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.

Preparation 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

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.

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.
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.

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**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.
Resources

Autism Society of America Resource Materials

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