

12-Part Sexuality Series for Parents with Children with an Intellectual Disability

*Part 5 of 12: **Child or Teenager?***

In the blink of an eye it seems that babies morph into children and children change into teenagers. It is between the ages of 9 -12 that the transition to adolescences typically occurs. These changes can occur earlier or later without any cause for concern.

Children experience rapid changes both physically and emotionally at this time. Both girls and boys experience rapid overall physical growth, grow hair under their arms and in the genital area and sweat glands become active. Girls will develop breasts and begin menstruating. Boys will grow facial hair, penis and scrotum will grow and boys will experience ejaculation and have more frequent erections. During puberty it is common for children to experiment with masturbation with the focus being toward pleasure and orgasm.

These physical changes occur in all children and it is imperative that parents ensure that their children understand these changes prior to their occurrence. As parents with a child with disability this may become more challenging. There are many books, DVDs and website that provide information on puberty and it is important to find the one that is suited for your child. It may be useful to find a resource that can be revisited and to provide the information on an ongoing basis. Take the time to share the information and answer questions.

The physical changes are only a portion of the changes. Emotional changes will also occur with children developing “crushes” or having their first experiences of sexual attraction. Should their first sexual attraction be toward someone of the same sex this may lead to sexual questioning and consideration of sexual orientation. Social relationships also start to change from being primarily same sex to opposite sex based. It is during these years that children may start to pair with a peer and want to spend

time “hanging out” with their friends. At this age relationships typically don’t involve sexual intercourse but may involve hugging, kissing and sexual touching.

Needless to say this becomes a confusing time for children and parents alike. Adjusting to physical changes and navigating the emotional and social changes can seem daunting. Parents of a child with disability need to provide facts and to provide the opportunities to develop begin healthy relationship. Ongoing discussions on friendships, respectful relationships and opportunities to spend time with peers are important steps at this stage. Rest assured that this is a scary time for all parents as we start to see children as adults in the not too distant future.

References

Sexual Health through Education (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.serc.mb.ca/sexual-health>

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Teaching Sexual Health (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca/>

Written by: Eleanor Gibson, Behaviour Consultant, Lake Ridge Community Support Services

Part 6: *And We Have Teenagers* (June 2015)