Key messages

- Adolescence is the period of time from the onset of **puberty until adulthood.**
- **Changes in hormones, physical growth and emotional growth** can impact relationships inside and outside of school.
- There are lots of **helpful free resources for students and parents** listed.

Pre-adolescence (approx 9-12 years old)

Pre-adolescence is not the same as pre-pubescence. Pre-pubescent is a term for a child who has not started developing secondary sex characteristics (also known as puberty). Pre-pubescence is generally used to describe the 9–12-year-old age group. This is sometimes referred to as being a 'tween'.

Puberty

Puberty can start as early as 8 years of age. Often it starts at age 10 or 11 years of age and continues past 18 years of age. Girls usually start early than boys.

At around age 9 or 10 years, children might notice their body or their friends' bodies changing. As children turn 10 or 11 years of age, they often worry, "Am I normal?". Children start to compare themselves (and their families) with the rest of the world.

Puberty is not just about physical changes to the body. It is also a time of huge emotional and social change. Young people's brain changes and hormones can affect their emotions and interactions with friends and family. Students need lots of reassurance that this is a normal part of puberty and they need to know which trusted adults they can talk to about how they are feeling.

It is important to be positive about puberty and celebrate this time that your students are starting to grown from a child to an adult. This helps to remove embarrassment and encourages open communication. School programs can help normalise puberty so that children who have started to develop are not singled out and made to feel self-conscious.

Friendships

Friendships will be the most important concern at this age, and children often enjoy learning skills for how to get on with each other. Some children may start communicating with friends through the internet and will need guidance on how to have respectful (and safe) friendships online.

Friendships can be tricky at this stage as children mature at different rates. Changes in friendships are common but one of the strongest feelings for most children will be the desire to fit in. Students will need support with conflict resolution and managing big feelings.

Attraction

Extra hormones can increase a child's sexual feelings, and some children may feel attracted to others. This might be played out in 'who loves who' games or present as crushes. Some children will be interested in having girlfriends or boyfriends, and many children will have no interest at all.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and pansexual people often recognise at an early age that they have attractions for people of the same gender, but it may take years before they can put a name to it. Openly challenging negative comments about being LGBTIQA+ can help students if they are privately wondering about their own sexual identity or if they are worried that school is not a safe space.

Online and media influence

The changes children are experiencing or watching their peers go through at this stage are enough to make them feel very self-conscious. Many children will compare their bodies to others that they see online, in media and in real life.

Most online and media images show unrealistic, promote gendered stereotypes on how men and women should look and can be over-sexualised. This can have an impact on a child's view of themselves and how they think they should look and act. Students need guidance on how to interpret these media messages and where to get help if they are struggling with body image and self-esteem issues.

Exposure to porn

The number of children exposed to porn increase at around age 9.[1] Children's increasing curiosity about sex and bodies may mean that they look things up online or get shown by a friend. They may come across pornography - accidentally or on purpose.

It is important that they understand that porn is meant for (some) adults and it can be a problem as it doesn't show what real sex, bodies and relationships are like. Providing parents with links to Talk soon. Talk often: porn and other sexually explicit material can help them to have conversations at home or providing a copy of Relationships, sex and other stuff booklet to students.

Mid-adolescence (approx 12 - 14 years old)

Puberty

As children continue through puberty and their bodies change, they can become extremely self-conscious. Differences in rates of growth of height, breasts, facial hair, acne, penis size, muscles, body hair, voice changes etc. can be worries for some young people particularly if they have attention drawn to these things and/or are teased about them.

Family and friendships

The opinions of friends and classmates become more important as they develop more independence from parents. Peer groups start to play an important role in helping to define a young person's identity - they are a major social and emotional support and play a significant role is shaping thoughts and decisions.

They will want to find friends who they can connect with at this age, and so friendships may change as a result.

Along with this independence, comes a new awareness of their own feelings and values and they might want more space to work things out in their own way. They may have trouble explaining what they are thinking and

feeling, which can be extremely frustrating for them and the people around them.

Parents and teachers still play an important role in adolescent decision-making through continued support and advice.

Online and media influence

Young people might start exploring the internet or engage in forums about their interests and hobbies and may start making connections and friendships with people online. Some young people may play online games where they can continue to chat and engage with friends or another avenue to make online friends with shared interests.

How the world sees them

The way the world sees and responds to them changes too. A girl developing breasts may find herself getting sexual attention she’s not ready for. Children who go through puberty earlier and appear older may get "pulled" into it by adults.

Children who are do not conform to gender norms or transgender may start to feel more distressed by the stronger societal pressure to fit in. See Gender stereotypes and Gender diversity.

Attraction

Crushes that children have had in the past may begin to turn into something more like sexual attraction. Some will begin to wonder (if they haven't already) about when they can have a boyfriend, girlfriend or partner. This is a normal, healthy and exciting part of growing up.

As sex hormones surge, so do sexual feelings. Some young people become sexually active (deep kissing, close touching) by age 14 and a small number will start having sexual intercourse.[2] Some children may have no interest in romance or sexual activity.

Talk to students about the pros and cons of being in relationship - there are lots of ways to learn and enjoy life without partnering up. Discuss what they might do if they were having difficulties in a relationship and what trusted adults or services they might go to for help. Show them reliable websites, like Get The Facts (external site) or the Relationships, Sex and Other Stuff booklet, for further information designed specifically for WA teenagers.

Late adolescence (approx 14-17 years old)

Puberty

A young person in this age group has two important tasks: to become an independent person who is separate from their parents; and to develop a sense of who they are. Part of the task of discovering "Who am I?" for a young person is to get their head around their sexuality. Not necessarily the act of sex, but about feeling attractive, loved, popular, good enough and like they belong.

Their assumptions about what's normal or 'good' influence how they feel about themselves and how they treat others.

Online and media influence

Many young people will start to use social media apps at 16 (if they haven't already). Celebrities and influencers they follow on social media (whether that be actors, athletes, reality TV stars or social media personalities) and their beliefs can influence the thoughts/values/attitudes of young people. This can be further perpetuated or endorsed by comments on posts supporting the views of the celebrity. This is concerning if the online celebrity is pushing views that are dangerous or discriminatory.

Friendships

Friendships at this age mean more than they ever have. Friends often determine what is 'acceptable' behaviour and this is also true for what is 'acceptable' sexual behaviour. They may want to spend more time with their friends than family or doing things like school work.

Romantic and intimate relationships

Despite all the bad news that we hear, first romantic relationships can have a very positive effect on a young person's development. They are learning about being close with someone and how to navigate respectful relationships. Young people in this age group most often report that their close romantic relationships are positive and satisfying.[2]

Young people highly value the sexuality education they get from school, but say it is too biological. They want more opportunities to talk about feelings, love, what's OK and what's not OK and solving common relationship dilemmas. Students need opportunities to talk about ways for them to handle different situations, like parties with alcohol and other drugs, and where to go to for help.

External resources

For young people

The Line

Healthy family relationships, Kids Helpline

Handling peer pressure, Kids Helpline

Relationships, families and friends, Get the Facts

Puberty booklet

Relationship, sex and other stuff booklet

For parents

Talk soon. Talk often web-version

Talk soon. Talk often booklet

This Educator note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- Peer influence
- Respectful vs disrespectful relationships
- Thinking about communicating online with others

References

1 The effects of pornography on children and young people: An evidence scan | GDHR

2 Western Australian Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health (2021) | GDHR

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