

them do their own thing. They may want to touch the ball, push it, roll it down their arm, or kick it. That's not to say you can't play together, by rolling the ball across the floor to one another, for instance. You can even help your little athlete score a three-pointer by encouraging them to throw the ball into a box or a bucket.

● **Build together.**

Set out several blocks—whether wooden, cloth, or interlocking bricks—and start stacking them and then knocking them over. This exercise will be more than just fun. Block play is a great means of developing motor skills, as well as demonstrating cause and effect when the blocks fall. Chances are your child will be curious and join in the play. Keep it simple, even if your little one just wants to bang them together. A 2-year-old can typically build a tower with four or more blocks. If your toddler gets frustrated because the blocks keep toppling over, don't intervene. Trying to rebuild them again and again in an effort to keep them from crashing to the floor will give them a sense of empowerment and confidence.

Sources: Gary Kirkilas, D.O., a pediatrician at Phoenix Children's Hospital in Arizona; Molly O'Shea, M.D., an editor at *AAP Journal*.

3-4 YEARS

HOW TO

Respond to Whining

by **REBECCA FELSENTAL STEWART**

● **See what they need.**

Kids this age often whine because they're experiencing distress or discomfort and don't know how to express themselves in another way. By using that plaintive voice, your child is trying to tell you that they're feeling an uncomfortable emotion. Just as you used to try to feed, change, or soothe them when they were a baby, think about what your preschooler might need when they are communicating that

way now: a snack, a nap, a book, or maybe just a really good hug.

● **Redirect their focus.**

Sometimes the situation demands a quick fix. If you're checking out in a crowded grocery store and your child won't stop asking for candy, say, "That looks really good, doesn't it? But it's dinnertime soon." Then lift them up, away from the treat and say, "Could you give these crackers to the cashier and then help me put the card through the machine?" Or if you happen to be shopping for clothes and they are particularly restless, you can ask, "Hey, which one do you like the best—the red or the green?" One reason kids whine is that they feel powerless, so asking them to help you lets them feel they have a purpose. And if you can talk in a silly voice or make funny faces that will bring on the giggles, even better, because laughing reduces the level of stress hormones in the body.

● **Give them your full attention.**

Focusing on your connection can be the best way to prevent whining. Regular one-on-one time with you can help your child build up the reserves they need to handle stress better. When you pick them up from preschool, give them a big hug and kiss, and say, "I missed you so much and can't wait to hear about your day." Or before putting them in their car seat, take a short leisurely stroll and engage them in a little conversation. Make them feel noticed and appreciated before you rush off to do whatever comes next. It may be just enough to keep your little one from entering the whine zone in the first place. But if your preschooler does break down and starts crying, take them aside and have a good snuggle. That might be exactly what they need to let go of whatever is bothering them. Your child may even tell you about what's wrong so that you can help them work through it. If not, showing them that they're safe and heard can help bring your kid out from that whiny place, feel better, and act in a more secure, reasonable manner.

Sources: Laura Markham, Ph.D., author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting*; Ashley Taylor, Psy.D., a psychologist in private practice in Pasadena, California.

5-6 YEARS

HOW TO

Deal With Bedwetting

by **JENNA WIRTH**

● **Try not to worry.**

Accidents during the night can be an upsetting experience for both you and your child. It's helpful to know that about 20 percent of 5-year-olds wet the bed, according to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Kids with this issue often have a smaller, not weaker, bladder than their peers, or may not readily wake up when they have to go to the bathroom. Children who stay dry at night get up more easily as the night wears on, but bedwetters have a tougher time waking up as the hours tick by. So if your child is a very heavy sleeper, that could be contributing to wet sheets. Being constipated can also put pressure on the bladder. If your child hasn't pooped in a few days, they may be backed up, and this can lead to wetting the bed.

● **Seek out solutions.**

Make sure your child has easy access to the toilet and is using absorbent pants until they haven't wet the bed for several nights, and limit their drinking prior to bedtime. Have them go right before they get into bed and every two to three hours during the day. In addition, ask your doctor about using a bedwetting alarm that can be clipped to the inside of your kid's underwear. It has a moisture sensor that triggers a bell or buzzer when urine hits it, awakening your child so they can go use the bathroom.

● **Be supportive.**

Bedwetting is never your child's fault, so don't blame or punish them. You can say, "It's okay; your body isn't ready to hold your pee for an entire night right now, but it will be able to before you know it." Resist trying to fix the problem. Instead, work through it. If they seem willing to

talk, discuss their emotions around bedwetting. Let your child know that this is common, they aren't alone, and bedwetting typically resolves on its own. Last, devise strategies for making it less of a big deal, like preparing the bed with double layers of sheets and waterproof mattress pads. That way, if the bed ends up wet, you can easily strip off the top layer and there will be a clean, dry set underneath.

● **Know when to consult their doctor.**

Experts consider bedwetting to be a problem if the child is over 7 and has wet the bed at least two times every week for three consecutive months. At that point, it makes sense to check in with their pediatrician, if you haven't already. In some cases, soaking the sheets can be a symptom of a health condition, like diabetes. Sleep apnea can cause bedwetting, too, because it prevents your child from getting a good night's rest. As a result, they'll be overtired and unable to rouse themselves to go to the bathroom. So look to see if your kid snores or breathes with their mouth open while asleep.

Sources: Gabrina Dixon, M.D., pediatric hospitalist at Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C.; Danelle Fisher, M.D., chair of pediatrics at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Los Angeles; Marc Yester, M.D., general pediatrician at UPMC Children's Community Pediatrics in York, Pennsylvania.

7+ YEARS

HOW TO

Handle Early Puberty

by KATE ROCKWOOD

● **Look for the signs.**

Puberty isn't always punctual. While most girls start puberty around age 10 and most boys around age 11, there are years of wiggle room on either side. When puberty kicks in before age 8 in girls or age 9 in boys, it's known as precocious puberty. If you or your partner went through puberty early,

your child is more likely to do the same, but they can also go through early puberty even if you didn't. It's usually nothing to worry about. But no matter when it starts, it usually progresses the same way. The earliest sign in girls is typically budding breasts and sometimes a change in body odor.

Development of underarm or pubic hair usually happens around the same time, then menstruation. In boys, the first thing that happens is an increase in the size of their testes (you may be alerted during a routine checkup with their pediatrician). Next up is new or extra body hair, body odor, and then growth spurts (aka when pants turn into floods seemingly overnight). Voice deepening happens about a year or two after puberty begins. For both girls and boys, irritation, aggression, confidence issues, and self-exploration are common emotional and mental changes you might see too.

● **Learn more.**

Parents whose kids start developing early are typically caught off guard and may not be prepared to deal with this yet. Also, if your parents didn't exactly give you a great road map for going through puberty (hugs to all those who thought they were dying when they got their period), you might be eager to change that for your children. Your child's pediatrician can be a great sounding board. Feel free to reach out about any questions you have on the topic. You can also find reputable info on websites like HealthyChildren.org (from the American Academy of Pediatrics) and from the Mayo Clinic. Useful puberty reads include kid-friendly but informative books such as the newly released *You-ology: A Puberty Guide for Every Body*, from medical doctors Trish Hutchison, M.D., Kathryn Lowe, M.D., and Melisa Holmes, M.D. Or try *Guy Stuff: The Body Book for Boys*, by Parents advisor and *Puberty Podcast* cohost Cara Natterson, M.D. There's also *The Ultimate Puberty Book: Celebrate Your Body (and Its Changes, Too!)*, by Sonya Renee Taylor.

● **Have low-key conversations.**

Going through puberty is tough on its own, but it can be especially confusing

and alienating for kids who go through it early or who are transgender or intersex. That's why now is a great time to get talking. Discussions about puberty, gender, and sex don't have to be long or even very thorough. Instead, explain why and how your child's body and brain are changing and what they might expect next. Tell your child that these changes are a normal part of getting older and that their bodies just started a little sooner than some. Ask your tween questions and encourage them to ask you questions too. Great conversation starters include: What do you know about puberty? Have you noticed any changes to your body? How do you feel about the changes you're going through?

● **Be empathetic.**

Puberty is a process. Estrogen-driven puberty can last up to three years and testosterone-driven puberty as long as four years—all of which means you're in it for the long haul when it comes to your child's developing body and mind. Be willing to buy clothes that will make them feel more comfortable as their body changes. Watch for signs that they may be struggling, such as having trouble at school or losing interest in their favorite activities. It's natural for kids to be uncomfortable with their body at this time—your job is to be a soft landing spot for their questions and worries.

Sources: Jennifer Kelman, an L.C.S.W. in southern Florida and a mental health contributor on JustAnswer.com; Jason Klein, M.D., medical director of the Transgender Youth Health Program and pediatric endocrinologist at Hassenfeld Children's Hospital at NYU Langone Health; Melinda Pierce, M.D., a pediatric endocrinologist at Children's Minnesota in St. Paul; Alla Vash-Margita, M.D., assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at Yale School of Medicine.

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