

autism at-a-glance

January 2016

Autism at-a-Glance
is a publication of the
Center on
Secondary Education for
Students with ASD
(CSESA)



Puberty in Adolescents with ASD

Autism at-a-Glance is a series of practitioner and family-friendly documents created by the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents with ASD. The purpose of the *Autism at-a-Glance* series is to provide a current summary of topics relevant to high school students with ASD as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

This *Autism at-a-Glance* was designed to support high school staff and family members in supporting adolescents on the autism spectrum during the changes associated with puberty.

Like all teens, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) go through puberty. During this transitional time, their bodies will go through changes that can be disorienting. Given that adolescents with ASD may have a need for sameness and routine, the changes associated with puberty can be difficult. Teachers and parents can support students by educating the teens in advance about the changes related to puberty and by giving clear guidelines about appropriate health and social behaviors during the transition to adulthood.

Preparing for Puberty

It can be helpful to prepare adolescents with ASD ahead of time for changes that will occur during puberty. Topics to discuss include:

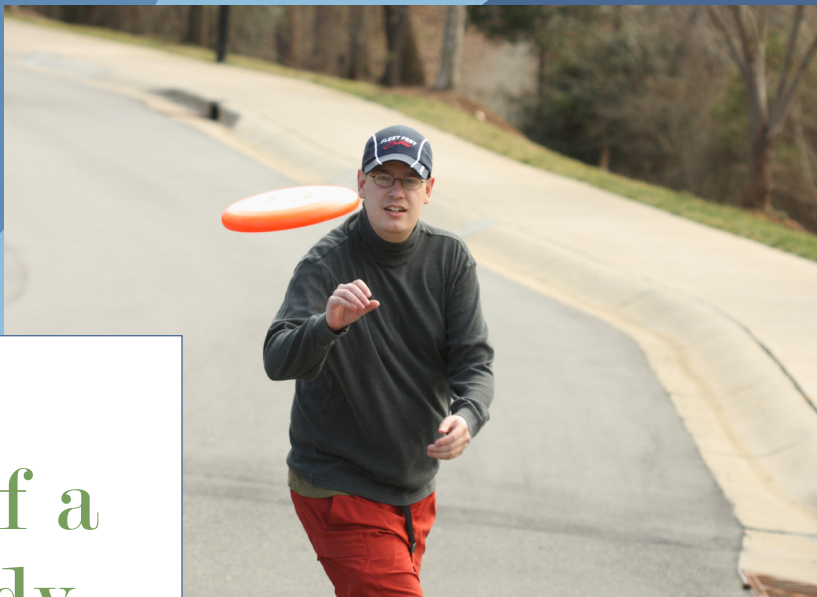
Identifying Body Parts

Teens should be familiar with male and female body parts. Formal names of body parts should be used when teaching students about body parts to avoid confusion and to give them the appropriate names to use as they learn about the development of their body.

Growth and Their Development

Teens on the autism spectrum benefit from a clear and detailed discussion of the growth and development process of their body during puberty (e.g., hair growth). Using visual and concrete examples can be very helpful in these discussions.

Taking Care of a Changing Body



Like many teens, students on the autism spectrum sometimes struggle to know what types of behaviors belong in public vs. private environments. For example, a student might not understand why it's OK to undress in a

locker room (with other students nearby) but not OK to undress in a classroom. Teaching students to understand the difference between public and private behaviors can reduce their chances of being bullied or abused.

Public and Private Body Parts

Teaching students about public and private body parts of males and females is important. For example, female body parts covered by a swimsuit are considered private body parts. Adults also should talk with students about who can or cannot touch their private body parts.

Public and Private Places

Teaching students about public (e.g., park, library, beach) and private (e.g., bedroom, bathroom stall) places and the types of activities that occur in each context are important. Adults should talk with students about who can (e.g., self, personal aid) or cannot (e.g., stranger) take them to public and private places. Adults should remember to respect privacy of adolescents in all of these situations even when assistance is needed in private settings.

Health Concerns

The body experiences many changes during puberty. Teens will need to learn how to keep clean and maintain their hygiene. It is important to start incorporating these hygiene routines early. Overall, these healthy habits can help improve mood and increase self-esteem.

Keeping Clean

Having good hygiene is important for all students. Remind and/or teach students about taking daily showers, brushing teeth, using deodorant, changing clothes daily, washing dirty clothes, shaving, washing hands, and trimming/grooming finger nails.

Healthy Habits

As the body develops, the student may start to feel either more tired or energetic. Maintaining a healthy diet with a variety of foods will sustain energy.

Teaching Public and Private Behaviors

Parents, teachers, and other people working with an individual with ASD can start early with teaching about public and private behaviors by setting rules in the classroom and at home.



Key Strategies for Supporting Teens as They Learn About Puberty

Visual Supports

Provide visual examples of what you intend to teach and support the student using pictures and checklists.

Task Analysis

Break down a complex or large task into smaller steps (e.g., showering, changing pad or tampon).

Social Narratives

Short narratives or stories can help provide students on the autism spectrum insight on puberty. Adults should individualize the narratives so that they are appropriate to the student.

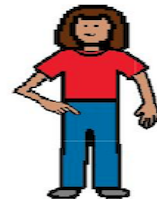
Important Reminders

Don't forget to reinforce appropriate behaviors! Make a point to capture students when they are doing things well and provide praise and specific feedback. This will help teens remember the skills you are working on. For example, "I noticed that you shaved your beard this morning. You look really nice today."

Be sensitive and respectful to students and consider family and cultural values. There may be certain topics or situations that the teen may not feel comfortable talking about.

Create a safe environment for the student to share information with you. Remember to be mindful of the individual's privacy. Do not share information (out loud or in private) with others that may make the him/her feel uneasy.

Now that I am getting older, I might have hair growing down in my private area. That is another sign I am growing up.



Some girls my age start growing breasts. They wear bras.



When breasts start to grow, they may be a little sore at first. That will go away after a while.

Example: Social narrative created by Indiana Resource Center for Autism



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The work reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grant R324C120006 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Suggested citation: Moua, P. (2016, January). *Puberty in adolescents with ASD* (Autism at-a-Glance Brief). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, CSESA Development Team.



Resources

Autism Society of America Resource Materials

<http://www.autism-society.org/about-the-autism-society/publications/resource%20materials/>

SAFE: Safety Awareness for Empowerment

<http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cedd/pdfs/products/health/SAFE.pdf>

Healthy Children

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/puberty/Pages/default.aspx>

Indiana Resource Center for Autism

<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Puberty>

Robert Crown Centers for Health Education: Adapted Puberty Education for Youth with Autism

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/blog/2014/12/11/your-dollars-work-adapted-puberty-education-youth-autism>

TeensHealth: All About Menstruation

http://kidshealth.org/teen/sexual_health/girls/menstruation.html