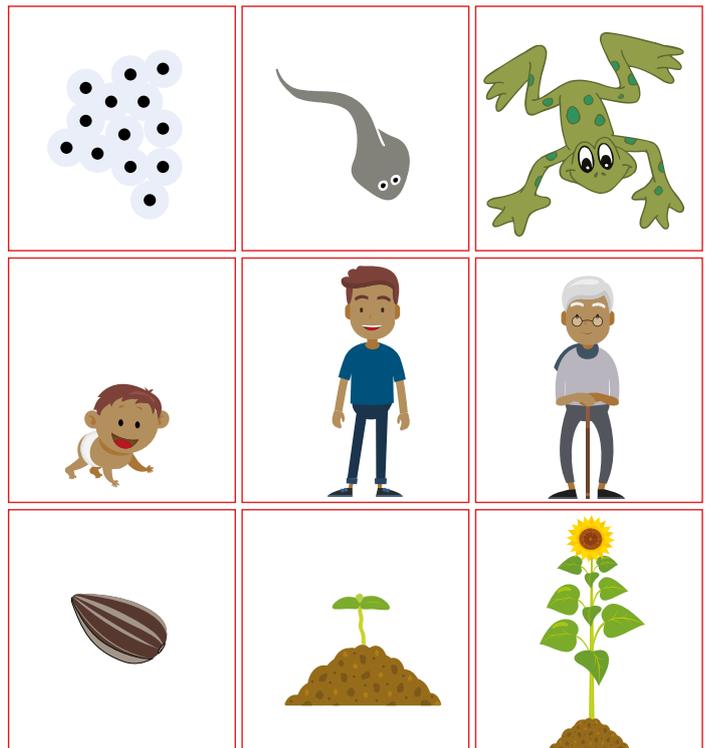
Using accurate anatomical terms like penis, vulva, vagina, nipples, testicles, and scrotum helps ensure clarity when discussing bodies and health. These are the same words that would be used when describing symptoms to a doctor. For parents who find these terms unfamiliar to use in conversation, quietly practicing them beforehand can help conversations flow more naturally. When adults use these terms matter-of-factly, it helps children understand that these words are normal, appropriate vocabulary for discussing their bodies. This approach supports children in developing the language they need to communicate effectively about their health and helps remove any sense of stigma around these natural terms.

Age appropriateness

Schools are skilled at deciding what content is age-appropriate for their pupils. Jigsaw materials don't provide any content referring explicitly to puberty changes until the end of Year 3 (when most children are 8 yrs old), or sex education before Year 5 (when most children are 10 yrs old), by which time other lessons will have explained the changes in bodies from birth to old age in line with the statutory Science and the Health and Wellbeing curriculum.

Not all schools introduce specific content at Year 4; some may wait until Years 5 and/or 6 to deliver puberty (and sex education) lessons. If you have any concerns or questions about the timing of lessons, your child's school will be happy to explain.

If you're concerned about age-appropriateness, consider asking to see the materials used in school. For example, Jigsaw uses images of animals to show growth and ageing in Key Stage 1, using kittens, tadpoles and puppies growing into cats, frogs and dogs alongside simple pictures of a baby, a child and an adult to emphasise how growth is a natural and positive change. Your child's school should be able to talk you through the materials and show you examples of images and activities to reassure you about the content used in particular year groups.



Changing human bodies

Puberty changes in children normally start between the ages of 8-14 years. Girls often start to see changes earlier than boys, with some starting their periods as young as 8, so it's important that puberty is taught in primary school to prepare children for these inevitable body changes.

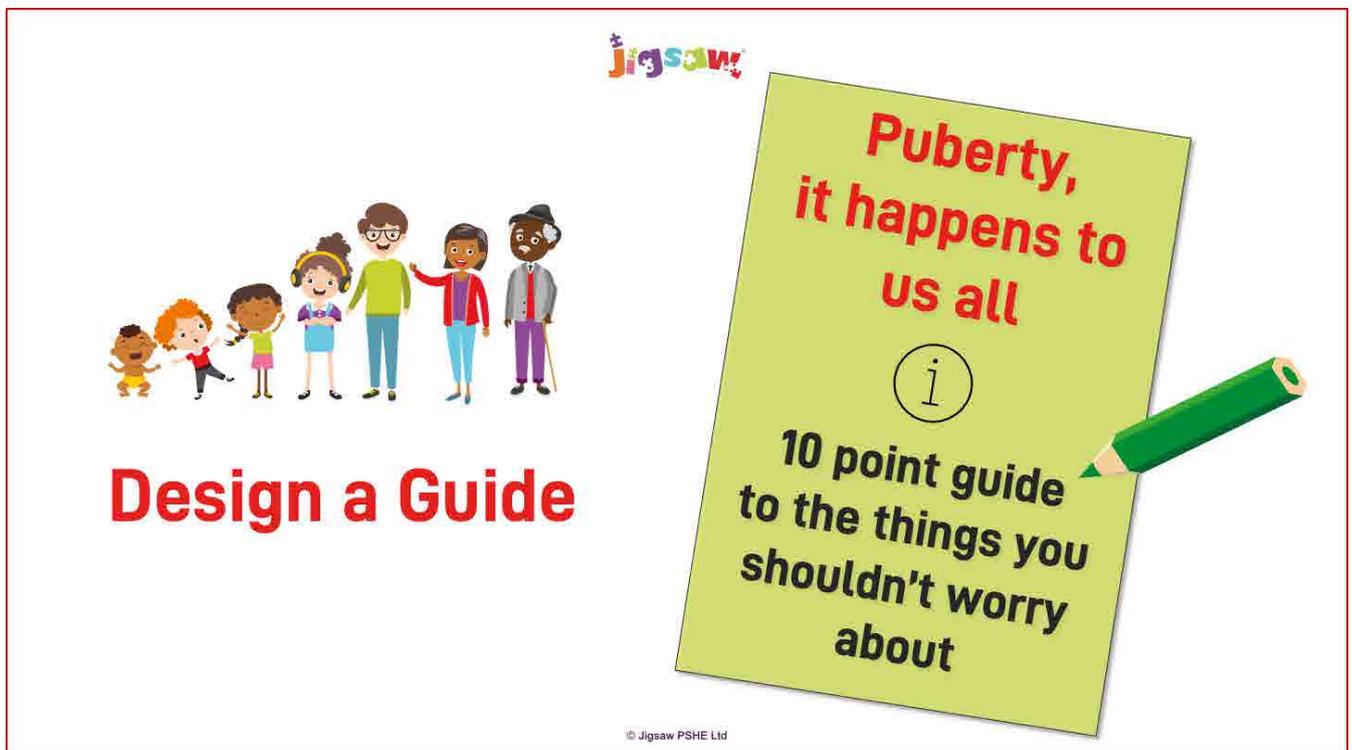
Recognising physical changes is important, so Jigsaw uses simple illustrations of growing bodies to show changes in height, musculature, growth of breasts and testicles, etc. Time is built into lessons for children to share common worries, ask questions and have them answered. Children are often reassured to know that "it's not just them" experiencing these changes.

Another important area to explore is how emotions and feelings can change under the influence of sex hormones during puberty. Jigsaw has lessons which explore feelings and how new emotions may start to occur, recognising that these new feelings are completely normal and encouraging children to think about ways to manage them and identify people they can talk to about any worries.

Jigsaw takes a mindful approach to PSHE, with part of every lesson devoted to 'Calm Me time' where children learn to quieten their minds and practice simple self-regulation techniques. These and other strategies are explored through puberty lessons so children learn to manage their feelings in response to the changes puberty brings.

Mixed classes

Puberty happens to everyone! It's important that boys understand the physical and emotional changes that happen to girls and vice versa. Puberty lessons are recommended to be taught in mixed groups, so everyone understands what happens to different bodies. Comparisons can be made between what happens to boys and girls; similarities and differences can be recognised; and emotional resilience and empathy can be developed.



Design a Guide

Puberty, it happens to us all

10 point guide to the things you shouldn't worry about

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Belonging

Having a sense of belonging is crucial for your child, and identifying who is there for them, no matter what, is key to their sense of safety. You and other trusted adults will often be part of this inner circle, and your child will likely turn to you when feeling lost, confused or anxious. It's important that they feel reassured and receive accurate information when they ask questions about puberty.

Sex Education

The DfE recommends that primary schools in England include sex education (how a baby is conceived and born) from Year 5, and most schools choose to include this. All parents are entitled to view the materials and find out how this content is being taught in an age-appropriate and stage-appropriate way; details of how to do this should be in your school's PSHE policy, or you can ask your child's class teacher.

Jigsaw PSHE includes one sex education lesson in Year 5 and one in Year 6, alongside the puberty lessons in the Changing Me Puzzle during the summer term, and your school may adapt these materials to suit the needs of their class. The focus of these lessons is on the biological facts of how a baby is conceived and born, rather than on sexual activity or behaviours. Learning about human reproduction helps children understand why puberty happens and what their bodies are preparing for. These lessons also give children the opportunity to ask questions, consider who they can go to for further reliable information, and help to break down any myths and misinformation they may have started to hear about in the media or from friends.

Your child's school will have thought carefully about how to teach this content appropriately, and teachers are trained to recognise when a child may need additional support, signposting to parents where necessary. Unlike most curriculum content in primary schools, parents/carers do have a right to withdraw their child from sex education lessons (though not from the puberty or relationship content). The school's PSHE policy will explain how to request this if you wish to do so, though the DfE recommends that all pupils attend these lessons.



How and when to talk to your child

There's no specific 'best' time to talk to your child about puberty and sex, but just as we use correct names for body parts, starting early with honest, age-appropriate information is a great beginning.

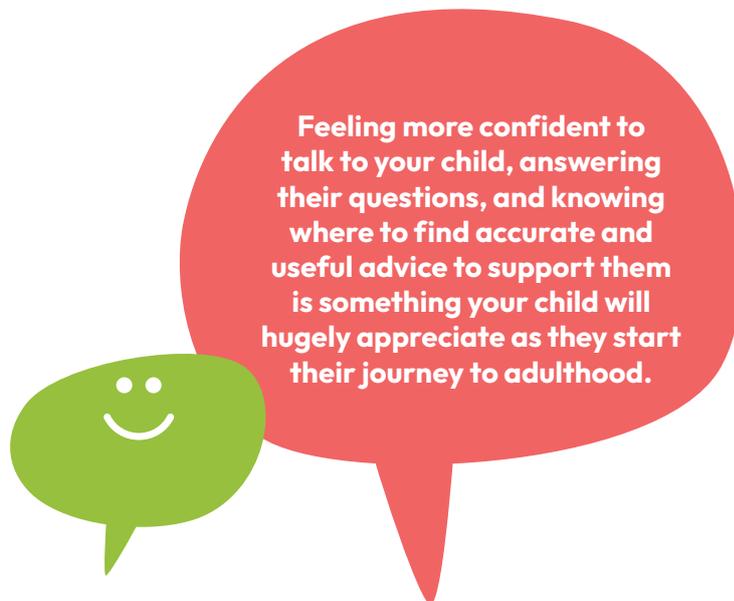
You might use the fact that your child is having these lessons in school as a starting point to see what they understand and to ask if they have further questions they couldn't or didn't want to ask in school. Be guided by your child. If you're concerned about saying too much too soon, answer their specific question and then check if they want to know more or if your answer is enough for now.

Introducing some of the coming changes before they begin may be helpful. Describing your own experiences can help children see that these changes are normal. For example, showing girls period products early (before they start periods themselves) can help them adjust to the idea that they'll need these products one day. Together you could make a useful 'period pack' that your daughter could carry in case her period starts when she's not at home.

Sharing experiences with boys, such as how voice-breaking can be managed or introducing the idea that wet dreams may occur, can also alleviate worry and help your son see that these things are a natural part of growing up.

Having discussions while you're both busy doing something together can reduce embarrassment. Chatting while driving in the car, doing a puzzle together or taking a walk can reduce eye contact and make conversation flow more easily.

Having resources to hand, such as books or trusted websites, may be useful. There's a list of such resources at the end of this article.



Resources

There are a number of websites and books that may be useful for parents to refer to when thinking about introducing the topic of puberty with their children.

Help for children:

Childline has lots of help and advice for children. They can be contacted via the website or call 0800 1111 <https://www.childline.org.uk/>

Childline also has a specific section for children Under 12 years-old:
<https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/u12-landing/>

Parent guidance:

NSPCC: A guide for parents and carers of children and young people with learning disabilities (also a good starting point for all parents):

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/navigating-puberty-booklet>

NSPCC: How to talk to children about difficult topics

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/talking-about-difficult-topics/>

NSPCC: How to talk to your child about healthy relationships:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/sex-relationships/healthy-relationships/>

Children's Books about Puberty and Sex Education

We are often asked for a list of books to recommend to parents to support the classroom learning in Changing Me. Books on this topic change frequently, and new editions sometimes have small but significant changes made to the wording and images, making it difficult to be confident about the descriptions and images at all times.

We know that what is suitable for one family may not be suitable for another, so it is important that you take time to check the contents of any chosen books before sharing them with your child. This list is compiled of some of the easier to find books that we feel are worth looking at either for older primary children to read at home by themselves or alongside a parent or carer.

Please do always check the content of any of these books carefully before sharing with your child to in case there is content that you do not feel is appropriate for your child at this time, or in case there are any parts that you might particularly want to discuss first, or to hold back to share when they are a little older.

Many of these will be available through your local library, making it easier for you to check the contents without needing to buy them first.

All these books are written for pre-teens and teens to support children in learning about their changing adolescent body, and why these natural changes are happening. For this reason, nearly all of them do explain sexual intercourse, apart from the last two in the Picture Book section. However, even if you feel your child is not ready for all the content, you can just share some parts with your child until you feel they are ready to look at all parts of the text either with you, or on their own.

Alternatively, you may just want to use these books to help you decide how you want to discuss different aspects of growing up with your child in your own way.

Written more for Girls

Welcome to your period by Yumi Stynes and Dr Melissa Kang (Little Tiger Publishing)

My period by Millie Hill (Wren and Rook Publishers)

The Girls Guide to Growing up by Anita Naik (Wren and Rook Publishers) - gentle shorter book, with cartoon pictures, briefly explains sexual intercourse

The Girls Guide to Growing up Great by Sophie Elkan, Laura Chaisty and Dr Madi Podichetty (Green Tree, part of Bloomsbury Publishers)

What's Happening to Me? By Susan Meredith (Usborne books) - boys' version has same title

Growing up for Girls by Felicity Brooks (Usborne Books) older version of the previous book listed - suitable into secondary

The Autism Friendly Guide to Periods by Robyn Steward (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) - detailed photographs of what periods look like, menstrual products, what to do and how to deal with periods and other clear facts to support autistic children in understanding and preparing

Written more for Boys

What's Happening to Me? By Alex Frith (Usborne books) - girls' version has same title

Growing up for Boys by Alex Frith and Felicity Brooks (Usborne Books) - older version of the previous book listed - suitable into secondary

How to Grow up and Feel Amazing, The No Worries Guide for Boys by Dr Ranj (Wren and Rook Publishers)

The Boys' Guide to Growing Up by Phil Wilkinson (Wren and Rook Publishers) gentle shorter book, with cartoon pictures, but still briefly explains sexual intercourse

Written equally for both sexes

Brilliant Questions about Growing up by Amy Forbes-Robertson and Alex Fryer (Penguin publishers) - includes explanation of sex - lots of good questions/answers. Clear section on sex and gender which you would want to check for updates.

Picture Books for both sexes

Let's Talk About the Birds and the Bees by Molly Potter and Sarah Jennings (Bloomsbury Publishers) - very gently presented picture book for possibly younger age group, but does still contain explanation of sexual intercourse

What's the Big Secret? Talking about Sex with Girls and Boys by Laura Krasny Brown, Ed. D. and Mark Brown (Little Brown and Company Publishers) - also gently presented including sex

Mummy Laid an Egg by Babette Cole - great for unpacking myths, getting round embarrassment, and recapping with older primary pupils for sex education

Where Willy Went by Nicholas Allen (Red Fox publishers) Picture book of the journey of the sperm to the egg as a story - sperm happens to be called 'Willy' - sexual intercourse not directly described but inferred.

Where do babies come from? Lift the Flap, First questions and answers Usborne. Very gentle introduction, in line with Jigsaw up to Ages 7-8 materials - mentions sperm and egg needed to make a baby **but not sexual intercourse**