BODY TALK, ON THEIR OWN TERMS

ADULTS ARE FAILING AT SEX ED, SO STUDENTS ARE TEACHING IT THEMSELVES

BY KRISTEN BAYRAKDARIAN



Caleb Dupe, 16, and Hazel Ekeke, 17, are peer health educators. "I feel like a role model," Caleb says. "I like feeling like everybody is safe."

WHEN HAZEL EKEKE was younger, she wanted to know about the changes kids go through, like menstruation and getting breasts. But it seemed as if she wasn't supposed to talk about that stuff. And when she finally got to take her school's health class, she says, "it was just kind of the same regurgitated 'stay safe' " messaging over and over. So she decided to do something about it. During the pandemic, after everything went virtual, she signed up for a six-week online sex-ed workshop. "I liked how open people were speaking about sex," she says, "because I'm not used to that."

Later, the workshop coordinators sent Hazel an email with information about Just Ask Me, a program at Children's Aid in New York City that trains teenagers to work as peer health educators. Hazel jumped at the chance to apply and was accepted. Now she helps other kids and teenagers learn what no one else is teaching them. "Everybody knows me for being obsessed with sexual health," the now-17-year-old says.

Health and sex-ed classes are different at every school. Some schools don't have them at all. Other schools teach abstinence, which is when people don't have sex until they are married. This is a problem because teenagers might have sex anyway and not know how to do it safely, says Mariyamou Sacko, 14.

This year, Mariyamou became a Children's Aid health ambassador at her school. Adult instructors teach participants about different health-related topics, including pregnancy, consent and sexually transmitted infections. Then the kids share that information with other people their age.

Caleb Dupe, 16, a peer educator, likes getting more information. "My peers also find it easier to listen to me than a teacher," he says. When young people come into the Children's Aid clinic to see a doctor or on a class trip, he and Hazel show how to use birth control, answer questions or play learning games. They also post TikTok videos explaining sexual health terms or quizzing kids on the street. "Something that we've been doing a lot in our job is breaking the misconceptions of people who believe things that aren't really true," Hazel says.

Mariyamou is always listening for kids passing around false information so she can correct them. Because of the program, she says, she has helped her friends make smarter decisions, and learned a lot herself too: "I joined to help me and to help them." ◆

PHOTOGRAPH BY DESEAN MCCLINTON-HOLLAND • ILLUSTRATION BY SUPER FREAK

WOW, THAT'S WILD

BY REBECCA KATZMAN



IF YOU'VE HEARD it once, you've heard it a million times: You're special! But — hate to break it to you — you're not *that* special. Every single creature in the animal kingdom goes through changes as it grows. Wolves' howls become deeper. Some female bats get their periods. Even dinosaurs that lived millions of years ago once went through puberty. "You're part of this more-than-500-million-year process of animal life on Earth," says Kathryn Bowers, who studies how animals behave. Here's how that process goes for other species.

TEEN COWS GET AN ATTITUDE

What do you call a cow going through puberty? Moooody. That's a dad joke, but it's also true: Cows can start having mood swings when they're around 8 to 9 months old, which is when they're "preteens." Researchers have noticed that some become shy, while others grow bold — brave enough to walk up to a stranger, for example. The same thing happens to humans, the researcher Marina von Keyserlingk says: "Something about puberty can change personality types."

GOOD DOGS BEHAVE BADLY

Don't even bother asking your pup to sit or stay during puberty. Studies show that "teenage" dogs become more defiant and less obedient at around 5 to 8 months. Dogs can also get zits on their lips, chins and muzzles. It's pretty ruff out there!

BLAND BIRDS TURN FLASHY

Ever hear the tale of the ugly duckling that turns into a beautiful swan? That's exactly what happens with some birds: They get prettier after puberty. Beaks change color and some are finally able to dance and sing. Certain types of flamingo turn a brighter shade of pink, and male birds of paradise that were once drab chicks grow eye-popping feathers to attract female birds. Talk about a glow-up.

BABOONS BLUSH RED

The next time you blush after running into your crush, just remember: It could be *way* worse. When female baboons grow into adults, their *butts* turn red and swell up. Sounds awkward, but the blush actually helps attract mates.

MOOSE AND DEER DUKE IT OUT

Male elk, moose and deer go through a wild type of growth spurt around puberty. They grow a new appendage altogether: their first visible set of antlers. Then they start using them to roughhouse and mess around. Remind you of anyone you know? They're not just goofing off, though. The play fighting is practice for conflicts they could have as adults. Those new antlers also help them get the girl. Or, you know, the doe.

CATERPILLARS TURN TO MUSH — LITERALLY

A caterpillar stuffs itself with food, then it hides away from the world and becomes a bare little tube called a chrysalis. Inside, it basically digests itself from the inside out. Dramatic! Caterpillars go through such a complete transformation that it gets its own name: metamorphosis. After several days of existing as a bag of mush, it emerges as a beautiful butterfly. ◆

ILLUSTRATION BY SERGE SEIDLITZ

IN THE NEWS

ADULTS SAY: SAFETY. KIDS SAY: CENSORSHIP!

Last year, politicians and other groups tried to get hundreds of books banned from schools. Even more bans are expected this year. What's the problem? Some adults are arguing that books about puberty aren't appropriate for preteen readers, because they mention topics like sex and sexuality. Others are against books that mention L.G.B.T.Q. issues. Lots of kids, parents and librarians are fighting back. Their message to would-be banners: Maybe you're the ones who need to grow up.

TRUE OR FALSE?

A PUBERTY POP QUIZ

BY AMY MARTURANA WINDERL

YOU GO THROUGH puberty only once (thankfully!), and it doesn't come with an instruction manual. Some things you've heard might not actually be true. Take this quiz to test your knowledge and maybe correct some misunderstandings.

1. Shaving makes hair grow back thicker.
- True ○
- False ○

2. Developing early means you're more grown up.
- True ○
- False ○

3. Girls mature before boys do.
- True ○
- False ○

4. It's obvious when puberty starts and ends.
- True ○
- False ○

5. Acne is pretty much unavoidable.
- True ○
- False ○

6. Touching yourself is bad.
- True ○
- False ○

7. Most kids gain weight during puberty.
- True ○
- False ○

8. You need more sleep these days.
- True ○
- False ○

ANSWERS

1. FALSE. When new hair grows in, it might look thicker and darker than before, but that's not because you shaved it. It's because during adolescence, hair naturally goes from light and fuzzy to darker and coarse. In other words, that was going to happen anyway, says John Steever, a doctor at Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center.

2. FALSE. In a scientific sense, getting taller, developing breasts or growing body hair are all signs that your body is maturing. But going through these things before your classmates doesn't mean you're any less of a kid than they are. Going through them later doesn't make you more of a kid, either.

3. TRUE. All kids go through puberty at their own pace, but girls generally start about a year earlier. They also reach their peak height earlier, so a lot of girls will be taller than the boys in their class for a while.

4. FALSE. Puberty is sneaky. Some of the first signs are so small you might not notice them — like a slight change in color of the skin between your legs, or soreness around your nipples. And there's no announcement at the end, like "Ding ding ding! Puberty is over!" Which would be weird, anyway.

5. TRUE. Some kids break out less than others, but expect puberty to come with a side of zits. Your skin's response to all of the hormones raging in your body is to produce tons of oil that creates a cozy environment for acne-causing bacteria, especially on your face, chest or back. Washing your face and body every day and using pimple products with benzoyl peroxide can help. If your acne is really bothersome or painful, a dermatologist can help clear things up.

6. FALSE. Exploring your body or masturbating is totally normal and healthy, Dr. Steever says. Your genitals are just body parts, like ears and noses. But since they're "private parts," you'll want privacy when you touch them.

7. TRUE. Kids are always growing, but puberty hormones change *how* you grow. You may get more body fat and wider hips, or gain muscle and broader shoulders.

8. TRUE. Your body's working overtime to grow and develop. Kids ages 6 to 12 need nine to 12 hours of sleep a night. Teenagers need eight to 10 hours. Puberty also shifts your body clock: You might not get sleepy until later, which makes getting up for school rough. ◆

ILLUSTRATION BY SUPER FREAK

DARKER HAIR DOWN THERE • NEEDING SPACE • SURPRISE ERECTIONS • GREASY HAIR