

# Catholic Parenting 101

## Tips to Navigate Puberty Successfully

Timothy Hogan, Psy.D., LP, CIRT

Puberty unleashes a tidal wave of growth and transformation for adolescents that is unequalled by any other time of human development. When informed and prepared, our young adolescents can surf this wave with a calm and confident sense of control. It can even be fun. If left unprepared, it can be, and often is, one of the worst emotional seasons a child faces. Parents hold most of the power to empower their children to thrive during puberty.

Here are seven keys to getting this season right.

### **Key #1:** **Start early.**

Children are hitting puberty younger today than ever. (Nobody knows why for sure.) It is not unusual for girls to start puberty as early as 8 years old, while boys typically start after their 9th birthday. It is best to be prepared before you need to start talking with your child.

### **Key #2:** **Begin with the end in view.**

Start by writing down your answers to the following questions: What do you want your children to know? How do you want them to feel about their changing bodies? How do you want them to connect their changing bodies with their creation in Christ? Imagine your children on the other side of puberty. What does it look like to navigate puberty successfully?

### **Key #3:** **Cultivate an attitude of gratefulness for the human body.**


It is easy to become tense and annoyed when change hits, especially change that is outside of our control. Therefore, as your child's leader and mentor, it will be important for you to affirm relentlessly a grateful attitude about how amazing the human body really is. Your adolescent will need to remember that the pubertal changes increase and expand the capacity to understand and enjoy life.

### **Key #4:** **Decide who the best person is to lead this effort.**

Both parents should work together to prepare for this journey. When possible, the same-sexed parent is the preferable person to teach and mentor in this area. When a same-sexed parent is not available or willing, consider asking a same-sexed grandparent, godparent, or close friend of the family.

### **Key #5:** **Prepare your child spiritually for puberty.**

Puberty is a spiritual event, not just a biochemical and hormonal one. Puberty is a time of "waking up" in a new way to the man or woman God is creating your child to be. Therefore, encourage your children to pray and talk openly with God and with you about their feelings about how their bodies are changing. You might want to suggest that your children put Ephesians 2:10 somewhere visible so they can read it every day: "For we are God's workmanship (that is, "work of art"), created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." This is critical because pubertal changes are never even.



Not only do different people change at different rates, but parts of our own bodies (such as breasts, testicles, and feet) also grow at different rates. Without a constant reference to becoming the people we are created to be in Christ, adolescents will invariably compare their bodies to those of their peers and typically be left feeling inadequate. The real spiritual question for your adolescent is, “How well am I becoming the work of art that I was created to be?” Staying focused on this question is key to navigating puberty successfully.

**Key #6:**  
**Prepare your child emotionally for puberty.**

Remind your child that puberty can be a bit of an emotional roller coaster, and so it is important for them to be gentle and gracious with themselves. Give them permission to have a bad day, to cry without a good reason or needing to explain what is wrong. Puberty also can trigger emotional waves of attraction for people that can seem confusing or even overwhelming at times. Knowing this is normal will protect your child from feeling overwhelmed by it.

**Key #7:**  
**Prepare your child for the physical changes that come with puberty.**

Start by reminding your children about the major physical changes that they should expect. It is likely that they already have some ideas about this, but be sure that they understand. Boys and girls need help anticipating increases in muscle mass, body soreness, pubic hair, body odor, and acne. They also need to learn new personal hygiene habits, including the need to take showers more frequently and use deodorant. Moms can help girls learn how to anticipate their first menstrual cycle, including how to use and where to keep feminine products nearby. Girls also need to learn about needed changes in clothing, including the appropriate use of bras and underpants. Dads can prepare their boys to anticipate wet dreams and coach them about how to casually hide unwanted erections. Make a list of all the questions you might have from puberty, and be prepared to provide this information to your child frankly and honestly.