

CENTER FOR Autism Spectrum Disorders

www.childrensnational.org/CASD



Children's National

CASD CHAT E-Newsletter

Guiding Your Child Through Puberty

Dear CASD families and friends,

This month's CASD Chat (by Dr. Ann Clawson, Dr. Meagan Wills, and Dr. Eliana Sudikoff) focuses on educating and supporting your child through puberty. Puberty is a time of significant developmental change. The hormonal changes associated with puberty impacts brain growth, leading to changes in cognition, behavior, and emotions. Puberty also occurs during a time of increased social and executive functioning demands when youth are working toward greater independence.

Many parents of youth (with and without autism) feel apprehensive about puberty and discussions of sexual health. Common concerns include hygiene, increased social vulnerability, and balancing independence with supervision. It can be challenging to know what to discuss with your child and how to best support them through this stage.

The good news is that puberty is usually not as bad as expected! Many youth do not have significant worsening of symptoms during this time. Families also often feel conversations about puberty are smoother than anticipated. Importantly, your child wants to learn! In a research survey¹, autistic women expressed wanting more information about puberty, including what to expect and why changes were happening. Education about puberty is thus critical to build independence and self-advocacy.

When should I start talking about puberty?

- Begin talking about puberty before pubertal changes occur. Most youth start demonstrating physical changes associated with puberty around age 8-10; however, instruction can start early in life and gradually become more detailed and complex as your child matures. Talking about puberty early allows for a slower, more gradual approach and helps prepare youth for unexpected changes.
- We also encourage you to speak with your child's medical providers and/or therapists before puberty begins, as well as throughout puberty. They can help you identify appropriate resources and can monitor any changes in mood or behavior that occur.

What are the best ways to teach and support my child?

The needs of each youth will vary, and instruction should be tailored to your child and their learning style. Many tools you already use for education and behavioral management can be applied to discussing puberty. It is often helpful to use a range of strategies and supports, adjusting based on your child's development and response to instruction.

Regardless of the specific strategies used, is critical to communicate openly and focus on promoting safety, respect, and dignity.

- Normalize that pubertal changes are often unfamiliar and unexpected.

- Preparation is essential! Prepare youth in advance for physical/emotional changes.
- Partner with educators, therapists, and medical providers.
- Identify realistic goals, and gradually work on steps toward your goals.
- Prioritize basic, functional skills first. The more intimate the skill, the more important it is to work on.
- Use scripts, social stories, checklists, and visual schedules.
- Demonstrate using models, drawings, and/or pictures.
- Use apps, calendars, etc.
- Be mindful about the language you use to avoid literal interpretations.

What topics should I consider discussing with my child?

There are many topics to consider when discussing pubertal changes and sexual health. Any teaching should be consistent with your family values and cultural beliefs and your child's sexual and gender identities. The list below is by no means comprehensive and may not fit for every family, but rather, can be used as a starting point for generating topics for discussion:

- Teach about bodies, reproduction, reproductive anatomy, and risk reduction.
- Discuss physical changes that occur during puberty, including how they may feel, when they are likely to occur, and why these changes are happening.
- Teach youth how to close and lock the bathroom door, use public restrooms, clean and shower themselves, and maintain personal hygiene (e.g., deodorant, shaving, etc.).
- Teach your child about appropriate and inappropriate touching, as well as behaviors that can be done in public and those that are only done in private.
- Discuss "What if?" scenarios with your child. For example, "What if your period starts at school?" or "What if you get an erection in front of the class?" Together, work out possible solutions to these scenarios (e.g., preparing a period kit that can be kept in a backpack).
- Teach your child that healthy, mature relationships are reciprocal and respectful.

What tools are available?

We are providing many resources because we know that every family has unique needs.

- Books such as [It's Not the Stork](#) or [What Makes a Baby](#) are appropriate for children as young as 4 years to provide age-appropriate responses to common questions (e.g., "where do babies come from?")
- Autism Society [puberty guide](#)
- Autism Speaks [puberty toolkit](#)
- National Autistic Society [tips for sexual education and puberty](#)
- American Girl offers suggestions to girls about hygiene and related topics: [The Care and Keeping of You 1: The Body Book for Younger Girls](#) and [The Care and Keeping of You 2: The Body Book for Older Girls](#)
- [The Autism-Friendly Guide to Periods](#) by Robyn Steward, an autistic woman
- [Healthy Bodies Appendix for Girls](#)
- [Healthy Bodies- A parent's guide on Puberty for Girls with Disabilities](#)
- [Healthy Bodies Appendix for Boys](#)
- [Healthy Bodies- A parent's guide on Puberty for Boys with Disabilities](#)
- Vanderbilt's [Healthy Bodies toolkit for boys and for girls](#)

1. Steward, R., Crane, L., Roy, E.M., Remington, A., & Pellicano, E. (2018). "Life is much more difficult to manage during periods": Autistic experiences of menstruation. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 4287-4292. doi: 10.1007/s10803-018-3664-0

Recreational Programs: Clubs & Activities

Where: Virtual through Ivymount School

When: Beginning week of February 1-March 26th

Virtual after-school clubs provide a space for participants to stay social, practice new skills and have fun. Groups are led by Ivymount's highly-trained staff and are designed for individuals of all abilities ages 6 - young adult. The upcoming spring session will run for 8 weeks. First session dates are the week of February 1st and will run through March 26th. Cost is \$80 per club (\$10 per class) *Minimum number of participants required for group to run.* Choose from the following clubs: games group, cooking club, IvyMoves Club.

Teen PEERS Program

Where: Virtual through Center for Assessment and Treatment (CAAT)

When: Tuesday nights, 5-6:30pm

PEERS® for Teens is a 16-week, evidence-based social skills intervention for motivated teens in middle and high school interested in learning ways to make and keep friends. The Teens program is open to clients age 13-18 who have difficulty initiating and maintaining friendships. Teens learn social skills through didactic instruction, live demonstrations by trained coaches, and extensive practice via group play activities such as sports, board games, etc., while receiving real-time, individualized coaching from clinical staff. Regular attendance is imperative to program success.

Adult PEERs Program

Where: Virtual through Center for Assessment and Treatment (CAAT)

When: Tuesday nights, 7:15-8:45pm

PEERS® for Young Adults is a 16-week evidence-based social skills intervention for motivated young adults, ages 18-30, who are interested in learning ways to make and keep friends, navigate social interactions, handle conflict and rejection, and develop romantic relationships. Young adults learn social skills by didactic and role play models, and then practice in a group session while receiving immediate, individualized coaching from clinical staff. Regular group attendance is imperative to program success.

Unstuck and On Target! Group

Where: Virtual through Center for Assessment and Treatment (CAAT)

When: February-June 2021: Wednesdays 5-6 pm (Kids group), 7-8 pm (Parent group)

Program for Students ages 8-11 who are on grade level academically and able to access learning through a virtual based instructional format, and who struggle with: self-advocacy, compromise, differentiating between "Choice" and "No Choice" situations, emotional self-identification, executive functioning skills, verbal and non-verbal social cues, how to be a successful member of a group, and flexibility.

Unstuck and On Target! Group

Where: Ivymount School*

When: Saturday mornings for 12 weeks, beginning March 6-June 12

Unstuck and On Target! is a research based intervention developed at Ivymount School to promote problem solving in students who struggle with executive function deficits. The curriculum explicitly teaches flexibility, coping, and goal setting through fun lessons that work for learners with autism, ADHD, and other challenges. This program is a learning experience for the whole family with weekly student classes, as well as, weekly parent classes.

*Programs will begin virtually and transition to in-person if advisable.

Game Time Group

Where: Ivymount School*

When: Saturday mornings for 12 weeks, beginning March 6-June 12

In Game Time, students are explicitly taught the skills needed to play structured and unstructured games with peers. Participants are encouraged to apply cognitive flexibility scripts and strategies, such as Plan A/Plan B, Big Deal/Little Deal, Compromises, and Expect the Unexpected. The program helps children manage the common challenges of game playing, such as not going first, taking turns, and winning and losing gracefully. **Based on the current circumstances, special emphasis will be placed on playing games in a virtual environment.**

*Programs will begin virtually and transition to in-person if advisable.

Secrets of Friendship

Where: Ivymount School*

When: Saturday mornings for 12 weeks, beginning March 6-June 12

This engaging curriculum gives your child the key "secrets" to making and maintaining a friendship. After determining who is a friend, students participate in engaging learning opportunities to explore how to make and maintain the friendship over time. The curriculum focuses on both explicit and non-explicit social skills that are required to make and maintain positive relationships. **Based on the current circumstances, special emphasis will be placed on navigating friendships in a virtual environment.**

*Programs will begin virtually and transition to in-person if advisable.

Self-Advocacy Program

Where: Ivymount School*

When: Tuesday and Thursday late afternoons for 12 weeks, beginning March 16-June 10

Using a program piloted at Ivymount School, students will develop self-advocacy skills through a variety of activities. By the end of the course, students will have identified their strengths, interests and challenges. The program is designed for transition aged students 14-18 years old.

For participants that reside in MD, funding is available through the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). If interested, speak to your DORS Counselor for a referral AND click below to apply through our website. Private pay participants also accepted.

*Programs will begin virtually and transition to in-person if advisable.

Annual Diamonds in the Rough Virtual Conference

Where: Virtual

When: March 12-13, 2021

The Diamonds Conference is a unique event at which parents, advocates, and professionals learn, connect, and share, with the goal of empowering children and ultimately launching them to becoming independent adults. The eleventh annual Diamonds in the Rough Conference 2021 will highlight up-to-date information about executive functioning and ADHD. Innovators in their fields will present essential and practical strength-based strategies for parents and educators to implement at home and at school.

Job Searching for the Neurodiverse

Where: Virtual

When: Saturday, March 20 10a-12p

In this virtual MGH Aspire Works workshop, participants will learn about their unique strengths and challenges through structured activities. Participants will learn how to use their knowledge of themselves to find jobs that match their skills and abilities. This workshop will feature an overview of online job searching tools.

Free Parent Support Group

Where: Virtual

When: every Monday at 1 PM EST

Dr. Dan Shapiro, friend of CASD, will be offering a free parent support group, every Monday at 1 PM EST. To register, [click here](#).

Community Resources & Events

New Study at George Washington University

Collaborators in the Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders Institute at George Washington University are looking for participants for a research study. [See the flyer for contact info and more details on how to get involved.](#)

New Study at the Kennedy Krieger Institute

Dr. Amy Keefer and colleagues at the Kennedy Krieger Institute are seeking children with suspected autism spectrum disorder and anxiety to participate in a study. [See the flyer for more details and contact info to get involved.](#)

Visit Children's National Hospital's COVID-19 Resources

Advocacy Resources

[Autistic Self Advocacy Network-Navigating College: A Handbook on Self Advocacy](#)

Resources on Racism/Supporting Black People

[Spectrum Support's Social Stories on Racism](#)

[ASAN's What is Police Violence?: A Plain Language Booklet](#)

[@TheMorganCruise Worksheets for Black Children](#)

COVID-19 Safety Resources

[Behavioral Directions LLC's Safety Teaching Protocol](#)

COVID-19 National and Local Government Resources

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[World Health Organization](#)

[DC Department of Health](#)

[Maryland Department of Health](#)

[Virginia Department of Health](#)

[U.S Department of Education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) Part C Dispute Resolution Procedures](#)

[U.S Department of Education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) Part B Dispute Resolution Procedures](#)