




# PUBERTY AND AUTISM



**Our topic today is puberty, adolescence and autism.** We will talk about the typical changes of adolescence all teens experience as they transition to adulthood and how these changes may be expressed in teens with autism. As there is a wide range of functioning on the autism spectrum, not everything we discuss will fit every child. However, I will be covering many general principles that should apply to most everyone.

Puberty describes the physical changes in the body and adolescence is the period of emotional and social transition to adulthood.

There are 3 areas of change during puberty:

- ✓ Changes in brain structure,
- ✓ Release of sex hormones that lead to physical changes
- ✓ Social/Emotional changes

# Changes in the Brain

Two areas of the brain that are important in explaining behaviors during adolescence

## **Frontal Cortex and the Amygdala**

**Amygdala**—This is the part of the brain which is responsible for immediate reactions including fear and aggressive behavior. When the Amygdala is triggered the reaction is flight, fight or freeze. When the Amygdala perceives a threat, it can lead the person to react irrationally and destructively. This area of the brain develops early in life.

**Frontal Cortex**—This area of the brain controls reasoning and allows someone to think before they react. It also is involved in coordinating and adjusting complex behavior, impulse control, control and organization of emotional reactions and organizing attention. This is the last part of the brain to develop and doesn't fully develop until the mid-twenties.

The connection between the Amygdala and the Frontal Cortex is the last to develop.