

My
Changing
Body

The title is presented in a stylized, multi-colored font. 'My' is purple, 'Changing' is orange, and 'Body' is purple. The text is set against a light purple background with a large white circle behind it. There are two orange silhouettes of a person with arms raised, one in the top right and one in the bottom left. Several orange and purple circles of varying sizes are scattered around the central circle.

Fertility Awareness for Young People

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Fertility Awareness for Young People

Institute for Reproductive Health of Georgetown University

and

Family Health International

in collaboration with Elisa Knebel

My Changing Body: Fertility Awareness for Young People

by the Institute for Reproductive Health of Georgetown University
and Family Health International in collaboration with Elisa Knebel

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The Institute has worked extensively in developing materials and approaches for increasing fertility awareness, mainly for adults. Its work has shown how few people really understand their fertility and how important it is to have this knowledge.

FHI is committed to the ideal that young people have a right to access reproductive health information and services, which leads to a greater understanding of their own bodies and fertility. FHI is currently working around the world to improve youth reproductive health and HIV prevention behaviors.

The impetus for this project was the combined desire of both organizations to share their experience in preparing young people to understand their bodies as they grow into adulthood.

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*Institute for Reproductive Health of Georgetown University
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Introduction to the Manual

Why Choose *My Changing Body*?

Human development, interpersonal relationships, personal skills, sexual behavior, sexual health, and sex in society and culture—there are many topics to cover when teaching youth about fertility, sex, and development!¹ *My Changing Body: Fertility Awareness for Young People* is not a comprehensive sexuality education manual, but it goes into detail about one of these topics—fertility awareness.

Fertility awareness is a way to help young people understand their maturing bodies and how to protect their own reproductive health. Discussing physical and emotional changes and signs of fertility during puberty helps young people become knowledgeable about how their bodies function and empowers them to make appropriate decisions about sexual behavior. Helping young people understand their fertility dispels myths and misconceptions about reproductive health and makes them better prepared for adulthood.

Most parents, schools, youth organizations, and religious institutions are ill-prepared to help young people understand and prepare for puberty. Thus, young people often lack skills and information to deal with the many physical, social, and emotional changes associated with this time of rapid change. When young people are better aware of how their bodies work and what changes to expect as they become adults, they are much better prepared to deal with sexual and reproductive health issues and challenges.

My Changing Body provides accurate, factual information about puberty in objective and reassuring terms for young people. What youth learn from *My Changing Body* will help them to become more self-confident, practice good health habits, and gain a positive self-image. *My Changing Body* is a fun and engaging manual. Each session includes interactive activities, role-plays, games, and craft-making that not only promote the mastery of new knowledge, but also stimulate participants to share feelings and emotions. By engaging the “heart,” in addition to the “head,” participants hear, learn, and absorb very important messages about their changing bodies.

¹ For guidelines on what topics to cover in sexuality education, see: National Guideline Taskforce. *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Kindergarten–12th Grade, Second Edition*. New York: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS), 1996. Available: www.siecus.org.

Who is the Target Audience?

This manual is designed for adults who teach young people about human development and fertility. Youth group leaders, religious instructors, school teachers, or any adults regularly meeting with and instructing young people can use this manual. This manual is ideal for youth-serving organizations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS), World Organization of the Scout Movement (Boy Scouts), and others. The content and activities covered in this manual are targeted toward young people ages 10 to 14.

Although this manual does not cover topics around sexual behavior and practice, participating young people will likely ask about these issues. Thus, there are questions and answers available throughout the manual in case this happens. It is also very important for you to be objective in how topics concerning sexuality are approached. Personal biases and attitudes should not interfere with the teaching of this manual. Young people have a right to honest, accurate, and appropriate information about their sexuality and reproductive health.

Overall Objectives

During the course, participants will do the following:

1. Identify specific physical and emotional changes experienced by both boys and girls during puberty.
2. Identify the age or time when puberty occurs.
3. Discuss their own physical development and body image.
4. Begin to understand their sexual feelings.
5. Describe the process of conception and the definition of female and male fertility.
6. Dispel common myths around female and male fertility.
7. Describe the process of fertilization.
8. Become conscious of their own signs of fertility.
9. Develop practices for maintaining good hygiene.

How is *My Changing Body* Organized?

This manual can be used as a supplement to existing materials you might be using to teach sexuality education. If you would like additional information or resources on sexual health and sexuality education, please consult the Resources section at the end of this manual.

Depending on the amount of time available, this manual can be taught over a series of weeks or days, or during a two- or three-day workshop. Each session in the manual should be followed in consecutive order, but the amount of time between each session can vary based on your program's needs. An advantage of moving through the material slowly is that participants will have enough time to complete the suggested long-term homework activities.

The Fertility Awareness Necklace

The manual uses a necklace with 32 beads of different colors to help facilitators explain the monthly changes that girls experience when they menstruate. The necklace provides a visual tool to help girls better understand their fertility and the changes in their bodies that occur at the onset of puberty and continue as they mature. Menstruation is a regular occurrence that involves the same changes in their bodies each month. The necklace can also be used to teach boys how the female body works and when a girl can become pregnant.

The idea for using a necklace to teach fertility awareness to young people had its genesis in the work of the Institute for Reproductive Health in developing a new, natural family planning method called the Standard Days Method (SDM). Many SDM users rely on CycleBeads™, a color-coded string of beads with a rubber ring, to help them track their fertile days while using this method. A number of individuals from youth organizations suggested that the necklace concept would be a helpful visual aid for teaching young people about fertility. Thus, it is important to note that the necklace used in this manual is different from CycleBeads™ and is not intended for use in family planning. If a woman wants to use CycleBeads™ for family planning, it is important for her to have additional information. She should contact her family planning provider.

Teaching Methodology

Telling youth about the process of growing up takes courage. In many societies, people are taught not to talk about intimate things, including our so-called “private parts.” But, as you have probably noticed, *not* talking only leads to more myths and misinformation.

The methodology of this manual is based on engaging participants in very interactive exercises. Activities are meant to be fun for kids, but be sure that in your role as facilitator, you draw out the lessons of each session. It is important to not get lost in the activity and to be sure to process the most important points for your participants.

To make this course a success, you need to overcome your fears and discomforts about discussing fertility and the human body. This will contribute toward creating an atmosphere of openness and trust for participants. Before beginning the manual, you should prepare yourself. Below are some recommendations to help you successfully conduct this course:

- **Read the whole manual.**

A preliminary reading of the manual will give you a holistic view of what you will be teaching, an idea about the material you need to gather, and how you should prepare yourself to teach the course.

- **Identify and understand the beliefs and values of youth participants and of yourself.**

Do you remember how it felt to be a young person? Do you remember what it was like to have your first period or wet dream? Think about what participants must be feeling as they grow up. Pay attention to your own beliefs and values. Doing so will make you a much more effective facilitator.

- **Create a nonjudgmental environment where participants' values are respected.**

Accept and respect all participants' comments and questions. Let them know that their concerns and opinions are valid and worthwhile.

- **Be enthusiastic!**

Help young people develop attitudes about human development by setting the tone of the learning experience. Maintain a positive approach to the normal, healthy process of growing up. No matter how objective adults are trying to be, youth notice negative feelings and attitudes. How something is presented is often more powerful than what is said.

- **Always be prepared.**

Before each session, *read all the session steps and content*. Pay special attention to the "Facilitator Note" and "Stress the Following" shaded boxes. Be prepared for any questions participants might ask about that particular topic. Do not be afraid to say you do not know something, and offer to check it out and get back to the group.

- **Make participants feel comfortable.**

Avoid causing anyone potential embarrassment. Do not make participants answer a question they feel uncomfortable answering.

- **Provide opportunities for participants to ask questions anonymously.**

For some participants, asking questions is the easiest way to express their concerns. Give participants time to write down questions and deposit them in a “Question Box.” Then answer the questions later for the entire group.

- **Identify resource persons and sites.**

If you are not comfortable facilitating a topic, or feel you do not have adequate information, invite someone (such as a health expert or fellow educator) who can.

- **Utilize brainstorming.**

Participants will likely know more about puberty and fertility than they or you might realize. Brainstorming helps to bring out this information and to identify if their information is incorrect or incomplete.

- **Help participants make their own rules.**

Helping young people to develop and follow a clear set of rules to govern their discussions will make them feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. Ground rules also make clear what type of language and behavior is considered acceptable and appropriate. Once ground rules have been clearly stated, refer to them throughout the course and when dealing with difficult situations.

- **Conduct large group discussions.**

The more participants are able to debate and talk with each other, the more they grow. After creating an atmosphere of openness and trust, you will still need to stimulate participation and involvement. Much of the manual will consist of involving participants in large group and small group interactive exercises.

- **Use small group activities.**

Participants will take ownership of their work when working alone or in small groups. Small group work can also help to encourage young people to speak up more, especially those who may be shy or reluctant to speak in larger groups.

Teaching with This Manual

It is important to be familiar with the organization of the manual. The manual contains:

1. Six teaching sessions. Each **Session** is devoted to a particular topic:

Session 1. Puberty: My Body, My Self

Session 2. Female and Male Fertility

Session 3. Combining Female and Male Fertility: Fertilization

Session 4. Concerns about My Fertility: Female and Male Group Discussions

Session 5. Hygiene and Puberty

Session 6. Review

2. A **Glossary** of important words in the back of the manual.
3. A list of other **Resources** at the end of the manual to help you gain more knowledge.

Each teaching **Session** contains:

1. **Objectives** – Specific skills and abilities the participants will gain from the session.
2. **Materials Needed** – Items that need to be gathered ahead of time for the session.
3. **Before You Begin** – Directions for what to do before starting the session.
4. **Time** – Schedule to guide the length of the session. Depending on the number of participants and other factors, the time for doing each activity could vary. Most sessions should take between one and a half to two hours to complete. It is most important to work at the pace of the participants.
5. **Steps** – Separate activities that comprise the session. Each step in the session should be followed in order. Instructions are provided for each step and may also include the following:
 - Facilitator Note** – Special note or reminder for the facilitator on how to facilitate certain steps.
 - Stress the Following** – Main points to cover for certain steps.
 - Take-Home Messages** – Points to review again with the participants at the end of the session.
6. **Possible Questions and Answers** – Young people will certainly ask questions about each topic. Some possible questions and answers are listed after each session to aid the facilitator. With the exception of Session 4, *you do not have to cover all of these topics*. The questions and answers are only there to provide you with quick answers if participants ask questions. Read these questions before starting a session to be familiar with possible questions participants might ask.
7. **Extra Activities** – Activities listed at the end of the session that can be added to the manual to reinforce what the participants have learned. *The activities are optional—you can decide whether or not to use them*. Some activities are designed to last over several months.
8. **Content** – Main information to be covered during the session. *It is critical to read and understand the content before starting every session*.

It is important for participants to understand the objectives of each session. Stop and review important points if participants do not understand them. This manual is about the personal development of each participant. It should not be treated like a school class in which participants are preparing for an exam. Make the course fun and informative!

Boys and Girls: Together or Separate?

All of the sessions, except **Session 4**, are designed to maximize the participation of boys and girls together. In **Session 4**, boys and girls are separated to give them an opportunity to ask questions of a facilitator of their own sex, among their peers. Some of the topics in this manual can be difficult to discuss. Separating boys and girls for this session enables them to feel more comfortable talking about their specific questions and concerns.

After reading this manual, you might believe that boys and girls should be separated in some or all of the other sessions. In many cultures, girls and boys, and men and women, traditionally do not talk about bodily changes or sexuality with each other. In such settings, both boys and girls will likely be embarrassed to speak or participate in the activities. Therefore, you may decide to conduct the sessions with girls and boys separately.

Promoting participation should be your first priority. Whether this means separating boys and girls for the whole or part of the course is your decision and should be based on the culture and society in which you are leading this course.

Course Location

Some of the material discussed in this manual is sensitive, and participants will likely want privacy. Where you choose to hold this course is critical. If possible, try to select a quiet, safe place where participants will not be viewed, listened to, or interrupted by outsiders. Assure the participants that none of their comments will leave this “safe place.” Also, make sure that the manual is delivered at a location convenient to participants’ homes.

Preparing Parents

Some parents and caregivers are uncomfortable discussing sexuality issues with their children. Others may feel anxious about providing too much information or embarrassed about not knowing answers to questions they are asked. Parents or caregivers may also feel uncomfortable communicating these things because of their cultural values, norms, and traditions.

It is important that parents or caregivers be informed about the information being shared with their children. Below is a sample letter that can be adapted and sent to them. This information can also be communicated in person if you are working with low-literate populations. In addition to the letter, you might want to hold a meeting with parents or caregivers to discuss the manual and some of its more sensitive content. This will be essential for low-literate populations who cannot read such a letter. Maintaining contact with and responding to any questions or concerns of parents or caregivers throughout the course will contribute to a greater understanding of the topics and overall success of the course. Providing your contact information in case parents or caregivers want to ask you additional questions is also recommended.

Sample Letter

Dear Parents,

We are pleased to offer a special program concerning the emotional and physical growth and development of early adolescence for your child. The program involves group discussion and interactive exercises.

In order to prepare participants to make healthy and responsible decisions as they grow and develop through adolescence, we will be studying the physical, social, and emotional changes associated with puberty. Fertility awareness and puberty education are part of a balanced, complete, health education program. The goals of this program are to help young people:

- Gain accurate and age-appropriate knowledge about puberty.
- Develop a positive self-image and attitude toward the changes that they are experiencing or will experience.
- Develop skills that will enable them to communicate appropriately with others about puberty.

Topics that will be covered include the social, emotional, and physical changes associated with puberty, development of the male and female reproductive systems, menstruation, fertility awareness, and personal hygiene. You may wish to become involved in your child's learning in the following ways:

- Encourage your child to discuss questions with you.
- Talk to your child about your own feelings and experiences during adolescence.
- Talk to your child about your own values and beliefs regarding sexuality, puberty, health, and hygiene.
- Encourage your child to share or discuss what he or she is learning in the manual.

The primary purpose of the program is to provide accurate, factual information about puberty in objective and reassuring terms for young people. All of the high-quality learning materials have been compiled by the Institute for Reproductive Health of Georgetown University and Family Health International in the United States, and are based on experiences of youth-serving programs in developing countries. Both organizations are well respected worldwide for their work in educating young people about puberty.

As a youth leader, I feel it is in the best interest of our young people to provide them with this very valuable and important information. Thank you very much for your continued cooperation and support. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me.

Sincerely yours,

(NAME OF FACILITATOR)

(Provide contact information such as school or organization name, address, and/or telephone number.)

Referring Participants for Further Help

Boys and girls often have questions or concerns that they might not want to share with their parents. There are many people who can act as counselors or advisors to youth: health providers, teachers, religious leaders, community leaders, school principals, and relatives. Throughout the course, it is important to stress that participants should contact you or other adults whom they trust to discuss any of the information presented in the manual. You should also mention existing referral services in your area that deal with any issues or concerns that participants raise during the course.