

Understanding Adolescent Male Sexuality and Health Risks

The Adolescent Male Experience

Adolescence, the period from ages 11-18, is marked by significant changes in physical, psychological and social development. It marks the dramatic shift from childhood to adulthood. It is a time when boys begin to explore their roles in society and figure out who they are. It is also a time of budding sexuality that often leads to their first sexual experience. In fact, nationally, almost three in ten boys have had sexual intercourse during their lifetime and one in five boys are currently sexually active (within the last 3 months). Less than 60% of boys used a condom during their last sexual intercourse. Although these trends have increased in a positive direction over the last ten years, it is important for parents to understand their son's sexual development and be supportive of their sexual and reproductive healthcare.

Understanding Adolescent Male Development

For most boys, the dramatic physical changes brought about by puberty usually begin between the ages of 11 and 14, synonymous with the middle school years. Given the huge individual differences among boys, some may begin earlier, others later. Genetics plays a big role in when puberty begins and when it concludes.

Physical changes are only a part of the transformation associated with adolescent male development. Psychological and social development are also a part of the maturation process. The brain, which governs these areas of development over time, matures in males during their mid-twenties. Relatedly, during adolescence and young adulthood, life experience contributes significantly to the overall maturity of the psychological and social development process.

Three Stages of Adolescence in relationship to Sexuality

- 1. Early Adolescence (11-14 years):** Increase in height, weight and genital growth accompanied by increasing body hair. It is common for boys to feel insecure about physical changes and often ask, "Am I normal?" when comparing with peers.
- 2. Middle Adolescence (15-17 years):** Physical changes continue. Increasing interest in dating relationships and engaging in sexual activity. Some boys may explore their comfort with their gender and sexuality other than that assigned at birth.
- 3. Late Adolescence (18+ years):** Completed physical development and have attained their full adult height. Now have a better grasp of their bodies, gender roles, and sexual orientation and are more fully aware of gauging risks and awards in terms of their sexual behavior.

Signs of sexual health and maturity include respectful interactions, seeking accurate information about sexuality and sexual health, avoiding exploitative relationships, and expressing love and intimacy appropriately.

Sexual and Reproductive Health

The many physical, psychological and social changes that occur during adolescence represent huge changes from childhood. During this period of rapid change, it is very important that boys have access to confidential, one-on-one healthcare. This allows them the opportunity to talk freely with their provider about any issues or concerns they might have. It also empowers them to take responsibility for their own healthcare. This is especially true of their sexual and reproductive health.

Education and Communication

From a parental perspective, open, honest and non-judgmental communication about sexual and reproductive health is essential. These conversations should be on-going and ideally begin early, prior to your son's onset of puberty. These conversations should be developmentally appropriate and over time, should address expected changes during puberty, contraception including correct and consistent condom use, healthy, consensual relationships, seeking appropriate sexual and reproductive healthcare and any other topics that arise. Parents should learn to be active listeners and empower their sons during the conversation.

Supporting Sexual and Gender Minority Youth

Sexual and Gender Minority Youth (also Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning; LGBTQ) youth and young adults face unique challenges, often struggling with acceptance of their sexuality while navigating adolescence. Multiple studies have shown that these young people are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior that often lead to negative health and psychosocial outcomes. This includes sexually transmitted infections, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, bullying, sexual violence, and suicide, among others. Boys and young men who have sex with males are at particularly high risk for negative outcomes including HIV infection. As such, it is imperative that parents support their son and identify a healthcare provider who is comfortable addressing these health and psychosocial issues. This is essential for supporting the health and well-being of these youth.

Being Proactive

By understanding these points and taking an active role, you can help your son make informed decisions about his sexuality and sexual and reproductive health.

