Friday, Oct. 4, 2024 / Puberty hits different now

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

ISAIAH KING (14-year-old): I do remember when my voice started to change.

<SCORING IN> Cradle Song

ISAIAH: I was listening to a voice recording last night of a voicemail that I had sent to my dad in August 2022, and you could really hear the the high pitched little squeak in my voice, and, and I was like, was I really like that when I when I was 12 or 11?”

NOEL: Puberty will always be puberty. For better…

ISAIAH: I think the best part was definitely getting taller. I was pretty insecure about my height in seventh grade.

NOEL: …or worse.

ISAIAH: And the worst part I definitely think, was the moodiness. Yeah, that hit hard.

NOEL: On *Today, Explained:* kids are going through puberty earlier these days. Some new research helps explain why. And it’s OK. The kids are alright.

ISAIAH: I still have a heck of a lot more of a journey to go through, but I think I'm inching closer day by day to becoming an adult.

<SCORING OUT> Cradle Song

[THEME]

NOEL: Prior to the 1990s, data showed that girls, on average, entered puberty at about 11 years old, and boys at about 11 and a half. But in the last 15 years or so, studies have shown the age is dropping for both boys and girls with some girls starting puberty at 6 or 7. Vanessa Kroll Bennett is a podcaster and writer on puberty. And Cara Natterson is a pediatrician. Together they wrote the book: *This is so Awkward. Modern Puberty, Explaine*d. Cara, let’s start with you and with this question: what is causing puberty to start earlier than it used to?

CARA: There are actually four answers. The first answer is no one really knows. But, there's a lot of data being collected. And these next three buckets are really probably the reasons why.

<SCORING IN> Neutral Irene

CARA: So bucket number one is stress. So we know that stress causes the body to produce cortisol. The stress hormone and cortisol has been shown to be connected with tipping kids into earlier puberty. We can talk about what stress looks like, but it looks like different things in different kids. And it's chronic in most kids these days because they are constantly, constantly on alert, telling their, their adrenal glands to release cortisol because of the big game coming up or the big test coming up, or their food insecurity or the trauma that they just witnessed…

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR:*

*MEGAN THOMPSON, REPORTER: It was a random drive by shooting. Ruth's children weren't physically hurt, but her older daughters, Andrea and Michelle, can't shake the memory.*

*CHILD 1: Yeah, I was scared. I was crying.*

*CHILD 2: I thought I would die….*

CARA: I mean, there's a lot of stress out there. So that's one bucket. The second bucket is exposure to antibiotics.

*<*[*CL*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ9ZpCyldGw)*I*[*P*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ9ZpCyldGw)*> NEWS CHANNEL 5: It might look good, but what's added to beef, pork and poultry has the attention of the CDC and hospitals all over the U.S. 80% of the antibiotics used in this country are used in animal agriculture…*

CARA: This is not a dose of antibiotic for an ear infection.

NOEL: Hm.

CARA: This is the chronic ongoing exposure, an antibiotic in our food supply, which has been connected with inflammation in the gut and also looks to be involved with earlier puberty.

<SCORING OUT> Neutral Irene

CARA: But the third bucket and this is, I think what you're most curious about, given the recent study that just came out, is a group of chemicals called endocrine disrupting chemicals, EDCs. There are a thousand of them. And these chemicals mess with the way that hormones work inside of bodies. And there's one in particular called musk ambrette that was just shown to be connected with the onset of puberty.

*<CLIP> WION: The parents hoping to prevent early puberty, need to check cosmetics, fragrances and household products that their children might use. New research has now revealed a common environmental chemical that is found in a wide variety…*

CARA: It's the very first endocrine disruptor that has ever been shown to be physically connected with, sort of, that first domino in the domino chain that gets a body starting to transform.

NOEL: What is musk ambrette?

CARA: What *is* musk ambrette is the most common question we've gotten for the last several weeks.

NOEL: <laughs>

VANESSA: <laughs>

CARA: So musk ambrette is a chemical that is used largely in cosmetic products to help fragrance, as its name implies. It's kind of a musky quality. It's not in every cosmetic product by any stretch. But ask me which cosmetic products it's in. And I'm going to say “I don't know,” because there is no requirement that the fragrance ingredients appear on an ingredient list. This is highly annoying to doctors, by the way. That fragrances are protected so they don't have to be individually listed. Which means, go to your local drugstore or supermarket and try to find it on the label and you're going to have very little luck. But musk ambrette, it is in the fragrance. And when we put it into or onto our body—so if you wash your hair with a shampoo that has it, or you slather moisturizer all over your body that has it. The musk ambrette that gets absorbed, it looks like when musk amber, it enters your body and it goes into your brain. It can fit into receptors in a part of the brain called the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus releases GNRH at the beginning of puberty, GNRH travels over to a different part of the brain called the pituitary gland. The pituitary gland gets the message from GNRH: “ah-ha it's time to start puberty”. And then the pituitary gland releases its hormones LH and FSH and that triggers the cycle that will eventually turn into a maturing body.

NOEL: I'm, I’m putting…I don't have kids, but I'm putting myself in the shoes of a parent right now. And there is this slight panic happening in my brain, which is. Should I stop using scented shampoos? Should I stop using scented soaps? Should I go to a doctor like you and say, figure out what's in it? Tell me what I'm not supposed to give my kid. Like. Is this is this a is this bad news?

CARA: The truth of the matter is that doctors have been saying, oh, I don't know forever that you should stay away from scented products. And there are a lot of reasons why. They irritate the skin. People that have eczema get worse eczema. So for all of us listening, this is a very relevant question. And the advice is always going to be go fragrance free. Now, when you layer on kids, it's like everything else in the world, right? Like kids shouldn't be on their screens all the time. Neither should we. Kids shouldn't sleep with their phones in their room. Neither should we. Kids shouldn't use fragrance products. Neither should we, right? If we need a reason to get fragranced products out of the bathroom for our kids in our lives. Great. You can use this as a reason, but I just think it's pretty harmless to also get them out of our own bathrooms.

<SCORING IN> Scanning the Horizon (no drone)

NOEL: Vanessa, I have never heard anyone talk about early puberty as if it is a good thing. Is hitting puberty earlier inherently a bad thing?

VANESSA: So we don't want to demonize it because there are tens of millions of children in this country who have or will be entering puberty earlier than generations past. And so whatever it is currently, we want to approach it in as constructive and empowering a way as possible. So that's number one. Number two, there is data and research that connects earlier puberty in girls to higher risks for substance abuse, for anxiety and depression, for lower body image, and also for risks of earlier sexual behavior. Now, I want to be super clear here that the research is not saying one causes the other. This is correlative and it's correlative because when a kid looks older, the world treats that child as older.

NOEL: Mhmm

VANESSA: And that treatment, that exposure, those invitations, those advances to participate in certain things. That's what puts a kid at risk.

<SCORING OUT> Scanning the Horizon (no drone)

NOEL: Many of us associate puberty with becoming an adult, at the very least, the early stages of adulthood. There are lots of cultural traditions that go back many, many, many hundreds, even thousands of years that kind of tie, puberty and adulthood together. Should we stop doing that?

VANESSA: It's so funny Noel, and my best response is a haiku that was written about bar mitzvahs. And it was something like, Today I am a man. Tomorrow I return to the seventh grade. And it is so—

NOEL: Aww. I’m tearing up. I like that.

VANESSA: I love it because it's a perfect reframing of where kids are in this stage. I mean, perhaps we want to rethink some of the language we use around these coming of age experiences. And you know, they may be anachronistic in some ways or they may put pressure on kids to feel older or more mature.

*<CLIP> CARRIE (1976):*

*MOM: You’re a woman now.*

*CARRIE: Why didn’t you tell me momma?*

VANESSA: Here's what I will say. Kids this age, tweens and teens are so awesome. They are so fun and so smart and so insightful. And they are evolving on a day to day basis. And I think if our trite traditions and rituals and markers of these moments can make space for that almost perpetual evolution of these kids…

*<CLIP> ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT’S ME, MARGARET:  
MARGARET: But do you feel older now? Like more mature?*

*FRIEND: Oh yeah. I don’t know how to explain it and you won’t understand it until you get it but, i feel like everything’s changed…*

<SCORING IN> Neutral Satoshi

VANESSA: It's actually really celebratory of what this experience is really about, which is you are a work in progress. Your body is a work in progress, your brain is a work in progress. And we love you and we believe in you no matter what. It's not about their survival out in the wild trying to capture beasts. It's not about being left on a mountaintop for most cultures these days. But it is about independence. It is about self-awareness. It is about taking on more and more responsibility. And those are amazing things that we don't want to eliminate from our experiences and conversations with kids.

MUSIC BUMP

NOEL: We’ll have more with Vanessa Kroll Bennett and Dr. Cara Natterson, up next.

*<CLIP> I feel like I'm still a kid in some sort of way. Like, you know, running around the hallways with my friends or going to the movies and watching Mets games at my house playing video games. But. I think that I've matured in a lot of ways, definitely in terms of, you know, staying focused like in school. So. Yeah.*

<SCORING OUT> Neutral Satoshi

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT’S ME, MARGARET:*

*MARGARET: Are you there god, it’s me margaret, I have never been so jealous in my entire life and I hate myself for being jealous, just please, please, just let me grow and let me get my period and be normal and regular like everyone else, just please please please please. <sighs> Amen….*

NOEL: Today, Explained. We’re back with Vanessa Kroll Bennett and Dr. Cara Natterson. Together, they wrote a book called: *This is so Awkward: Modern Puberty Explained.* Vanessa, the book explores how puberty is changing in some very real ways. It starts earlier. It lasts longer. It now involves a phone. So, what should conversations between parents and kids sound like?

VANESSA: So first of all, and I so appreciate, Noel, that “conversations” was plural in your question, because it's many, many, many, many conversations over a decade.

NOEL: Hm!

<SCORING IN> Carousel waltz

*<CLIP> MY GIRL (1991)*

*VADA: I’m hemorrhaging.*

*SHELLY: What do you mean you’re hemorrhaging?*

*VADA: I don’t want it. I don't need your help.*

*SHELLY: Vada, did this happen in the bathroom? How old are you?*

*VADA: I’m eleven and a half.*

*SHELLY: It’s OK. Come upstairs. We have to have a little talk.*

VANESSA: So knowing that it's many conversations, we hope that takes the stress off of adults back to do it right and to do it perfectly. And we like to say that when you mess up, take the do over. Say to the kid, ‘you know what? I totally blew it the other day. You asked me what a blowjob is and I freaked out and avoided it.

NOEL: Hm!

VANESSA: And I want another chance to be in conversation with you.’

CARA: I just want to jump in and say it is the rare child who is game to have the blowjob conversation a second time.

VANESSA: <laughs>

NOEL: <laugh>

*<CLIP> FULL HOUSE:*

*DAD: Hold it right there, I'm not through talking to you yet.*

*DJ: I’m through listening <door slams>*

CARA: So if and when they turn on their heels and walk out of the room, that is okay. The second most important piece of advice that we give is to zip it.

<SCORING OUT> Carousel waltz

CARA: Just take the moment to let them absorb what you've said and then keep your mouth shut and give them space to respond.

*<CLIP> MY GIRL (1991)*

*VADA: My mommy and daddy did that?*

*SHELLY: It’s actually a very beautiful thing.*

*VADA: I think it should be outlawed.*

CARA: Over time, what they begin to understand is that you are there to impart information and then to stop and to listen to what they have to say. And some of them will come right out with it in 30 seconds.

*<CLIP> LIZZIE MCGUIRE:*

*LIZZIE: I. Want. A bra! OK? A bra! A bra-wee! I want a bra! I want a bra!*

CARA: And some of them, it'll take them three months, but eventually they'll come out with it

and they'll start being in conversation with you because all of this is about being in conversation.

NOEL: I wonder, Vanessa, if you can walk us through the stages and the ages. So based on what you were both telling us earlier, it sounds like the door to conversation may open around the age of seven?

VANESSA: We think of the conversations that happen at puberty or with teenagers as actually sitting on the building blocks of earlier conversations with kids. And those conversations can start. And some people may find this surprising and some people may totally be on board with babies on the changing table or toddlers in the bath or kindergartners standing on line at recess. And those are conversations that are about teaching kids the correct anatomical language for all of their body parts, including their genitals. And there's tons of research that shows that helps keep kids safer from sexual predation. It promotes bodily autonomy and self-awareness. It allows them to tell a doctor what hurts or what doesn't feel good. So that can happen with little, little kids…Understanding the names of their body parts and understanding consent gives kids a foundation so that when you start to talk about changing bodies, right? When you start to talk about a growing penis or growing testicles, the words penis and testicles are not bad words in your house. They're not foreign words in your house. They are just everyday ho hum words. that get uttered at various parts. Hopefully not in the aisles of the supermarket, but definitely at bedtime or bath time. We like to think that by the average age for the onset of puberty, right, if we figure the average age for girls is eight and the average age for boys is nine, so like by third grade, you are having conversations with kids, not about sex, but about taking care of their bodies, about changing bodies. And then as they grow older, the conversations spiral up and they become more and more sophisticated as a kid is developmentally able, psychologically able to understand the complexity of taking care of a body, of respecting other people's bodies, of understanding their bodies in relationship to other people. And then, as they may or may not choose to become sexual. What that looks like in sexual relationships.

NOEL: You both talked earlier about the problem of young people who look older than they are. They've gone through puberty or they're going through puberty, and you have a ten-year-old who maybe looks 15. What is the best advice for parents who see it happening? What is the best advice for the young person who also probably sees it happening but doesn't really know what to do? And then, and I understand that this is a very sensitive question, what is your advice to everyone else? It seems to me there is care that needs to be taken here, not just by parents and kids.

VANESSA: For the parents and caregivers. It's our jobs in our own homes to treat that ten year old as a ten-year-old and to make sure that the world around them does the same. So their teachers, their coaches, their extended families who may look at them and be super confused because the ten-year-old looks 15 to reinforce to those trusted adults that the ten year old is still a ten-year-old with the decision making capabilities, the executive functioning, the brain development, the romantic inclinations of a kid that age.

*<CLIP> FULL HOUSE:*

*STEPHANIE: It’s weird, I mean, boys were always chasing me and I never really cared. But when I’m with him, my heart goes, Brett, Brett. Brett, Brett. How do I get him to be my boyfriend?*

VANESSA: With the kids, it's important to acknowledge to them that this is a phenomenon that they may be in the world and people may treat them older than they actually are, and to begin to role play with them and be in conversation about what can they say and do to remind people that they are the age they are. So, for example, one well-meaning adult may try to strike up a conversation with a kid who looks older and is actually younger and may say something like, ‘hey, you got any boyfriends lately?’

*<CLIP> HOWIE MANDEL: Do you want to date yet? Do you have a boyfriend?*

*AMANDA BYNES: No, I don’t. I mean, I go, well, I you know, I do like boys, like, in movies. Like, I like Ryan Phillippe.*

VANESSA: To which a kid can say, Actually, I'm only ten. Do you want to talk about the books I'm reading? Right. And to give them the language, to brainstorm with them, to role play with them, how they can respond, because it's kind of a shocking and uncomfortable thing to have that. And then when we think about the adults in the world, it's not only the kids who look older than they actually are. It's also the kids who look much younger than they actually are.

*<CLIP> ALMOST FAMOUS:*

*CHILD 1: Where are your pubes?*

*CHILD 2: I had them. I shaved ‘em off!*

VANESSA: A sixth grade classroom can look like…have kids who look eight and have kids who look 16. And all of those kids are struggling with that reality. And so one piece of advice we love to tell adults is please don't guess a kid’s age. Because if you, if you guess that a ten year old is 15, that's going to be pretty uncomfortable.

NOEL: Ah.

VANESSA: And if you guess that a ten year old is seven, that's going to be pretty uncomfortable. So that's number one. And number two, we really, really, really beg of all adults out there. Please don't make comments about kids’ bodies. Don't make comments about their physical development, about their height, about their weight. Ask them about their interests, the movies they watch, the music they listen to, the books they read, any of that stuff. But try to keep the conversation away from their growing and changing bodies no matter what stage they're at in their development.

<SCORING IN> Lazy organ

CARA: It's not our job to relive or relitigate our own puberty with the kids in our lives. It's our job to just support them and love them and listen to them and try to understand them. And ultimately to keep them safe and healthy. It's not to be their best friend. It's to be the adult in their life, which means giving them limits and keeping them safe and healthy.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Cara Natterson, pediatrician. And Vanessa Kroll Bennett. Writer, podcaster. Together they wrote a book called *This is so Awkward*, and host a podcast of the same name. You also heard from my nephew, Isaiah King. Haleema Shah produced today’s episode. Amina al-Sadi edited. Miles Bryan fact-checked. Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir engineered. The rest of our team includes Amanda Lewellyn, Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, Peter Balonon-Rosen, Victoria Chamberlin and Laura Bullard. Matthew Collette is a supervising editor. Miranda Kennedy is an executive producer. Sean Rameswaram went through puberty at 34.

*<CLIP> ISAIAH KING: I still have a heck of a lot more of a journey to go through, but I think I'm inching closer day by day to becoming an adult.*

NOEL: You sure are, Sean. We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder. I’m Noel King. *Today, Explained* is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox. Support our journalism by joining our membership program today. Go to vox.com/members to sign up.

<SCORING OUT> Lazy organ

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]