

Forbes

Helping Your Menstruating Child Through Puberty



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I write about the intersection of parenting and health.



Outdoor portrait of Black teenager GETTY

There's no denying that adolescence is full of big changes, especially for children who will eventually go on to menstruate. From developing breast tissue, experiencing massive hormonal fluctuations, and starting that very first period—it's a roller coaster that can be difficult to navigate, even for the most prepared pre-teen.

That's exactly why parents should be prepared to help their kids through these changes. And why those conversations often need to start early.

When to Have the Talk

[Jessica Shepherd](#), MD, is a board-certified OB/GYN and U by Kotex partner said she often hears from patients seeking guidance on which puberty topics to cover first.

“When your child is young, anatomy is a great place to start,” she explained. “It's never too early to introduce your kid to the proper names of body parts.”

By making it a goal to help your child understand how their body works, Shepherd said you empower them to keep their body healthy, and to become more self-aware as they grow.

“That way, they're more prepared when changes occur during puberty.”

Double board-certified adult and child psychiatrist, [Lea Lis](#), MD, agreed.

“Sex talks should be ongoing,” Lis explained. “Children should be informed and aware of what an adult body looks like and how it is different from a child's body.”

She said parents should focus on explaining menstruation from a young age as well, starting with when kids begin to notice tampons or maxi pads around the house.

“If the child sees blood on a tampon, maxi pad, or underwear, more detail can be given,” she said.

If you're looking for resources to help you have those conversations, she recommended the following books, based on age:

- Age 3 and up: *It's Not the Stork!* by Robie H. Harris
- Age 7 and up: *It's So Amazing!* by Robie H. Harris
- Age 9 and up: *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg and *Hello, Flo: The Guide, Period* by Naama Bloom

“I would not recommend the popular American Girl book, *The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls*,” she said. “It can be heteronormative, and say things like, ‘girls may begin to notice boys in a whole new way,’ which implies they are all heterosexual.”

It's a criticism the book has faced [from other sex educators](#) as well, while several [Amazon reviewers](#) have also pointed out the book is not written in a body-positive way.

Shepherd had another recommendation, however. “As your child prepares for their first period, relieve any concerns by educating them on the resources and products available to girls who

experience periods,” she said, suggesting the online [First Period Guide for Girls from U by Kotex](#).

She said it’s also important to talk to kids nearing menstruating age about the range of period products available, as well as how to use those products properly. And she further recommended the [U by Kotex period tracker](#), an easy-to-use tool that helps people who menstruate better understand their cycle and keep an eye on irregularities.

When to Buy Bras and Period Products

There is no set age when a child may be ready for, or in need of, products that will help them in this next stage.

“When the body starts developing or if the girl becomes self-conscious about it,” is the right time to go pick out a training bra, according to Lis.

As for period products, she said, “I like a whole kit for this, with period panties from Thinx and Period Suppose, as well as a little gift.”

She pointed to a company called [Lunar Wild](#) that helps parents design that fist menstrual cycle box, complete with menstrual pads, candles, literature, jewelry, and even an option for parents to write letters to their child to commemorate the event.

Lis especially loved the idea of a parent writing a letter to their menstruating child years before the event, focusing on what this step toward adulthood means, and sharing their hopes and dreams for their child’s future with them. By giving that letter to the child on their first day of menses, Lis said, “It will build self-esteem, and help create a sex-positive adult who loves who they are and can embrace their body and sexuality.”

While so much focus on the event may seem uncomfortable at first, Lis said there are a lot of benefits to doing so.

“Contemporary societies do not often use rituals to mark developmental milestones, except in some religious communities and sometimes in educational contexts,” she explained. “But rituals, even ones created within the family, can be a way to acknowledge and incorporate physical and emotional changes into the history of the family.”

[Celeste Mergens](#), CEO and Founder of [Days for Girls International](#), a global movement that is working to bring dignity, education, and opportunities to millions of women and girls around the world, said that parents should start thinking about putting together such a kit for their child as early as age 7 or 8.

“Girls are getting their periods earlier. It’s far better for them to have understanding and looking forward to using their supplies than to be frightened or embarrassed,” Mergens explained.

Navigating Hormone Fluctuations

Hormone changes and fluctuations are never fun, and it's because of the big hormonal changes adolescents go through that they often get a bad reputation for being moody and overly emotional.

"It can feel terrifying when your daughter starts melting down or blasting at you for no apparent reason," Mergens said, sharing the story of when her own daughter began going through that stage and she started to notice the sudden outbursts and shift in their relationship.

"You're hitting puberty!" she shouted in the middle of one of her daughter's meltdowns.

"She stopped her rant and said, 'Really? Do you think so?'" Mergens shared. "Just like that, we could both recognize where the intensity was coming from."

Recognizing that is at least half the battle, she said.

Be careful not to mock, shame, or talk down to your hormonal child, Mergens encouraged, adding that the goal should be increasing their confidence and wellness.

"Remember how intense puberty can feel, especially at the start when you can't see the change from the outside yet," she said.

While for parents, that shift in attitude might feel frightening or like an escalation in tension, Mergens said that by being on the lookout for signs of puberty, you can instead celebrate those with your child, recognizing excessive moodiness as just one of those changes.

She suggested talking to your adolescent about how the surge of changes they are experiencing throughout their entire bodies (getting taller, changing shape, starting menstruation, etc.) go right along with those supercharged bursts of emotions they're also feeling.

"Tips for self-calming during stress will help everyone," she said. "Simple things like breathing deep, exercise, or counting silently backwards in your mind, 'Calmer in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.' Those life-skills will help in many situations."

Signs Puberty May Not Be Happening As it Should

For most children, puberty and menstruation will happen between 10 and 14 years of age. Some may start a few years earlier, or a few years later, without anything being wrong to facilitate those different timelines.

But sometimes, parents will notice signs that might indicate puberty isn't happening as it should, and visiting a doctor with your child may be an important step to take.

“Sometimes boys develop breast tissue,” Lis offered by way of example. “This is a normal part of some boys' puberty, but worth checking for other issues.”

For those who menstruate, she said, “Irregular periods are very normal when puberty starts,” adding that irregularity doesn't call for a doctor's visit in adolescence. But she said very late menses (after age 16), intense cramps, or periods so debilitating a child can't function at school are all reasons to call your doctor.

Entering This Next Stage Together

“The more you can educate your child [about puberty](#), the better prepared they'll be,” Shepherd said.

While some puberty experiences, like menstruation, can be a bit difficult to manage, she encouraged parents to keep a positive tone when discussing this topic with their kids.

“Remind them that periods are a natural and important part of the circle of life!”

By [shattering stigmas](#) around period shame and silence, she said parents can help their kids to understand what is and isn't normal, while also empowering them to talk to their doctor in order to keep everything healthy.

Lis encouraged a similar level of openness.

“Aspire to become a family who's open about nudity and talking about how the body changes—and why knowing this information is a great life lesson from early on.”

She said parents should work to model a healthy relationship with their own bodies, while simultaneously steering the emphasis on their child's appearance toward health rather than attaining cultural ideals.

“The middle school years are an ideal time for both parents to model healthy habits, such as exercising and eating well, and to have discussions with their children about beauty ideals,” Lis encouraged.