Puberty brings changes that are difficult for teens with autism

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Why do young people on the autism spectrum find puberty difficult?

Most children with autism have a terrible time with change. They like things to stay the same, as they are used to the familiarity of routine. If there are no new things, they don't have to anticipate for any 'attacks' to their senses; they can anticipate what is coming next. Many will spend time lining up their toys or objects. Some parents have reported that when they have moved the furniture around, the child will move it back to where it used to be.

Now, imagine that you are the type of person who cannot stand change, that you are afraid of it. And then you notice something really freaky - your body is changing on you and you have no control over it. It is even worse if no one has told you what was going to happen. Boys start noticing the hair on their legs growing in tougher and longer, and hair sprouting in places there wasn't any before. Then, they notice their Adam's Apple has grown and become more prominent, and their voice is starting to change and is cracking at times. Not only that, but something weird is happening 'down there' - their penis gets hard and sometimes there is a liquid leaking out. How weird is that??!!

For girls, it is much the same - think of all the ways a girl's body changes, and imagine how frightful that could be if you don't like change. Especially when the girl begins to menstruate, if no one has explained to her in a way she can understand what that is all about, then she will have a difficult time going through this change towards womanhood.

Puberty is really scary for most children on the spectrum and parents have a difficult time knowing how to explain the changes to their pre-teens.

Some tips that I share on my interactive Autism College course on Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum:

- Explain the bodily function inherent to being a boy (hardening of the penis, ejaculation) and being a girl (menstrual cycle). If you have a girl on the spectrum, it might be a wise idea to have her wear a pad for a while before she begins her menstrual cycles, so that she gets used to the sensory aspect of wearing the sanitary pad.
- It is best to start explaining to the preteen what bodily changes to expect before puberty hits. For girls, puberty usually starts at age 9 or 10, for boys at 10 or 11. However, better late than never.
- Show pictures of trusted, loved adults of both sexes - mom, dad, aunt, uncle - as babies, then children, then teens, then as adults, so that they see how the transformation has happened to everyone, and that it is a positive thing to go through.
- Explain what will happen to both the male and female bodies during puberty, so that the child is not surprised when they see their peers changing as well.
- The use of social stories and a picture book you can create with the above information is helpful. You can then go over the picture book and social stories as often as needed.

The point is, body changes are scary for those who do not like change, but by telling them and showing them the changes that will happen can make it much easier for them. For more autism parenting tips when it comes to teens, you may wish to sign up for my on-line course starting on March 8, Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum for more autism parenting tips when it comes to teens.