

Growth and Development, Ages Nine to 12 – What Parents Need to Know

Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the early stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—enormous changes take place. Throughout the process, each person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding.

Sexuality is also a lifelong process. Infants, children, teens, and adults are sexual beings. Just as it is important to enhance a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for a child's sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help young people understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

Each stage of development encompasses specific markers. The following developmental guidelines apply to most children in this age group. However, each child is an individual and may reach these stages of development earlier or later than other children the same age. When concerns arise about a specific child's development, parents or other caregivers should consult a doctor or other child development professional.

Physical Development

Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

- Experience a growth spurt with significant weight gain, muscle growth, and genital maturation [Growth spurt begins earlier for girls; lasts longer for boys, who end up taller].
- Enter puberty, a time when hormones produced in the pituitary gland trigger production of testosterone in males, estrogen/progesterone in females [This usually begins earlier in girls (nine to 12) than in boys (11 to 14).] During puberty—
 - Skin becomes more oily and may develop pimples.
 - Sweating increases and youth may have body odor.
 - Hair grows under arms and on pubis and, in males, on face and chest.
 - Body proportions change [hips widen in females, shoulders broaden in males].
 - Joints may ache due to rapid growth.
 - In males, genitals mature, scrotum darkens, voice deepens, sperm is produced, and erections, ejaculation, and wet dreams are more frequent.
 - In females, genitals mature, breasts develop, vaginal lubrication increases, and ovulation and menstrual cycle begin.
- Masturbate [both males and females] and may have fantasies about others and about sexual intimacy

Cognitive Development

Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

- Move toward independence as they progress to middle/junior high school
- Continue developing skills in making decisions as they become more independent
- Begin to consider future careers and occupations
- Shift their school focus from play-centered activities to academics
- Begin to look to peers and media for information and advice [Friends greatly influence them.]
- Develop increasing capability for social conscience and for abstract thought, including understanding complex issues such as poverty and war
- Take on increased responsibility, such as family jobs and babysitting

Emotional Development

Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

- Want to blend in and not stand out from their peers in any way, particularly as to gender roles and sexuality
- Feel concern about outward appearance [They want to look like “everyone else.”]
- Become self-conscious and self-centered
- Have ambivalent, conflicting feelings about puberty and about sexual desire and want to be independent and to conform
- Care greatly about relationships with peers, friendships, dating, and crushes and give peers more importance than family
- Relate to both same-gender and opposite-gender peers and may develop sexual feelings for others as a new dimension within relationships
- Develop the capacity to understand the components of a caring, loving relationship
- Experience feelings of insecurity and begin to doubt self-concept and previous self-confidence [Girls, especially, often experience a significant drop in self-esteem.]
- Struggle with family relationships and desire privacy and separation from family [They test limits and push for independence.]
- Experience mood swings, especially evident in family relationships
- Develop infatuations or “crushes” and may begin dating

Sexual Development

Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

- Have an emerging sense of self as a young adult
- Feel conscious of their sexuality and how they choose to express it
- Understand jokes with sexual content
- Feel concerns about being normal, such as whether it is normal to masturbate, have wet dreams, etc.
- Feel anxious about puberty, when it will happen, how it will occur, how to be prepared, etc.
- Feel shy about asking questions of caregivers, especially regarding sexuality, and may act like they already know all the answers
- Value privacy highly

What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Youth

To help nine- to 12-year-old youth develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

- Help young people understand puberty and the changes they are going through and that these changes, including menstruation and nocturnal emissions (ejaculation), are normal.
- Respect young people’s privacy while encouraging open communication.
- Convey that growth and maturation rates differ from person to person.
- Help young people understand that, while they are maturing physically, they still have lots of emotional and cognitive growth ahead and that sexual intercourse is not healthy, appropriate, or wise at this time in their lives.
- Acknowledge that abstinence is normal and healthy, that sexual development is healthy and natural, and that, as they grow older, there will be many ways to express sexuality that do not include sexual intercourse.
- Discuss the important relationship between sexual and emotional feelings.
- Be open to conversations about contraception and condoms and respond honestly and accurately when young people ask about them.