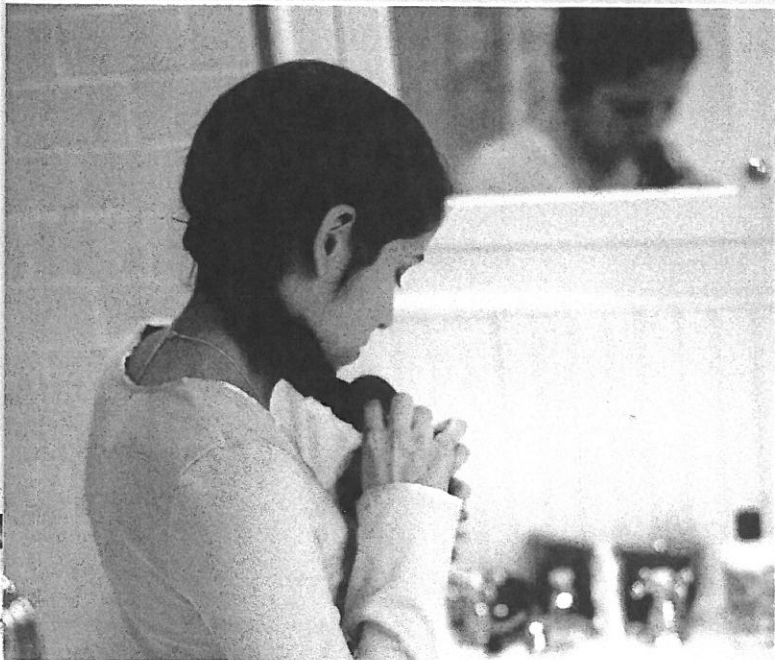


# Taking Care Of Myself

**A Healthy Hygiene,  
Puberty and Personal Curriculum  
For Young People With Autism**

**by MARY WROBEL**



# Teaching Growth and Development

People with autism typically dislike change. They usually like predictability and routine. For this reason, I've often had students with autism who refuse to "get older." One student had a hard time accepting that every year on his birthday he was a new year older. Other students have had a hard time understanding and accepting the concept of getting bigger and outgrowing their clothes.

Growth and development can be a difficult concept to understand, especially if you are growing and changing so slowly that you can't perceive many of the changes in your physical appearance. Even though puberty is a slow process, the physical changes are dramatic.

Boys, often at about the age of 12, begin to grow pubic hair, and thicker hair on their legs. They begin to sweat more and excrete body odors. They may have a growth spurt; their feet and noses may get bigger. As they grow older, their chests get broader, their muscles become more defined and their voices get deeper. Underarm hair and facial hair begin to grow at about the age of 15. They develop an Adam's apple. The boys continue to grow and develop until they are about 20 years old.

Girls often start puberty at younger ages than boys. The first signs of puberty are the beginning growth of the breasts and the appearance of pubic hair, and these changes may occur in girls as young as eight. Girls will often have pubic hair by the time they are 10 or 11, and most will have their first period between the ages of 11 and 12. Typically, they continue to grow in height, weight and breast size until they are about 16. A good rule of thumb for determining the onset of menstruation; a girl may have her first menstrual period approximately one year to two years after pubic hair begins to grow. However, girls grow and mature at different rates, so it's not easy to determine exactly when menstruation will occur. It may be helpful for parents to discuss these changes with their child's doctor or a school nurse in order to get more specific guidelines for determining when menstruation will begin.

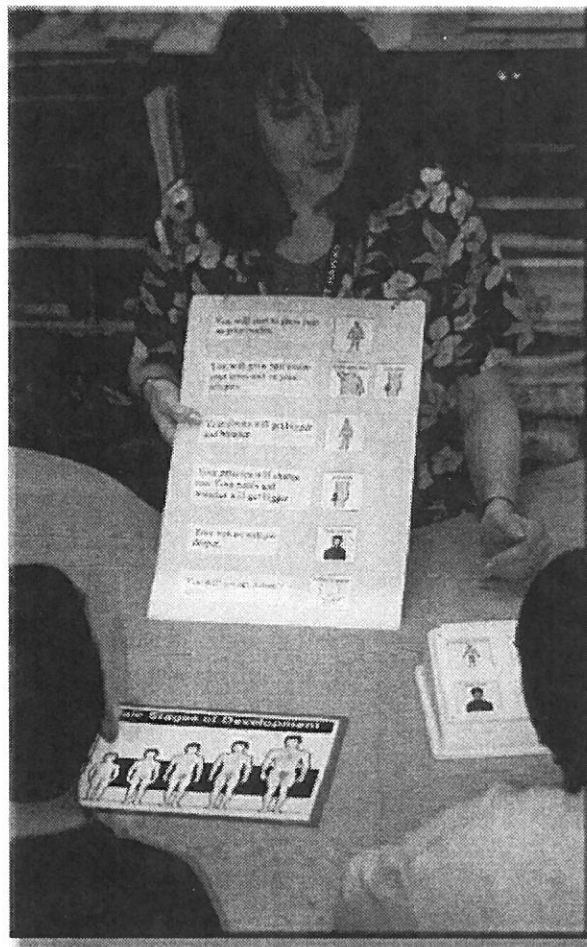
I've found it's important to prepare students for the changes to their body before they actually begin puberty. This is especially true for students with autism.

I had one student several years ago who typically disliked change of any kind, but especially had trouble with any change to himself. This student, who I'll call Clark, was independent with his hygiene skills and learned to be appropriately modest as he grew older. When he started to grow pubic hair at the age of 12, his mother discovered how much it upset him after he attempted to shave it off using his sister's razor. In his mother's words, it was a "bloodbath." Clark didn't understand why hair was growing near his genitals, and he decided to get rid of it the only way he knew how. After we explained to him that pubic hair was all part of growing up and that it was supposed to be there, he learned to accept that change as a natural progression to getting older.

The goal with this unit is not only to prepare students for the changes that will occur as they grow and develop, but also to help them accept the fact that this is okay. Their bodies will continue to grow and change as they start to look like young adults and eventually reach their adult heights. The following stories, some of which are gender specific, will help prepare students for the inevitable growth changes that will occur and help them learn new hygiene routines to add to their daily schedule. As with all units that teach skills related to puberty, it is recommended that students be segregated and taught information pertaining to their own gender.

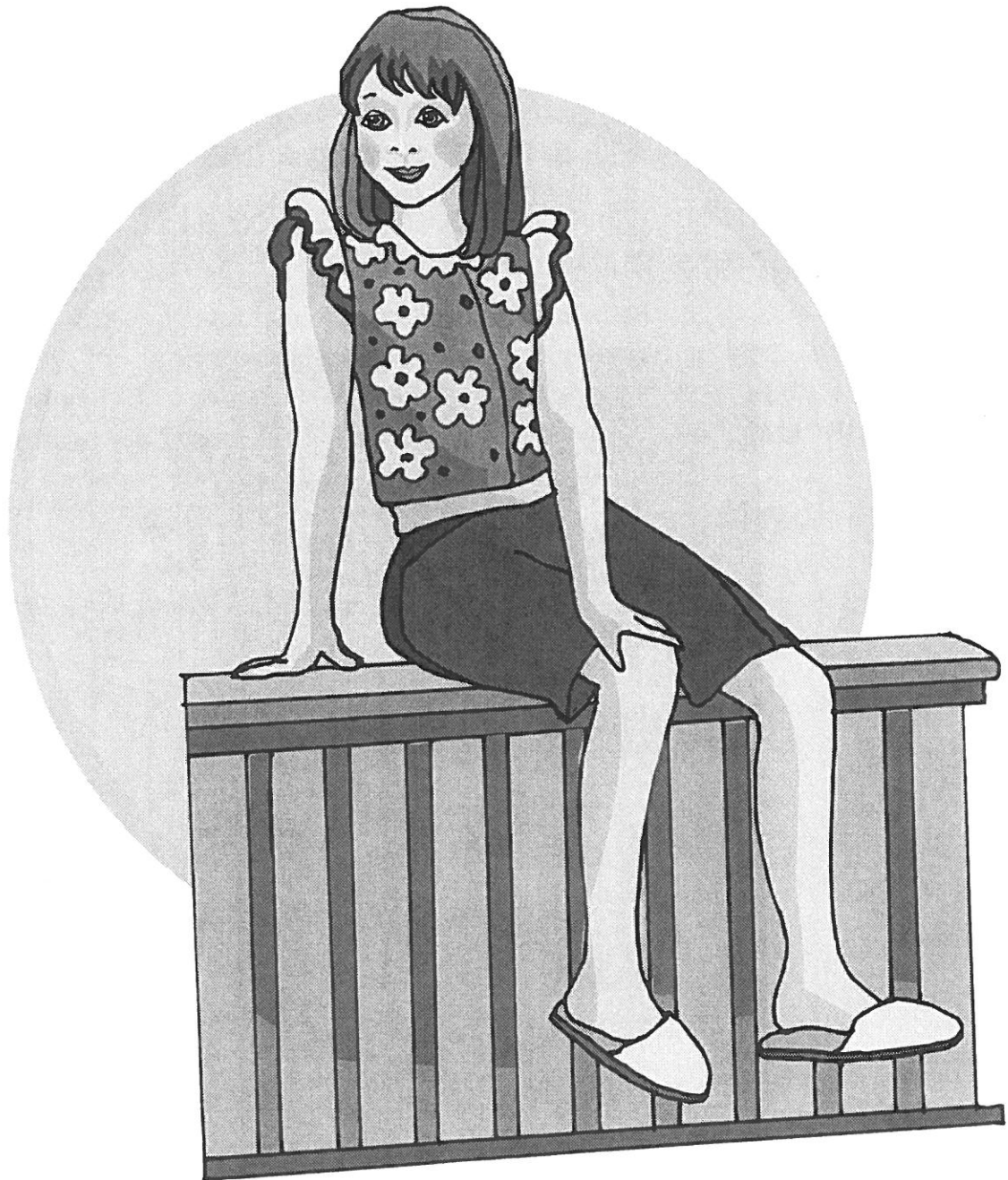
## The goals and anticipated progression of skills for this unit:

- Student will identify basic body changes of puberty: increased height and weight, hair growth, breast development, penis growth, body odor, etc.
- Student will understand the term deodorant and demonstrate its use.
- Student will independently apply deodorant as a part of his daily hygiene routine.
- Female student will tolerate wearing a bra.
- Female student will independently put on a bra as a part of her daily dressing routine.



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The following two stories are gender specific and designed to help students understand and accept the changes to their bodies as they grow and mature. All of these changes can be scary to students. The more we prepare them for these changes and assure them that they will be okay, the easier this transition will become.



# Female Development

Our Bodies Are Growing And Changing

- ↪ Our bodies are growing.
- ↪ Every year, our bodies grow and change a little or a lot.
- ↪ Sometimes, we grow taller.
- ↪ Sometimes, we grow heavier.
- ↪ Soon our bodies will change in other ways.
- ↪ I will start to grow hair on my body.
- ↪ I will grow some hair under my arms and on my privates.
- ↪ I will begin to grow breasts. I will need to wear a bra.
- ↪ Soon, I will start my period.



- ✎ Blood will come from my privates (out of my vagina). Blood will come out every month for about five days and then stop. This is called my "period."
- ✎ During my period, I will need to wear pads in my panties to catch the blood. My body is starting to grow into a woman's body.
- ✎ I will start to grow to look like Mommy and other adult women.
- ✎ I will grow and change every year until I am about 15 years old.
- ✎ I know that my body is growing and changing.
- ✎ I know that someday I will look like Mommy and other adult women.
- ✎ I know that soon I will get my period and blood will come out between my legs from my vagina. I know this is okay.



I will do a good job of growing and changing. It's okay to grow and change and become a woman.



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Communication boards help students to understand and respond to information more easily. Since many of our students are visually strong and need visual cues to help them express themselves, it is important to use these communication supplements when we discuss topics and ask them questions.

The following story helps to explain male growth and development. As with all stories, pictures are an essential tool for showing the changes that will occur. I also encourage fathers to point out to their sons what these changes will look like by indicating their own chest, face and leg hair, underarm hair, muscles and Adam's apple. Although fathers should talk about pubic hair with their sons, I don't recommend showing pubic hair, since it's important to demonstrate rules of modesty and personal safety even within one's family.



# Male Development

Our Bodies Are Growing And Changing

- ↪ Our bodies are growing.
- ↪ Every year our bodies grow and change a little or a lot.
- ↪ Sometimes, we grow taller.
- ↪ Sometimes, we grow heavier.
- ↪ Soon our bodies will change in other ways.
- ↪ I will start to grow hair on my body.
- ↪ I will grow hair under my arms, in my armpits, and on my privates.
- ↪ My chest will grow bigger and broader. I will have muscular arms.
- ↪ My privates will change too. My penis and testicles will get bigger.

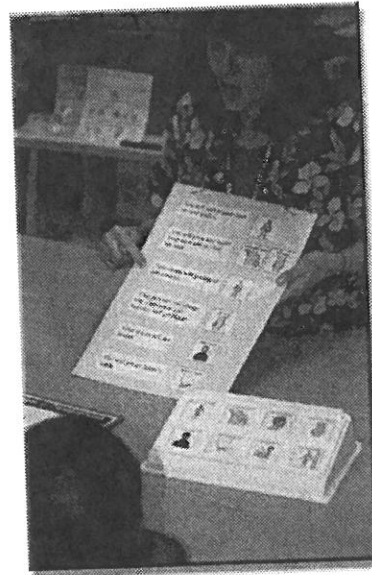
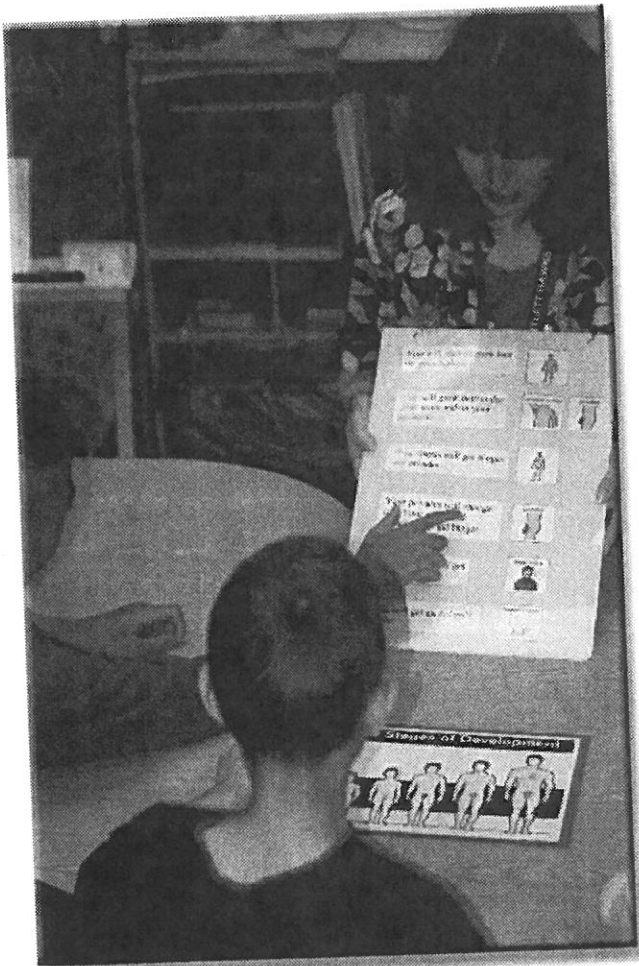


- ↪ My voice will sound deeper and lower like a man's voice.
- ↪ I will have an Adam's apple on my neck, just like Daddy and other men.
- ↪ When I am about 15 years old, I may start to grow hair on my face. I may need to shave the hair on my face.
- ↪ My body will start to grow to be a man's body.
- ↪ I will start to grow to look like Daddy and other adult men.
- ↪ I will grow and change every year until I am about 20 years old.
- ↪ I know that my body is growing and changing.
- ↪ I know that someday I will look like Daddy and other adult men. I know that all boys grow and change and that's okay.

↘ I will do a good job of accepting all the changes to my body. I will do a good job of taking care of my body.



It's okay to grow and change and become a man.



Using a variety of visual supports, as well as voice output devices help students understand information and make responses. The Cheaptalk-8 voice output device (Enabling Devices) is shown.

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Learning to wear deodorant is another essential hygiene routine as our students get older. Most students with disabilities are not aware of the need to wear deodorant and may even resist doing so because of the change in routine, the wet feeling or the unusual smell. Parents often ask me when they should start this routine with their child. As with most changes, I tell them to start the routine of wearing deodorant before it becomes a necessity. If a student has a hard time learning or accepting new routines, it's always a good idea to start early and take it slowly. Eventually we want our students to learn to routinely put on deodorant every morning by themselves.

