

Dear Parents

I can still remember when I first got pimples on my face. What a great day that was! All around me for the previous 3 years boys had been sprouting hair, pimples, nasty body odours and even painful “stones” in their nipples! Their voices had broken, their muscles expanded and they had a genuine, and rather crude, interest in girls. My mother, bless her, assured me that my time would come but I know even she was considering taking me to a doctor to see if I should be given hormones. So you can imagine (or maybe you can't) the relief the first pimples were to me in an all-boys, all-boarding school.

Boys enter puberty somewhere between 9 and 16 years of age. This is a huge range and presents something of a challenge for teachers and parents – and an even bigger challenge for some boys. Entering it at a young age has its problems in that boys can be regarded (even regard themselves) as rather freakish and may be mocked or ostracised. In addition, being bigger than their friends (and at times frustrated by their confused feelings) they quite often find themselves involved in or accused of bullying or inappropriate behaviour. This can result in a greater sense of alienation which may see them seeking out older friends in year-groups senior to them. Here they learn things which make them even more different and this knowledge and experience can also get them into trouble if they pass it on to their peers in an effort to be accepted. Of course, they do enjoy advantages in sport, which may bolster their self image for a time, but this advantage sometimes ebbs with time and may result in a loss of confidence just when they need it to face the challenge of their late teens. As senior school parents we may need to help our son to accept this change and assure him that our love for him, and interest in him, is not dependent upon sporting (or any other) success.

In many ways the problems of a late start to puberty are an inverse of early starts. All is well for a number of years until a critical mass of friends/peers have changed. Then, quite suddenly, the boy finds himself at a disadvantage socially, sporting wise and even, to an extent, academically (although this may be countered by the fact that his peers are being distracted by other things). Strong characters may weather this period with little effect to their status or self-belief (I always admire such boys.). Others may withdraw, become quieter so as not to draw attention, and look for the safety of a couple of close friends. Still others look for a protector in the ranks of the more physically mature until they grow themselves. This can be tricky because interests may not be common and the late developer is, to a degree, vulnerable. All look to cope with it in their own way, for each boy experiences it uniquely. Most succeed admirably – though not without the odd wobble along the way. As parents we need to reassure our late developing boys that they will mature and grow and that, before long, they will start to catch up. Of course what is “before long” for a parent is ages and ages for a teenager so this reassuring needs to be on-going.

In a few cases both extremely early and extremely late puberty can be abnormal and cause for concern. However, in most cases where worried parents visit a doctor for the latter there is nothing wrong and soon after the visit things start to happen – late but totally normal. Still, there is no harm in asking and it often puts everyone's mind at ease.

And so as an 18 year-old when Sgt Hodgsen punched me in the stomach for lying about shaving I knew I had eventually arrived. And as I doubled up in pain there was a joyful voice in me shouting words to the effect, “At last! I am a man!”.

I wish you all the best as you shepherd your son (children) through puberty and beyond. It is certainly an interesting and entertaining part of the human experience – if a little confusing and painful now and then.

Yours sincerely

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