

Your Child's Growth

What Is Growth?

Physical growth refers to the increases in height and weight and other body changes that happen as kids mature. Hair grows; teeth come in, come out, and come in again; and eventually puberty hits. It's all part of the growth process.

What's Normal?

The first year of life is a time of amazing change during which babies, on average, grow 10 inches (25 centimeters) in length and triple their birth weights.

Given all the growth that happens then, new parents might be surprised when their child **doesn't** continue to grow so fast after the first year. But no child continues the rate of growth of infancy. After age 1, a baby's growth in length slows quite a bit. By age 2, growth in height usually continues at a fairly steady rate of about 2½ inches (6 centimeters) per year until adolescence.

No child grows at a perfectly steady rate throughout this period of childhood, though. Weeks or months of slightly slower growth alternate with mini "growth spurts" in most children. Kids actually tend to grow a bit faster in the spring than during other times of the year!

A major growth spurt happens at the time of puberty, usually between 8 to 13 years of age in girls and 10 to 15 years in boys. Puberty lasts about 2 to 5 years. This growth spurt is associated with sexual development, which includes the appearance of pubic and underarm hair, the growth and development of sex organs, and in girls, the start of menstruation.

By the time girls reach age 15 and boys reach age 16 or 17, the growth of puberty has ended for most and they will have reached physical maturity.

At the Doctor's Office

Beginning in infancy, kids will visit a doctor for regular checkups. During these, the doctor will record height and weight as they compare with that of other kids the same age on a growth chart. This valuable tool can help the doctor determine whether a child is growing at an appropriate rate or whether there might be problems.

How Can Parents Help?

You can do a few things to help your child grow and develop normally. For their overall health and wellness, kids need:

- **Enough rest:** Sleep patterns vary by age and individual child. But most kids need an average of 10 to 12 hours of sleep per night. Sleep gives growing bodies the rest they need to grow well.
- **Good nutrition:** A balanced diet full of essential vitamins and minerals will help kids reach their full growth potential.

- **Regular exercise:** Because obesity is a problem for many kids, parents should make sure that their kids exercise regularly. Bicycling, hiking, in-line skating, sports, or any enjoyable activity that will motivate kids to get moving will promote good health and fitness and help them maintain a healthy weight.

Talking to Kids About Growth

Kids differ in growth and development during childhood. And as with adults, some kids are taller or shorter. Generally, girls hit puberty earlier than boys, though some girls might lag behind their peers in breast development or getting their first period. All of this is usually normal.

Try not to compare growth among siblings or other children. Drawing attention to height, for example, will only make kids feel self-conscious about their size. Encourage your kids to accept their own growth and development. Explain that some kids grow and develop at different rates — and late bloomers usually catch up eventually.

Kids have many questions about growth, from why their teeth fall out to tough or embarrassing topics like breast development or sweating. Answer questions honestly and even start talks about growth to help kids understand the many changes they're facing. This will help them accept the changes positively.

If you're uncomfortable discussing these topics, your kids may think there's something shameful about the changes they go through and might be less likely to bring their concerns to you.

Kids who are short often face teasing by peers and may need help coping. You can help by supporting your child's self-esteem. For example, it might be hard for a small boy to make the football team. But focusing on alternatives, such as soccer or tennis, may make him feel better about himself and what he can do. Try to understand your child's feelings and keep the lines of communication open.

Another way to boost your child's mood is to encourage activities that don't focus on height or weight. Special skills and individual qualities, such as musical talent or a love of literature, are things to be proud of too.

What Should I Do if I Think There's a Problem?

Some parents worry about their child's growth and development. So it can be reassuring to know that most kids who are short or delayed in development are healthy and normal. Shorter parents tend to have shorter children, for example, and not all kids develop at the same rate.

If you have concerns, talk with your doctor. The doctor can examine your child, ask questions about your family history and, if needed, order tests to see if there's a medical condition affecting growth. The doctor may check your child's growth more often or refer your child to a pediatric endocrinologist (a doctor who treats growth disorders).

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