

# Parents First

*Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2223)*

## Church Teaching *Preparing for Puberty*

A large part of our total human development is our response to our own sexual identity. This identity affects all aspects of our lives, physical, psychological, spiritual, and social. It is necessary for us to acknowledge who we are, male or female, as such differences help to bring balance and harmony to our own lives as well as to society and to the family (CCC 2333). Acknowledgement of these differences also helps us learn to respect appropriate boundaries in our relationships with others.



The onset of puberty can be a time of confusion about our identity. At this stage, the development of healthy friendships and an understanding of appropriate boundaries can lead to

the proper "integration of sexuality within the person" (CCC 2337). It is especially important at this time that children learn to first develop strong healthy relationships with members of the same gender, first and foremost the parent of that same gender. Where this person is absent, a relative, older sibling, or even a strong mentor can help fill that role.

As we grow and develop physically, we must also try to keep up in other areas of our development, particularly in our spiritual lives. As our sexuality is not meant to be expressed strictly in a physical way, it is important that we develop a proper sense of the virtue of chastity (CCC 2349). If we never develop the ability to express ourselves other than in a physical way, it can lead to an inability to form close bonds of friendship, a lack of self-control, and a loss of personal freedom (CCC 2339, 2347).

*Puberty may begin as early as 8 or 9 but typically begins between the ages of 10 and 14.*

### Growing in Virtue

Prudence is known as the virtue of wisdom. It is also known as the prince of virtues because it governs each of the others. Aid your child in developing the ability to be self-aware and to pay attention to the way that others react to attitudes and behaviors. Children at this age should begin to develop a sense of their own hygiene and appropriate cleanliness. They also may become embarrassed more easily. Help them to develop a sense of what they can control and what they cannot.

Justice is the virtue of right relationship. At this point you may wish to help your child understand that they also have certain responsibilities to themselves. The Church teaches us that God gives us our bodies as gifts and that we need to show proper respect for that gift through care for His creation. Be certain to help your child see that this is not just a burden but it can be a joy. Proper exercise can be maintained though play and sport, bath time can be relaxing after a long day, and practice of proper nutrition can mean fun in the kitchen or a family fishing trip.

#### Culture Alert...

We have ample evidence to conclude that sexualization has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development," said Dr Eileen Zurbruggen, APA Task Force.

"The consequences of the sexualization of girls in media today are very real and are likely to be a negative influence on girls' healthy development," she said.

They gave examples of images from advertising. One featured a well-known female pop star, Christina Aguilera, advertising a trainer. She was dressed in a school uniform with an unbuttoned shirt and was licking a lollipop.

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## Guidelines for Answering your Child's Questions

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- Ask for more information before answering, (i.e. "Why do you ask?", or "Tell me more.") Your child's response will provide you with insight, context and time to think.
- Pause to ask God for the wisdom and grace to provide an appropriate answer.
- Phrase your answer in the context of your family's Catholic values (i.e. "When you are grown and married..." or "As Catholics, we believe...").
- If you don't know the answer, say "That's a great question but I'm not sure of the exact answer. I will look it up and get back to you later today." Make sure to follow up later with an answer.

**Example: "What is puberty?" or "What is happening to my body?" or "Why does my sister look different?"**

*Know the context of the question i.e.: Are they noticing changes in themselves or their peers? Did they hear something on TV or are they just curious? The information your child provides will help frame your answer in a way that is meaningful to them.*

### Possible Responses:

- "Mom and dad also went through these changes when we were young."
- "Puberty is a physical process that happens in your body usually between the ages of 10-14."
- "This is a natural process created by God so you may also become a parent in the future."
- "Your body will begin to look more like a grown-up."
- "These changes will make it possible for you to be able to make and have a child someday."

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## Practical Suggestions

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Start talking to your child about puberty before it occurs. Puberty occurs in most children sometime between ages 10-14 but, can occur as early as 8 or 9. Help your child prepare for the changes to come by providing him/her with age-appropriate information along the way.

- Remind your child often that their body is designed by God - a unique, one-of-a-kind gift from God. Therefore, we should treat our bodies with care and respect. Together make a list of ways we can care for and respect our bodies (i.e. healthy eating, exercise, getting enough sleep, bathing regularly, etc.)
- Remind your child that like their body, the process of puberty is also designed by God and a gift from God. It marks the beginning of their journey into Christian adulthood.
- When teaching the specifics of puberty, use visual aids like books, videos, pictures or charts that tactfully illustrate

the physical changes your child can expect.

- Remind them to talk to you about any uncomfortable feelings or situations that enter in their Circle of Grace.

*Children many times mirror their parents' behavior, good and bad. They do this because they trust their parents as all-knowing and look to them for guidance.*

### Parent Resources

- Tell Me Now DVD- 22 minutes, presents age-appropriate information about puberty and sex to 3rd to 5th graders in an entertaining and fast-paced format. Designed to be viewed with your child. Includes educational guide, DVD and activity booklet. <http://www.medinstitute.org/products/item124.cfm>
- Circle of Grace Parenting and Sexuality Handout