

# Teaching Puberty: You Can Do It!

## Growth & Development Curriculum Support for Grades 5 and 6

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### Lesson 1: Introduction to Puberty

**Target Group:** Grades 5 and 6  
**Suggested Time:** 60 minutes

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#### Learning Goals:

Today we are learning to:

- co-create ground rules to be used in puberty education classes
- discuss our feelings about puberty education classes
- state why puberty education is important
- learn to use 'dictionary' words for all body parts
- describe physical and emotional changes that happen at puberty
- understand the importance of asking questions as a key part of our learning
- be aware of other resources that can assist us to learn about puberty
- share our learning with an adult we trust

#### Suggested Materials:

- SMART board or white/black board
- flip chart paper
- classroom dictionary
- question box (with a small opening in the lid and the lid taped shut)
- paper for the question box (uniform colour/size)

#### Overview

Growth & Development classes help students learn about the physical and emotional changes that will happen to them over the next few years.

Lesson 1 is intended to set the tone.

Students may have different expectations about what will be discussed in these classes.

There may be some children who do not know basic information and may be anxious about having to learn it.

It is important for them to understand what the word 'puberty' means and why it is important to discuss this topic.

Teaching about puberty includes teaching about human sexuality. This does not mean just teaching about how bodies change and function. Human sexuality includes the following aspects: biological (sexual and reproductive anatomy), psychological (mental health and self-esteem), social (relationships and individual identity), spiritual (values and beliefs), and behavioural (how we express our sexuality).

## **Activity #1: Ground Rules**

Work with students to construct a list of ground rules that will increase their feelings of safety and comfort during puberty classes

It is essential that the following ground rules be included:

- No personal questions or sharing of private information.\*
- You have the right to pass on a question.
- No question is silly or stupid. (Refer to activity 10 for more information.)
- Use dictionary words whenever possible.

Post the list in the classroom and refer to it as needed.

*\* There is a balance between encouraging students to talk about real life and over-disclosure of private information. Encourage students to use the phrase "Someone I know..." instead of the person's name if sharing information of a personal nature.*

## **Additional Information for Activity #1**

It may be helpful to frame the ground rules in a creative way, such as:

**G**...Giggling is okay but laughing at others is not

**R**...Respect for myself and others is important

**O**...Option to pass on answering questions is available to all

**U**...Use dictionary words when describing the body

**N**...No question is a silly question!

**D**...Do use "Someone I know..." instead of the person's name

## Activity #2: Student Voting Exercise

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Choose some behaviours from the following list to read out to the class (or create your own list). Ask students to put their hands up to indicate when the behaviour applies to them.

### Teacher Prompt:

- “How many of you...
  - like to sleep late on weekends?
  - have read a good book this month?
  - have ever had a pet?
  - would rather be older?
  - talk to someone in your household about the changes your body is going through?
  - have a private place to go when you want to be alone?
  - like to be teased?
  - tease other people?
  - wish you could stay up late at night?
  - wish your parents/guardians would give you more freedom?
  - dream about being famous one day?
  - have lied to the adults at home and wished you hadn’t?
  - have rules in your home about what you watch on TV or your use of the computer?”

### Teacher prompts:

- “How did it feel when you had your hand up and you looked around and everyone else had their hand up too?”

Student response: “It felt good to be the same as everyone else.”

- “How did it feel when you were one of the few people who had their hand up?” Student response: “It didn’t feel very good to be different than everyone else.”
- “Sometimes you might feel like that when you’re going through puberty. You may want to be like your peers, but in reality everyone is different. Everyone starts to go through the changes of puberty at different times. We need to be understanding of other people’s feelings and value our differences.”

Have the class brainstorm what they can do to support others who might feel isolated or feel like they are ‘the only one’.

### Possible Student Responses-

“I could encourage them to:

- Talk to a friend
- Talk to their family
- Talk to a teacher
- Call Kids Help Phone.”

Write the Kids Help Phone contact information on the board (1-800-668-6868, [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)). Inform students that the Kids Help Phone has a supportive person at the end of the line who is there to listen and offer help. Remind students that contacting Kids Help Phone is free, confidential, anonymous, and that it can be a safe place to discuss concerns.

### Additional Information for Activity #2

- This is an opportunity to engage, relax, and promote empathy in students as well as to increase your understanding of them.

### Activity #3: Language Exercise

Draw a table on the board with 4 columns.

Label the columns (Dictionary, Childhood, Polite, Slang/Street) as in the example below.

Using the word 'buttocks' as an example\*, ask students to suggest no more than 2 words for buttocks that fall under the other categories: childhood, polite, and slang/street words.

Remind the students they will be encouraged to use 'dictionary' words in class.

Now look up the definition for the word 'elbow'.

See if students can come up with words in each category.

Was there a difference? Discuss.

*Examples:*

Dictionary	Childhood	Polite	Slang/Street
buttocks	bum seat tush	backside derriere bottom	ass bum butt

Dictionary	Childhood	Polite	Slang/Street
urinate	pee wee	going to the bathroom being excused	piss pee take a leak

*\*For this exercise be sure to use the more neutral words suggested. Avoid using words like penis or vagina as the slang/street words may be offensive, and sharing of childhood words may lead to embarrassment or ridicule.*

### **Additional Information for Activity #3**

- Being familiar with language that they can use in public is important to enhance students' sense of self. Because language is such a powerful tool, it also helps them to develop greater confidence and empowerment.
- This activity will help the class learn about different categories of words. It is an activity that can be fun and help students feel more comfortable.
- There are a variety of words used for body parts and sexual activities. Some of these words are 'nice', some are 'funny', and some are considered 'rude' or 'disrespectful'. Some students will not know the socially appropriate words or may have learned only slang. Students need to know what words they can use in class and also understand why some language is unacceptable.
- It is important to acknowledge that we might have learned different words, and that's okay – it is helpful to know the words that medical practitioners might use. It is important that students not feel ashamed for their prior sexual health knowledge.
- Some students (i.e., trans\* or intersex students) may not identify with the dictionary terms.
- Using dictionary words in class will familiarize students with the anatomical names for body parts.

### **Activity # 4: Feelings about Puberty Classes**

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Lead a discussion regarding feelings about puberty classes and elicit student responses.

#### **Teacher prompts:**

- "I've noticed a lot of giggling and have heard a few comments since you learned that we were going to start learning this topic. I don't hear the same things when you find out that we are going to start social studies or a new math lesson."
- Why do you think that is?"

### **Additional Information for Activity #4**

- Students will be talking about parts of the body that are not seen in public and are often not discussed.
- Feelings ranging from curious to comfortable or embarrassed to disgusted are common.
- Some students grow up in families or cultures where body changes and/or sexuality are not discussed.

### **Activity #5: Puberty Definition**

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Lead a discussion on the word 'puberty'. Start by having the class provide a definition for the word puberty.

Have a student look up the word in the classroom dictionary (or computer) and have them report back their findings to the class.

### **Teacher Prompt:**

- “Why do you think we need to learn about puberty in school?”

### **Additional Information for Activity #5**

- Everyone needs to know what is going on in their bodies during puberty and how these changes are related to the reproductive system.
- Students have the right to learn accurate information.
- See SIECCAN: Sexual Health Education in Schools: Questions and Answers Updated 2020 Ontario Edition: Pg. 10: Why is it important for young people to have access to comprehensive sexual health education?

### **Activity #6 (Optional): All-Gendered Classes**

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Lead a discussion on why all-gendered puberty classes are taught in school.

#### **Teacher Prompts:**

- “What would be the advantage of having boys and girls learn about puberty together?”
- “What are the possible advantages of having just girls together and just boys together for some puberty classes?”
- “Do you think there are differences in how different genders are able to talk about puberty?”

*Note: It is important that students have some opportunity to be in same gender groups for part of the curriculum. This allows for greater comfort and more in-depth discussion of certain topics. See Lesson 5.*

### **Additional Information for Activity #6**

- Teaching puberty in an all-gendered environment allows students to:
  - learn to talk comfortably and respectfully with each other
  - understand that they need to learn about others
  - understand that many changes are the same for everyone
  - learn that they are more alike than different
  - have an opportunity to discuss sexism and power

### **Activity #7: Mind Map**

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Write the word ‘PUBERTY’ in the centre of the board and draw a circle around it.

#### **Teacher Prompt:**

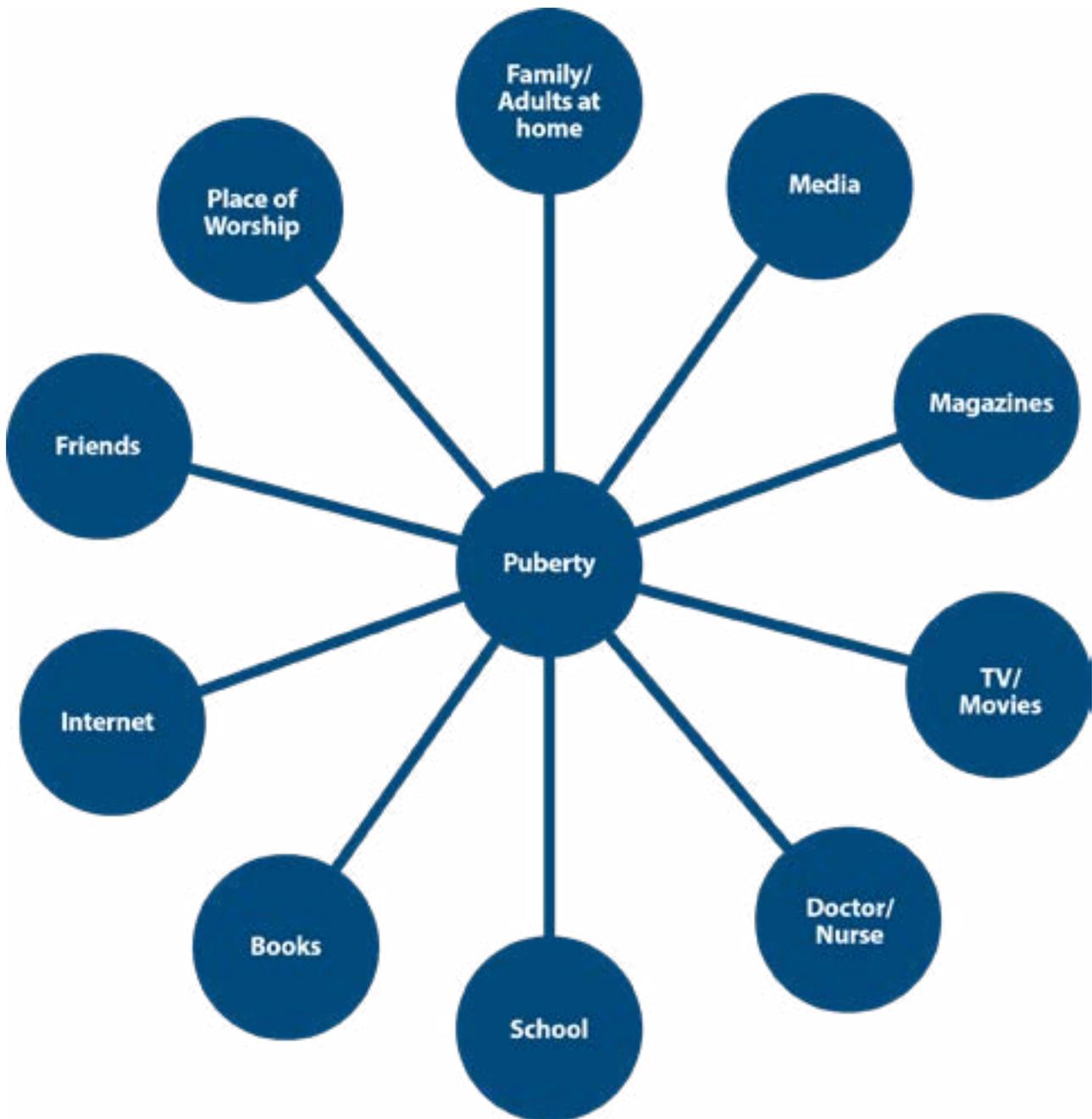
- “Where are some of the places that young people learn about puberty?”

Fill suggestions into circles surrounding the word 'PUBERTY' (as seen in the following example). Be sure to include 'school'.

**Teacher Prompt:**

- "Which ones might be good sources of correct information? Why?"

Encourage students to talk to someone they trust whenever they encounter information that is confusing to them or which they do not understand.



Discuss some reasons why the grown-ups in their homes may not talk to them about puberty.

## Additional Information for Activity #7

- Students have access to information about puberty and sexuality from a wide range of sources.
- The adults in their homes may not be comfortable talking about puberty for a number of reasons. Reasons may include discomfort, feeling that their children are not ready, or forgetting what it was like to go through puberty themselves.
- Many students have unsupervised access to television, adult magazines, sexually explicit videos/DVDs, internet sites, and social media.
- Misunderstandings can lead to anxiety and uncertainty.
- Media literacy and internet safety should be stressed.

## Activity # 8: How Does Puberty Start?

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### Teacher prompts:

- “The changes of puberty happen due to hormones. Hormones are chemical messengers in our body that tell something in the body to change.”
- “There are three hormones that tell our bodies to begin the change from a child to an adult (puberty): testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone. Everyone has all three of these hormones. Generally, females have more estrogen and progesterone, while males have more testosterone, but we all have some of each.”
- “A gland called the pituitary gland is responsible for making the hormones that start the changes of puberty. The pituitary gland is located at the base of the skull at the back of your head.”

Help students find the location of the pituitary gland by asking them to touch the base of their skull at the back of their head.

### Teacher prompts:

- “There is no ‘right’ time for these changes to start.”
- “How and when a person begins to change depends on the genes that they inherit from their birth parents. Genes are like instructions that help the body to decide all sorts of things, like our eye colour, our height, the colour of our skin, and the shape of our ears!”

## Additional Information for Activity #8

- The pituitary gland at the base of the brain sends out chemical messengers in the blood stream, called hormones.
- These hormones travel to the gonads (the testicles and ovaries) and signal them to start working to make the hormones testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone.
- It is these hormones (testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone) that cause the changes at puberty.
- Everyone has all of these hormones. Estrogen is necessary for ovulation, while testosterone targets the testicles to start sperm production (spermatogenesis).
- Changes in females commonly happen between ages 8 and 16.

- Changes in males commonly happen between ages 10 and 18.
- Changes during puberty can feel like they happen really slowly, or like they happen all at once.
- Recent research shows the age of puberty is decreasing, especially for females.<sup>1</sup>
- A child's weight and environment can influence the onset of puberty.

## **Activity #9: Periods of Rapid Growth**

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Tell the students that there are 3 stages of rapid growth in human beings.

Ask the students to turn to their elbow partner and see if they can determine when these growth spurts occur. The following could be given to students as hints:

### **Teacher prompts:**

- "Does anyone know someone who was, or is, pregnant?"
- "Does anyone know someone who has a baby?"
- "Does anyone know someone who has had a big growth spurt this year?"

Using the teacher prompts below, have a class discussion on the 3 stages of rapid growth in human beings.

### **Teacher prompts:**

- "Conception to birth – when someone first becomes pregnant, the baby is called an embryo and is only the size of a grain of sand. This cell grows and multiplies in size many times over nine months until the baby is ready to be born."
- "Infancy – from the time of birth, the baby will grow quickly and often triples its birth weight in the first year of life."
- "Puberty – height, weight, and body shape change rapidly as children go through puberty."

### **Additional Information for Activity #9**

- An increase in sleep is required during all these periods of rapid growth.

## **Activity #10: The Question Box**

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Pass out slips of paper to the class, each the same colour and size.

*In order to make students comfortable and remain anonymous, every student should receive a uniform size/ colour of paper, and every student should write something.*

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<sup>1</sup> The New Puberty: How to Navigate Early Puberty in Today's Girls. Julianna Deardorff PhD and Louise Greenspan, MD. 2014. Rodale Press, Inc.

## Teacher prompts:

- “In order for everyone to feel comfortable doing the Question Box activity, it is important that we go over our ground rules again. There can also be some added agreements about this activity:
  - The Question Box will only be opened by the teacher.
  - If you don’t know how to spell a word, then sound it out or guess.
  - Do not put your names on your slips of paper.
  - Feel free to change your handwriting if you are concerned that the teacher will recognize it.
  - Do not use people’s names in questions.”
- “Everyone is to write down their own question or complete a statement such as:
  - “Learning about puberty makes me feel .....” or “Someone I would talk to is .....”
- “This ensures that everyone writes down something and everyone puts their slip of paper into the question box – that way we don’t know who wrote what and it keeps it all anonymous.”

Ask everyone to fold their paper in half and put it in the box.

Remind students not to put their names on their papers.

Explain where the question box will be located and when the questions will be answered.

Preview questions and sort them into categories. It is preferable that questions relevant to the particular topic are addressed at the time. Some teachers prefer to have a designated question box time (Please refer to Appendix A).

As with all subjects, sometimes questions fall outside of the curriculum expectations and it is up to the teacher’s professional discretion to decide how to answer them.

There may be some questions that need to be reworded. If inappropriate slang is used, instead of reading out, ‘Why does a dick get hard?’ restate the question: ‘This question is asking about **erections**’. Then answer the question in a developmentally appropriate way.

If the anonymity of the student could be jeopardized, instead of reading out, ‘*Why do boys tease me because my **breasts** are too big?*’ restate the question: ‘*This question asks why some people tease others about their bodies.*’ Then answer the question in a developmentally appropriate way.

For more information see ‘Questions! Questions!’ (Appendix A).

## Additional Information for Activity #10

- Using a question box is one way to make it easier for students to ask questions that they may feel too embarrassed or too shy to ask out loud.
- It is important to ensure confidentiality.
- Using the question and answer format is a good opportunity to address oppressive language or comments (i.e., sexism, **homophobia**, **transphobia**, racism, etc.).

## **Wrap Up for Lesson 1**

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- Summarize what was discussed in this lesson and ask for any questions.
- Encourage students to share what they have learned with a trusted adult.
- Write the Kids Help Phone contact information on the board (1-800-668-6868, [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)) and remind students that contacting Kids Help Phone is free, confidential, anonymous, and that it can be a safe place to discuss concerns.
- Discuss what will be talked about in Lesson 2: self-esteem, feelings, and relationships.
- Give students paper and ask for contributions to the question box.
- Distribute 'Exit Cards' and give students a few minutes to complete them and hand them in.

## Lesson 1 Exit Card

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**It is important to be able to use dictionary words for all body parts, including the genitals.**

**True or False? Explain why.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Where is a good place for you to get information about puberty?**

**Explain why.** \_\_\_\_\_

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## Lesson 1 Exit Card

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**It is important to be able to use dictionary words for all body parts, including the genitals.**

**True or False? Explain why.** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Where is a good place for you to get information about puberty?**

**Explain why.** \_\_\_\_\_

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*Adapted with permission from Toronto Public Health (October 2022)*



HEALTH  
DEPARTMENT

Durham Health Connection Line | 905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729  
**durham.ca/sexualhealth**

If you require this information in an accessible format, contact 1-800-841-2729.

