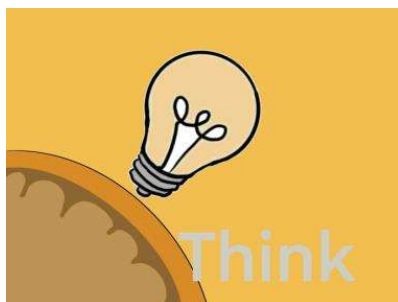


Puberty

Puberty refers to the stage in a child's life when their body begins to develop and to change, over time, into their adult body. It can start any time between the ages of 8 and 14 and may take up to four years. During puberty, you may sweat more, hair starts to grow under your arms, pubic hair starts to grow around your genitals, you may also grow more hair on your arms and legs and you may start to get spots or acne. Girls develop breasts and start their periods, whilst boys develop deeper voices and their facial hair starts to grow. Hormonal changes can affect how young people going through puberty experience hunger, tiredness, mood and relationships. They may start to be interested in sex and relationships. All of these physical and hormonal signs of puberty are big changes for the young person to cope with. On top of this, other people may start to treat you differently or expect you to act in different ways once you start going through puberty.



Autistic people may experience the changes associated with puberty as distressing and confusing. They may find that their sensory processing is affected. For example, in order to be regulated, pre-menstrual girls may feel the need to reduce sensory input or, alternatively, they may seek out extra sensory input.



Many of the changes associated with puberty have a sensory component, such as increased body odour, having wet dreams and growing pubic hair. Like any other sensory experience, these changes may be experienced by Autistic young people as either heightened or muted. Compared to their non-autistic peers, an Autistic young person may find it more difficult to manage the physical and hormonal changes they experience as they go through puberty.



Puberty is a natural stage of life that we all go through. Puberty brings changes for Autistic young people just as it does for their non-autistic peers. However, Autistic young people may not have any opportunity to learn about and discuss puberty in ways that are meaningful and accessible to them. Providing opportunities for Autistic young people to discuss puberty openly can be really helpful in reducing any confusion or distress they may be feeling as they approach and go through puberty. Visual aids may be a useful addition to the conversation.