

GROWTH AND YOUR 6 TO 12 YEAR OLD

As kids grow from grade-schoolers to preteens, there continues to be a wide range of "normal" regarding height, weight, and shape.

Kids tend to get taller at a pretty steady pace, growing about 2.5 inches (6.35 centimeters) each year. When it comes to weight, though, kids often start gaining weight faster at around 8 to 9 years of age.

This is also a time when kids start to have feelings about how they look and how they're growing. It's common for girls in particular to worry about being overweight or "too big," while boys tend to be sensitive about being too short.

Try to help your child understand that the important thing is not to "look" a certain way, but rather to be healthy. Your son can't change the genes that will determine how tall he will be, but he can make the most of whatever height that is by eating nutritious foods, developing healthy eating habits, and getting lots of physical activity.

Your child's doctor will take measurements at regular check-ups, then plot the results on a standard growth chart to follow over time and compare with other children of the same age and gender.

How Can I Help My Child Grow Normally?

Normal growth - supported by good nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular exercise - is one of the best overall indicators of your child's good health. Malnutrition severe enough to affect a child's growth rate is uncommon today in the United States and other developed countries unless the child has an associated chronic illness or disorder. Your child's growth pattern is largely determined by genetics. Pushing a child with "short genes" to eat extra food or greater than recommended amounts of vitamins, minerals, or other nutrients will not increase his or her height. By accepting who your child is, you are also helping your child build self-acceptance.

Puberty

Puberty - or sexual maturation - is a time of dramatic change for both boys and girls. The age at which the physical changes of puberty normally begin varies widely. For both sexes, these hormone-driven changes are accompanied by growth spurts that transform children into physically mature teens as their bodies develop.

Breast development, usually the first noticeable sign of puberty in girls, may begin anytime between ages 8 and 13. The following characteristics describe the sequence of events in girls as they progress through puberty:

- Breasts begin to develop and hips become rounded.
- The increase in the rate of growth in height begins.
- Pubic hair begins to appear, usually 6 to 12 months after the start of breast development. About 15% of girls will develop pubic hair before breast development starts.
- The uterus and vagina, as well as labia and clitoris, increase in size.
- Pubic hair is well established and breasts grow further.
- The rate of growth in height reaches its peak by about 2 years after puberty began (average age is 12 years).
- Menstruation begins, almost always after the peak growth rate in height has been reached (average age is 12.5 years).

Once girls start to menstruate, they usually grow about 1 or 2 more inches (2.54 to 5.08 centimeters), reaching their final adult height by about age 14 or 15 years (younger or older depending on when puberty began).

Boys tend to show the first physical changes of puberty between ages 10 and 16. They tend to grow most quickly between ages 12 and 15. The growth spurt of boys is, on average, about 2 years later than that of girls. By age 16, most boys have stopped growing, but their muscles will continue to develop. Other features of puberty in boys include:

- The penis and testicles increase in size.
- Pubic hair appears, followed by underarm and facial hair.
- The voice deepens and may sometimes crack or break.
- The Adam's apple, or larynx cartilage, gets bigger.
- Testicles begin to produce sperm.

At the Doctor's Office

Despite data collected for growth charts, "normal" heights and weights are difficult to define. Shorter parents, for instance, tend to have shorter children, whereas taller parents tend to have taller children.

Although you may worry if your child isn't as tall as other kids that age, the more important question is whether your child is continuing to grow at a normal rate. If your child's doctor suspects a problem - such as a growth rate that had been normal but has recently slowed - he or she may track your child's measurements carefully over several months to determine whether the growth pattern suggests a possible health problem or is just a variation of normal.

If it's found that your child is growing or developing too slowly, the doctor may order tests to check for medical conditions such as hypothyroidism, growth hormone deficiency, or other genetic conditions that can affect growth.

If you have any concerns about your child's growth or development, talk with your child's doctor.

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