

Supporting Your Autistic Child Through Puberty: Talking About Public and Private Things

Puberty introduces many new experiences, from body changes to growing curiosity about relationships. For Autistic children, understanding the difference between public and private behaviours, spaces and topics is essential and often needs to be taught explicitly and gently.

Social boundaries don't always come naturally to Autistic children due to differences in how they interpret cues, process sensory input and communicate. These aren't deficits, just different ways of experiencing interaction.

During puberty, private actions become more relevant and must be handled with care, clarity and compassion. Learning about these differences can help keep your child safe and respectful.

What is the difference between public and private?

Public actions are those appropriate for shared, visible spaces like schools or parks, while private actions are those meant for personal or restricted spaces like home or bathrooms.

You can help your child determine what should be public or private by discussing some options to see what their initial thoughts are before further explaining which actions should be kept private or made public. Key areas for discussion may include:

- public places like parks, classrooms and living rooms;
- private places like bathrooms or bedrooms (with the door closed);
- public behaviours like waving, talking and eating;
- private behaviours like changing clothes, personal hygiene, masturbation and using the toilet;
- public body parts like the hands, face and arms;
- private body parts like the buttocks, chest and genitals;
- public conversation topics like pets, holidays and hobbies;
- private conversation topics like personal hygiene, sexual thoughts and bodily functions.



Of course, some of these topics may not be appropriate for your child depending on their maturity and age. It's recommended to open discussion before the topics become relevant, for example, talking about menstruation and hygiene before your child starts growing body hair or starts their periods. Normalising typically uncomfortable subjects will become easier over time for both you and your child.

Using role play, visual aids and scenarios are useful strategies to help maintain a consistent approach to reiterate these concepts clearly.

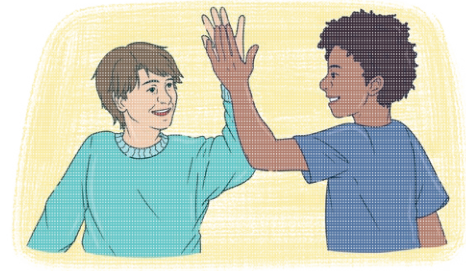
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Discussion Prompts

Use calm, simple language. Pick one idea at a time and repeat regularly. Try to avoid overwhelming your child by discussing too many things at once. If your child's curiosity leads to a new topic, address it at an appropriate moment.

Here's a breakdown of prompts to try.



General Topics

Some places are for everyone.
We call them public places.

Some things are just for you.
We call those private.

Your (body part) is private.
That means you don't show it to others.

Hygiene and Body

When you take a shower, it's best to do it in private.

Using deodorant helps your body stay fresh.
That's something we do every day, even if no one sees it. Deodorant does not replace washing. It's important to wash every day, especially when you have been active.

Touching your private parts is something that should only be done in private. Do you know where that would be?

Clothing and Dressing

It is OK to wear pyjamas in your room, but not at the supermarket or for school.

When we change clothes, we do it in private. Practice using the bathroom or your bedroom.

Talking About Feelings and Bodies

It is OK to have questions about your body. You can always ask me.

Some things we talk about only with family, doctors or trusted adults. Some of those topics are periods, erections, bodily functions or body hair.

Boundaries and Others

Just like your body is private, other people have bodies which are private to them too.

If someone wants a hug, they can ask: 'Would you like a hug?' If they say no, that's OK. Similarly, if you do not want to give someone a hug, you can also say no.

If you need further support and guidance, contact your family doctor or health care professionals who can help reinforce these lessons and signpost you to other facilities for help.

And finally..

Be patient. Understanding social rules takes time, repetition and support.

Stay open and honest. If your child asks about private things, don't panic. Children have access to a wide range of information sources – choosing to ask you shows a level of confidence and trust. Praise their curiosity and use teachable moments when topics crop up. Address questions at an appropriate time. For example, 'We don't undress in the living room. Next time, let's go to your room'. Respond calmly and give praise for appropriate actions.

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