

Teaching about Puberty and Physical Changes

Written by Sorah Stein

Monday, 08 February 2010 02:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 04 November 2012 14:32

In explaining the physical changes associated with puberty to both boys and girls, it is important to keep things simple. Our children are not likely to need to know the ins and outs and to be able to identify the ovaries and fallopian tubes, the prostate and the vas deferens.... I don't think we need to explain that this is a chemical process; just that this is G-d's way of us growing up from children to be ladies and men (or chicks and dudes as I call everyone at work!)

What our sons and daughters need to know is the simple names of their body parts, their basic functions, and how they will change as they mature into young adults.

A girl should be told that her breasts will get bigger (and as I mentioned earlier, give examples; like mommy, like your sister, like your aunt, like grandma). Tell her this will not hurt. You can explain that when her breasts are bigger you will take her to buy a bra like the one you (and sister, etc.) wear. She should be told that she will start to grow hair on her legs (if she has not already), on her arm pits, and in her pubic area. You can reassure her that growing hair on these body parts does not hurt; it does not hurt anywhere else, does it? Also explain about body odor and needing to wear deodorant. Keep it simple.... you need to wear this so you smell nice. Explaining menstruation can be more difficult. You could use the pictures of the uterus as visual aids (look at the book *The Care & Keeping of YOU*) as you explain the process of menstruation. Take time to explain that getting a period does not mean a woman is hurt or sick. Actually, this is because she is healthy! You should explain about cramps, and let her know that she can ask you for medicine, heating pad, etc. to help it feel better.

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For your sons, they need to know about facial hair in addition to armpit and pubic hair. Boys/men typically do not shave pubic hair, although some do, especially those with sensory issues. Deodorant is more important for boys because the presence of their armpit hair actually is what makes them have worse body odor. Something that worked nicely for us was that I took my son to Target and let him pick a smell that he liked (and I could deal with!). Boys need to learn that their p.s and t.s will get bigger. As with the girls, this will not hurt. You can explain that his voice will start to sound more like daddy's, brother's, uncle's, etc. I would, if your son will understand, explain that sometimes when he is sleeping a small amount of white-ish liquid may come out of his p.; this is normal, it does not hurt, and does not mean he is sick. Explain too, that sometimes he may see something (keep in mind that our kids are very visual, and so our sons are more likely to respond to visual stimuli as possibly arousing - not to say you should never let them outside or put blinders on them.... just giving the facts!) and his p. might get hard. Again, this does not mean something is wrong. Again, as with the girls, keep the focus that this is part of growing up, and becoming a man.

I hesitate to keep things too simple for some kids, omit the understanding piece, and just have facts. I've seen/heard too many instances of a girl thinking she is dying when she gets her period for the first time, or a boy thinking he's sick and has pus coming out the first time he has a wet dream. It is too hard to try to undo that once it's happened, it's far better to be at least somewhat pre-emptive. I think it's different when we were camp counselors or direct care staff - in those situations these teaching opportunities are someone else's responsibility for the most part and we just follow their instructions and do and say what they tell us to. As parents, we have to be the teachers; the onus is on us to make sure that our children have the information they need to be as healthy emotionally and physically as possible within their limitations.

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I would not necessarily make the connection between menstruation (or ejaculation) and pregnancy/parenthood. While many individuals like our children have partnered sexual relationships; many of our children, sadly will not. If you believe that marriage and children could realistically be in your child's future, then you might be wise to include this information now. If not, then I'd just leave it out. It's just more information for your child to be potentially overloaded and overwhelmed with. Otherwise, I really might just leave it as growing up, and being a woman or a man.