

BODIES & BODY IMAGE

Making babies, puberty before it hits and teenage development

THE FACTS

- Puberty starts between 8 and 13 for girls, and 9 and 14 for boys, according to [Childline](#).
- 52% of 11 to 16 year olds regularly worry about how they look, according to Be Real's [Somebody Like Me](#) report.
- A [report](#) by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image found that 75% of people hold the media, advertising and celebrity culture as primarily responsible for body image attitudes, but that supportive family and friends were fundamental to enhancing self-esteem

I WANT TO... promote positive body image in a *younger* child

What?

Model positive body attitudes, emphasising health over staying slim and looking a certain way



Why?

Young children are **naturally body confident**, but media and social norms can quickly undo the status quo



How?

Challenge critical body imagery and language, and refer to body parts with as little embarrassment as possible

What the experts say:

- You might have noticed that your very young child seems naturally happy with their body, happily exploring and learning how to use it. There is mounting evidence to suggest that [this may not last long](#). To maintain your child's body comfort, try to avoid shaming during nappy, potty and toilet experiences; stick to showing pride and awe for what your child's body can do.
- 'Because you'll get fat' isn't a wise answer to the question 'why can't I have another ice cream?'. Emphasize healthy teeth and strong bodies over weight as motivation for eating well, to stave off body image issues.

There's more where this came from:
Visit OutspokenEducation.com

- Use anatomically correct names for body parts to help your children avoid feeling shame. Accurately naming body parts is also a safeguarding issue because it shows the world that they can talk openly and give children the vocabulary to explain if something has happened to them. Lexx James' book *These are My Eyes, This is My Nose, This is My Vulva, These are My Toes* can help with this!
- Monitor toys and media for unrealistic representations of bodies, and try to counter these with critical thinking. Cartoons are a good place to start. See #GenderStereotypes for more on this.

I WANT TO...promote positive body image in an *older* child

What?

Take body image concerns seriously, even if you disagree: if they say it matters to them, then it does matter



Why?

Body image issues can get out of hand in the social and hormonal **hot-house** of school and friendship groups.



How?

Mix sympathy and challenge; target their underlying assumptions rather than their specific body complaints

If they're going to watch this stuff, which their friends are watching, you should watch it with them, and let them know how silly – if not sad – it is. "Gosh, this woman is really obsessed with her behind, or her hair, or whatever. Isn't that sad? What about her brain?"
- Gail Saltz, [How to Help your Daughter have a Healthy Body Image](#), Child Mind Institute

Being active in other areas – such as clubs, sports or hobbies – where your young person can excel is a good way to ensure that their body image is not so central to their identity.
[How to Help your Child with their Body Image](#), Parenting NI

- Discuss media manipulation as it comes up. Adverts can often be a way in; famously, in 2002, [this Dove advert](#) began to change minds. Plenty have joined in since – see Libresse's [Blood Normal](#) and H&M's [She's a Lady](#).
- Natasha Devon's [Naked Beach](#) programme on Channel 4 teaches us that being surrounded by body confident people has the greatest possible impact, so [model](#)

[body comfort](#) yourself as far as possible: this means limiting conversation about dieting and 'ugly' or 'fat' bodies. Be aware that even seemingly affectionate nicknames can hurt a sensitive teen or pre-teen.

- If your child is struggling with body image, a helpful tone to strike falls somewhere between sympathy and bracing realism. Something like "I know, I remember having a real problem with my tummy when I became an adult. It's tough but you're strong and bright, I know you'll find a way through"
- Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) describes an anxiety disorder related to body image. If you feel things are getting serious, the [BDD Foundation](#) can help. Likewise, [Beat](#) for eating disorders.

I WANT TO...help my child understand their changing body

What?

Be there, with a supportive (and not intrusive) approach

Why?

Questions about puberty may not come in thick and fast, and difficult emotions are a common route in

How?

Stay matter-of-fact - but sympathetic, and brush up on those facts in advance

Kids who are prepared for puberty are more likely to find it a breeze than a hurricane. And that includes you too. By knowing what to expect from puberty, you can support your child as they go through this major stage of change.

- Cath Hakanson, [Kids and Puberty](#), Hey Sigmund,

- If there's one thing that school sex and health education does pretty well it's puberty - so your children *should* be equipped with the facts, but in case they do come to you with questions, it's worth reading KidsHealth's [Understanding Puberty](#) guide for parents or this more technical (and very useful) [guide from Hey Sigmund](#). We guarantee you didn't already know it all!
- Stay matter of fact: puberty *is* an everyday occurrence and making it sound mundane can neutralise what can often turn into a playground atmosphere of fear and mystique.

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- Don't expect a barrage of questions, but there are roundabout routes to open conversations. School might be abuzz with who's got what so far - ask if any talk about bodies is troubling them. Your key messages: "puberty happens to everyone at different times" and "we all end up looking different - isn't that nice?"

I WANT TO...prepare my child for their periods

What?

Choose your tone in advance - humour? Empowerment? Loving pride?



Why?

Handling a child's first periods can be your **chance to shine** as a supportive parent



How?

Use what's already on the internet: there are some fantastic videos, websites and apps out there to help

Take her on a tour of the feminine hygiene aisle and answer any questions she might have. Let her buy a variety of products so she can take them on a test run and see what she likes best. The last thing you want is for her to be scared of what will help her.

- Lissa Rankin, [How to Talk to your Tween about Periods](#), *Psychology Today*

- Light touch period references from an early age will help limit what can come "as a bit of a shock even in the best case scenario. This excellent article '[Talking to your Tween about Periods](#)' recommends a dose of laughter, giving her "permission to diffuse the embarrassment she may feel with healing humour".
- Always' [Period Fairy video](#) - whilst it's essentially advertising, the tone is right for nine to 14 year olds. Meanwhile, Tampax offers [this advice to parents](#).
- 'First moon' or 'red tent' parties - yes or no? Test the waters with this [comedy video](#) (totally age appropriate for a 10 year old) - use it as a way in to discuss whether and how she'd like to celebrate.

MORE HELP WITH #BODIES:

1. **Be Real:** Follow Natasha Devon's Be Real campaign for the latest body image resources and stories. [Go to Be Real >](#)

There's more where this came from:
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2. **Hey Sigmund:** a great guide to puberty for parents - one that doesn't ignore emotional and psychological as well as physical developments. (See also Central Sexual Health's [Preparing for \(and Surviving\) Puberty](#), aimed at parents of children with a learning disability). [Go to Hey Sigmund >](#)
3. **The Hormone Diaries:** Young sex and relationships YouTuber Hannah Witton has a series called 'The Hormone Diaries' - including "Things You Should Learn About Periods in School". Point your son or daughter this way. [Watch Hannah >](#)

Remember: every child is different. Adjust these suggestions for the age and stage of your child. Children with special educational needs and disabilities, looked-after children and children who have experienced abuse may all need different support. If you're in doubt about a child's emotional, physical or psychological development, please seek the advice of a professional.