

Puberty Happens

building a healthy foundation

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Developed by Maine Family Planning's Prevention Program staff:

Lynette Johnson

Vicki Preston

Abigail Chick

With valuable input from:

Joanna Duke, Health Educator, RSU 13, Oceanside Middle School

Jeff Payson, Health Educator, Five Towns CSD, Hope Elementary School

Kristin Nelson, School Nurse, Five Towns CSD, Camden-Rockport Middle School

Jeanne Dooley, Executive Director, OUT Maine

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Maine Family Planning
P.O. Box 587, Augusta, ME 04332

www.mainefamilyplanning.org

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Dear Educator,

Puberty education is the building block for future sexual health education. You, who are champions for this education, are providing your students with an integral piece of the puzzle that begins with understanding the wonder of who we are as human beings. The foundation young people receive through puberty education helps them understand what they are experiencing physically, emotionally and socially. The contents and format of ***Puberty Happens*** prepares young people to think critically, ask questions, identify personal boundaries, and navigate the world around them. By providing information, exploring attitudes, and building skills, puberty education gives students the necessary tools to make healthy decisions for themselves and to treat others around them with respect.

We have worked with educators from around the state, asking them what works, what could be better, and how to provide puberty materials that speak to all youth. We also gathered input from community organizations and made revisions based on their suggestions, so that every student feels seen and heard. It is important that we continue to evolve and update the material and how it is delivered to meet the demands of our changing world.

In this version of ***Puberty Happens***, you will find:

- activities that increase knowledge, critical thinking and skills
- inclusive language and activities
- a format that encourages sequential activities, while recognizing time limitations
- information and links for supplemental lessons and resources
- opportunities for parent or guardian involvement

We have strived to align ***Puberty Happens*** with the *Maine Health Education Standards* and the *National Sexuality Education Standards*. We send out a challenge to educators around the state to make inclusivity the standard in your classroom, and we have provided many resources in this curriculum to help you achieve that goal. Every child deserves a safe place to discover who they are--let's make sure school is one of those safe places!

Thank you for all you do for Maine youth. We hope this curriculum provides you and your students with the necessary tools to begin this journey.

Happy teaching!

Lynette Johnson, Vicki Preston, Abby Chick

PUBERTY: A FOUNDATION FOR HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Puberty education is a fundamental part of comprehensive sexuality education. Sexuality, broadly defined, involves the whole person throughout the life span. Puberty education provides the cornerstone to understanding a wide range of issues including growth and development, self-care, relationships, body awareness, and gender. There is no other time that the human body changes more than during puberty, except during the first year of life. During this time, a major part of our self-image is formed, as well as our attitudes towards and interactions with others.

Puberty education is important because it:

- normalizes and helps youth understand the social, emotional and physical changes that occur during puberty
- develops understanding and respect for the uniqueness of others
- enhances students' communication and social skills among their peers
- provides information and vocabulary to promote self-care and awareness
- encourages communication between children and their parents/caregivers
- prepares youth for other sexual health topics they will hear and learn about as they grow older

According to the *National Sexuality Education Standards*, studies have repeatedly found that health education programs in schools have a positive effect on overall academic outcomes.

Puberty can be a very exciting topic to teach. At the same time, educators often have reservations or lack the comfort and knowledge to deliver the material in the classroom. Students are curious, ready, and eager to learn about how their bodies work and they are already beginning to hear both facts and myths about these changes. In addition, many parents are recognizing early changes in their children and are often relieved to receive support with this topic. This curriculum is designed to assist and support educators in providing medically accurate, factual and affirming information to young people about sexual health.

PUBERTY EDUCATION AND MAINE LAW

The importance of puberty education was confirmed by lawmakers when they passed into Maine law a requirement for comprehensive family life education in 2002. The Maine State Law states:

“Comprehensive family life education” means education in kindergarten to grade 12 regarding human development and sexuality, including education on family planning and sexually transmitted diseases, that is medically accurate and age appropriate; that respects community values and encourages parental communication; that develops skills in communication, decision making and conflict resolution; that contributes to healthy relationships; that promotes responsible sexual behavior with an emphasis on abstinence; that addresses the use of contraception; that promotes individual responsibility and involvement regarding sexuality; and that teaches skills for responsible decision making regarding sexuality. (Sec. 1. 22 MRSA §1902, sub - § 1-A)

GOALS & PHILOSOPHY

Puberty Happens educates young people about how they are growing and developing and affirms that sexuality is a positive aspect of being human for people of all identities. This curriculum seeks to provide a safe and healthy environment in which students can openly question their changing bodies, relationships, and identities while acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes to become safe, empowered and empathetic individuals.

Puberty Happens is based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which explains that effective learning is based on dynamic cognitive, environmental, and behavioral factors. According to this theory, human behavior results from the interaction between an individual's personality (knowledge, attitudes, values), their social context (social norms, support, access), and their self-efficacy (skills, practice, experience). **Puberty Happens** is designed to facilitate developmentally-appropriate, interactive learning based on this framework.



Student Learning Objectives:

In the lessons and activities ahead, students will:

- Acquire knowledge about the human body and about the physical, emotional, and social changes that may occur during puberty (knowledge).
- Explore their own attitudes and values around physical health, changing relationships, and personal autonomy (attitudes).
- Be exposed to a wide range of social attitudes and values (attitudes).
- Understand the importance of universal respect and empathy for others, regardless of different views or identities (knowledge, attitudes).
- Begin developing communication, critical thinking, and self-advocacy skills (skills).
- Identify key resources including trusted adults, sources of reliable information, and safe spaces (skills).

HOW TO USE THE CURRICULUM

When should I teach *Puberty Happens*?

Puberty education is often delivered to students in the older elementary grades, therefore **Puberty Happens** was developed with a 5th grade age group in mind. The content and methodologies included in the curriculum are most appropriate for young people between 4th through 6th grades. Many young people this age are already starting to go through puberty, and for those who may develop later, it is important for them to have the information earlier, rather than later. Within each unit, activities provide students with a foundation of relevant information, skill-building, reflection, and guidance as they navigate through their puberty years.

What is included in *Puberty Happens*?

There are three units in **Puberty Happens**—*Puberty Changes*; *Body Parts: Reproductive and Sexual Anatomy*; and *Changing Relationships*. The sequence and timing of the units are flexible, although the unit on *Body Parts* tends to be best received when following one or both of the other units.

Each unit begins with an overview page that explains the purpose, learning objectives, suggested instructional time, materials needed, and optional advanced preparation for each activity.

The changes experienced during puberty are broad, encompassing many content areas that young people are experiencing both personally and within their social interactions with peers, families and the world around them. For this reason, there are supplemental lessons at the end of the curriculum that are developmentally-appropriate and can be added to this curriculum or taught at other times during your classroom education, as needed.

Puberty Happens Units

Puberty Changes is an overview of the common physical, emotional, and social changes that can occur during puberty with the message that people experience these changes in different ways, times, and speeds.

Body Parts delves into the details of reproductive and sexual anatomy with students learning the names and functions of these body parts. Diagrams are included.

Changing Relationships touches upon the ways friendships can evolve and change during the puberty years and lays the groundwork for exploring the difference between healthy and unhealthy aspects of friendships and relationships.

How much time do I need to deliver *Puberty Happens*?

Each of the three units in **Puberty Happens** includes a variety of activities that can be adapted to fit shorter class periods or expanded as time allows. On the summary page before each unit is a guide on how long each activity may take. The time needed will depend on your facilitation style and pace, the number students in the group, their comfort level in engaging and participating in the lesson activities, and the number of questions they may have. Within each unit, essential activities are noted by an asterisk. We suggest using all activities as it is the best way to ensure a sequential learning experience.

Where do I begin?

Before you deliver the curriculum, read through all the material. You can also find resources for advanced preparation at the beginning of each lesson. Use these resources to increase your knowledge and comfort level with the material, prepare for commonly asked questions, and cultivate a supportive learning environment.

Facilitators will find suggested dialogue to use in each lesson. Once you become familiar with the lessons, you may feel comfortable using your own words. Throughout the units, facilitators will find notes, opportunities to be more inclusive, and tips to assist you in delivering the activities.



Think ahead – this icon indicates something to keep in mind while explaining the material or introducing a lesson. These notes may provide ideas about how to help students feel more comfortable, anticipate common questions, or respond thoughtfully to situations that may arise.



Be inclusive – this symbol indicates inclusivity. It might come up alongside suggestions for more inclusive language or act as a disclaimer before a particular activity. Whenever this icon appears, it is an important reminder to acknowledge and affirm the wide range of identities that often go unspoken and unseen. This symbol also reminds educators to check any assumptions that come up based on appearance or other characteristics.



Tips for educators – This icon indicates information about facilitating activities or lessons. These tips are more about teaching methodology, and might provide information on timing, classroom set-up, or materials.

WHO ELSE NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED?

In creating a positive learning environment, it is important to have all systems in place. All relevant school staff – including the school nurse, counselor and social workers – should be made aware when puberty education is taking place. If issues arise for students, the staff will be better prepared to assist them. During the activities, you will be asking students to brainstorm trusted adults who they can go to for support. School staff are resources for your students, so it is a good idea to introduce them to your students if they are not already familiar faces.

Many school districts have procedures in place for introducing new curricula or materials. Talk with your administrator to learn if there is a procedure you should follow and, if necessary, have this curriculum approved through that process. *Puberty Happens* aligns with both the *Maine Health Education Standards* as well as the *National Sexuality Education Standards* – this is a good starting point for advocating for puberty education. Be sure to know about other policies and procedures within your school, such as how to handle controversial issues, the process for informing parents, policies around supporting transgender students, and protocols for mandated reporting.

ENGAGING PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Your school policies may require, or you may wish to send home, a parent/guardian letter stating when you will be starting your puberty education unit. The letter may include the content you will be covering, the objectives of the units, and your contact information. You will find a sample letter at the end of this introduction along with a *Family Matters* flyer that you can send home with tips for starting conversations and being an *askable* adult. The flyer also includes resources and websites where parents and guardians can go for more information.

Another way to include parents and caregivers is to host an information night where you describe the puberty topics to be discussed and make the curriculum and other materials available for review. This provides parents and guardians an opportunity to talk with you regarding their support or concerns. Surveys of parents show that they are supportive of sexual health education within school or community settings. If it is difficult to bring parents together specifically for an information night, think about other opportunities at the school – such as an open house – where you can connect with and provide information to parents and guardians. You can also be creative by sending home short assignments with your students—like the one included in the *Puberty Changes* unit – so that your students have opportunities to engage and communicate with their parent or guardian around specific topics.

CREATING A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Being Inclusive

Puberty Happens includes language that is open and inclusive of the range of gender identities and expressions. There are students in each classroom along the gender spectrum, from students who are transgender (whether you are aware or not) to those who express themselves in ways outside of the gender stereotypes found in our society. Keep in mind that you may have students who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. These students may express their identity by using the pronouns of the opposite gender and presenting as the opposite gender. Students might also choose to present themselves in a way that is neither traditionally masculine nor traditionally feminine. Students who are transgender may be concerned about the changes that come with puberty. Some families may choose medical options that block the hormones to delay the onset of puberty.

To be inclusive and respectful of this diversity, ***Puberty Happens*** does not separate the changes of puberty into those experienced by boys vs. girls. We also recommend teaching the material as co-ed, rather than dividing students up into boy or girl groupings that may leave some students confused or uncomfortable. Using the terms *boy* and *girl* or *male* and *female* may work for many students, but relying solely on the gender assigned at birth may exclude students who don't identify with their assigned gender or are not certain where they fit in these groupings. How we may feel as male, female or something entirely different is both complex and separate from how our bodies looked physically at birth. The most inclusive response is to not separate students by gender. Yes, it may be uncomfortable for some, but by keeping your students together, you are demonstrating inclusion of all students. Learning together engenders respect for each other's shared and varied changes while modeling open and honest communication.

Gender non-conforming students are at a higher risk for harassment, bullying, and violence. Therefore, it is critical to support them in the school setting by validating their identity, using language that includes them, and teaching in a way that represents their experiences. When we support and respect diverse gender expressions in the classroom, all students benefit by feeling safe and included.

Setting Group Agreements

The *Puberty Changes* unit begins by creating a set of classroom agreements for how the students will behave and participate in the group learning. Regardless of which unit you begin with, naming these shared agreements is an important first step for setting a safe tone in your classroom. These agreements, created by the students (with a little help from the educator), provide safety and structure while outlining a set of guiding principles for open, respectful discussion and participation.

The Anonymous Question Box

Providing a safe space for students to ask questions is a critical part of puberty education. The *Puberty Changes* unit also introduces the anonymous question box. Regardless of the order in which you deliver the three units of ***Puberty Happens***, it is important to introduce the anonymous question box at the beginning. Even with classroom agreements in place, it might be difficult for some students to ask certain questions. Using the anonymous question box enables all students to have the opportunity to gain more information and knowledge, without asking a question out loud and feeling uncomfortable or exposed in front of their peers. At the close of each unit, students are provided with an opportunity to write down a question on an exit ticket. In the Supplemental Appendices, you will find Tips for Answering Students' Questions. In addition, each unit includes common questions that pertain to the topics covered, with some possible responses.

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SAMPLE PARENT LETTER

Dear Parents/Guardians,

We will soon be starting our educational unit on puberty using a curriculum called ***Puberty Happens***. Please contact me if you would like to review the curriculum or if you have any questions.

Puberty Happens includes information that will help our young people:

- understand the physical, emotional and social changes of puberty.
- separate facts from misinformation they may receive from friends or the media.
- develop a positive attitude toward their changing bodies and social relationships.
- better understand their bodies and how they function.
- learn how to treat each other with respect and appreciate each other's differences.
- acquire greater skill in communicating with parents and other trusted adults.

We see families and schools as key partners in helping students move successfully through this important stage of life. If you have information about your child you think would be helpful for me to know as we begin our puberty unit, please let me know.

Teacher/Educator's name, signature and contact information.



Puberty Happens

Family Matters Parent Flyer



Family Matters

At school, your child is learning about the changes that come with puberty. We see this as a joint venture in helping youth navigate this exciting and sometimes confusing phase. Puberty is a time when our bodies grow faster than at any other time in our lives, except during infancy. In addition to the noticeable physical changes they may experience, they are also changing socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

This can be a roller coaster ride of change for your child and for you! This flyer includes tips and resources to broaden your knowledge.



The Many Changes of Puberty

Here are some of the changes you may expect to see in your child, if you haven't seen them already!

- Physical changes such as growing taller and gaining weight
- Body odor (and needing to wash more frequently)
- Pimples and body hair growth
- Each child growing at their own pace
- Friendship changes and crushes
- Resistance to parents and rules
- Increased desire for privacy
- Wanting to spend more time with peers

Kids don't come with manuals and neither do parents and families, so it's a time for everyone to learn together. Your child may be asking more challenging questions.



Be Askable!

At school

we are encouraging them to talk with you. Here are some suggestions to help you along the way.

- Help your child to feel at ease about their body.
- Use moments in everyday life to begin talking. Movies, tv shows and popular music provide opportunities to talk about body image, peer pressure, and relationships.
- Educate yourself so you can provide accurate information (see our list of web resources or talk to a health care provider).
- Talk about it again and again and again. Instead of a marathon session, provide information in small, snackable bites.
- Share your family values about love and relationships.
- Listen more than you talk to show your child that their opinions are important.
- Be honest as it will build trust for further talks. If you don't know an answer, find out together!
- Some youth feel more comfortable texting or leaving a note. Let them know this is okay and try responding in the same manner.
- Be patient - let your child know you are in this for the long haul!

Drive-thru Advice for Answering Questions

We know that feeling when you get a question that makes you gulp! Your child no doubt has many questions they'd like to ask, even if it may be awkward. Here are some specific tips for answering questions.



- Listen to the question and repeat it back. Make sure you understand what they are asking.
- Start out with simple, short answers and then ask if they would like more information.
- Check to make sure you answered their question.
- Moments of silence can be good—give them time to think and ask questions.
- If you aren't sure how to answer, let your child know you're glad they asked. Let them know you'll get back to them with an answer as soon as you can.



Parent Resources

Check out these trusted resources for information on how to support your child and answer their questions.

American Academy of Pediatrics provides information for raising healthy children and starting the discussion around media messages and peer pressure.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Adolescent-Sexuality-Talk-the-Talk-Before-They-Walk-the-Walk.aspx>

Kids Health is a trusted resource for parents, kids, and teens on topics such as growth and development, school and family, emotions and behavior, and so much more.

<http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/talk-about-puberty.html>

Amaze has age-appropriate, animated videos for youth ages 10-14 offering parents a way to initiate conversations about important topics in a fun and engaging format.

<http://amaze.org/parents/>

Human Rights Campaign provides resources for discussing issues around sexual orientation and gender identity in an age-appropriate way with children and youth.

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/talking-with-kids-about-lgbt-issues>

Advocates for Youth's Parent Sex Ed Center offers articles, tips and advice for supporting your child and having conversations.

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center>