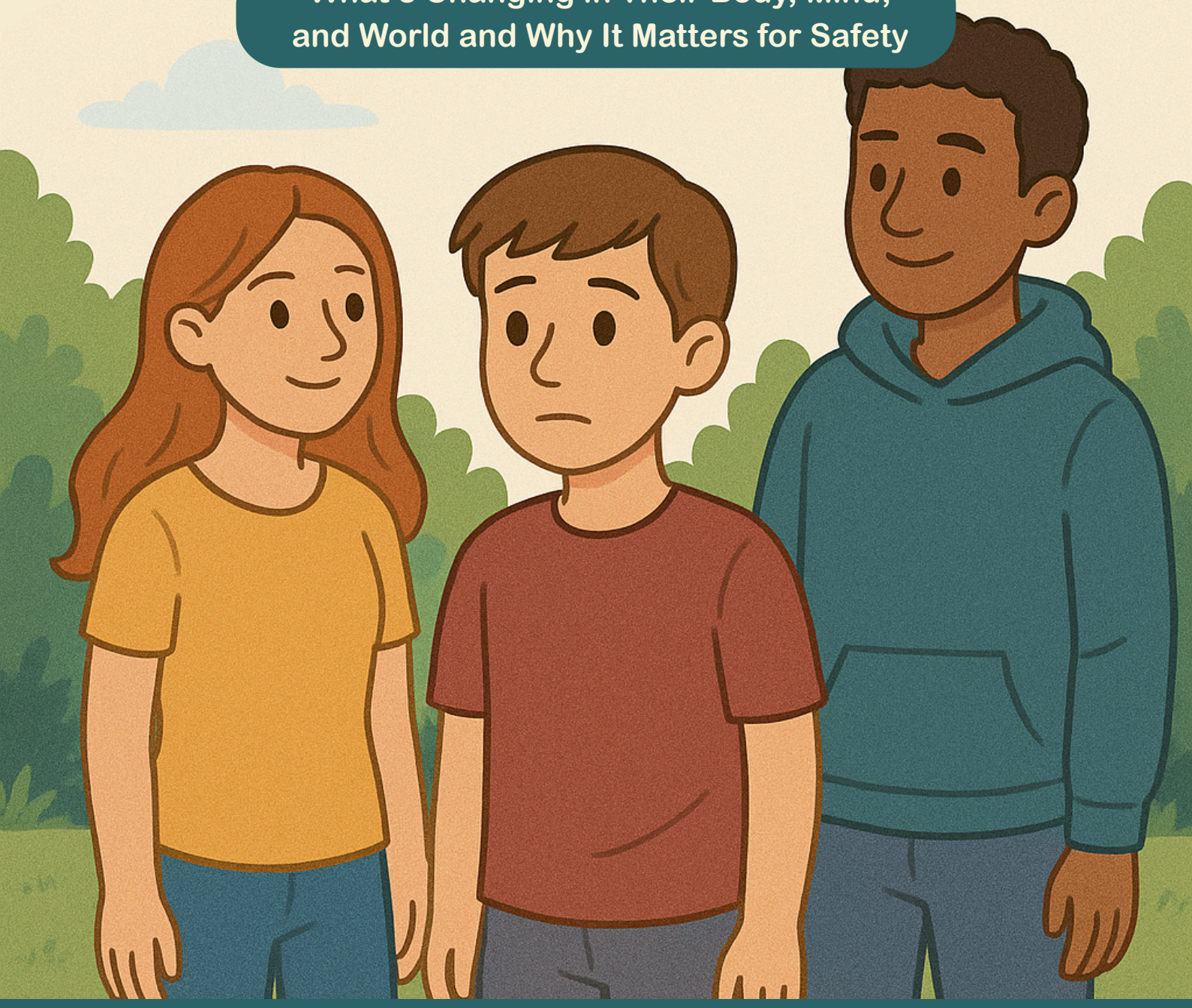
NESTLING MINDS

Tough Talks

# Understanding Your Pre-Teen

What's Changing in Their Body, Mind, and World and Why It Matters for Safety



"Before we teach them to protect themselves, we need to understand what they're growing through."

# START HERE

This is Mini Guide 1 in a special 8-part series to help parents talk to their pre-teens about sexual safety with confidence, calm, and connection.

Each guide breaks down one key theme, so you don't have to do everything at once. Together, they form a complete toolkit for modern parenting through the "in-between years."

By

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Nestling Minds

# UNDERSTANDING PRE-TEEN DEVELOPMENT

## "Why now?" A closer look at what your child is going through

Before we dive into what to say and how to say it, let's take a quick pause to understand what's really happening for your child during these years. Once you know what they're navigating internally, it becomes easier to meet them where they are — and gently guide them forward.

## A PHYSICAL CHANGES PUBERTY BEGINS

This is the age where the body starts to change sometimes subtly, sometimes all at once. It can be exciting, confusing, or downright embarrassing for them. Breasts may begin to develop, body hair appears, sweat glands kick in, and private parts begin to grow or feel different.

### What this means for you:

Your child may become more private, self-conscious, or even reactive about body talk. That doesn't mean they don't want to talk — it means they're unsure how.

### How to support:

- Use the right terms (e.g., penis, vulva, breasts) calmly and confidently
- Normalize body changes and hygiene as part of growing up
- Offer them age-appropriate books or videos to explore privately

### Try saying:

"You might notice your body changing soon it happens to everyone. If you ever have questions, I'm here. No topic is too weird."

## B. Emotional & Social Changes: Independence, Curiosity, and Peer Power

Pre-teens are starting to care a lot about what others think. Friendships matter more. So does fitting in. They're testing independence but they still need emotional scaffolding.

This is also when curiosity around bodies, relationships, and "grown-up stuff" takes root often whispered about with friends or searched online.

### What this means for you:

They may hear things you haven't brought up yet or Google what they're too shy to ask. They may act like they know it all but feel confused underneath.

### How to support:

- Stay curious, not judgmental, when they say something surprising
- Keep the door open: "You can ask me anything. Really."
- Use shows, books, or news as gentle starting points
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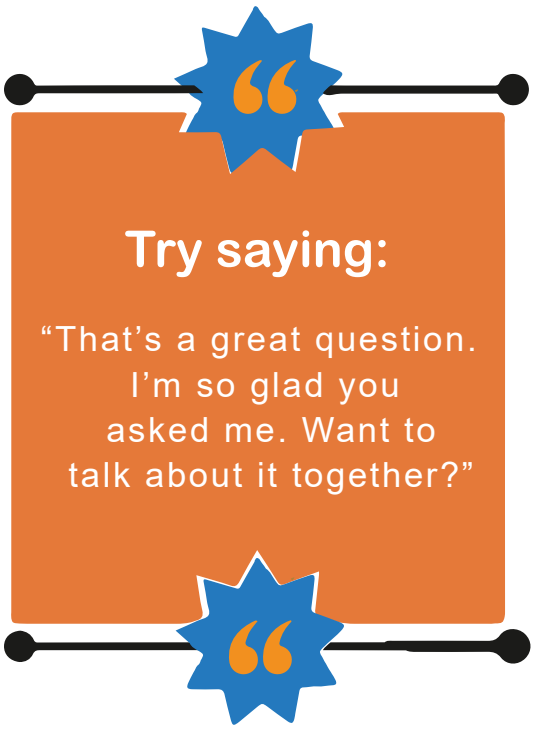


## C. Why It All Matters for Sexual Safety

These developmental shifts  in body, brain, and behavior make pre-teens more vulnerable to unsafe touch, peer pressure, online risks, and body shame.

### That’s why now is the ideal time to:

- Teach clear body boundaries
- Explain consent and touch in relatable ways
- Talk about safe vs unsafe secrets, online behavior, and trusted adults

The earlier these conversations happen, the more confident and protected your child becomes  not just for now, but for the years to come.

# WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THEIR BODY

**Pre-teens (ages 8–12) are beginning puberty though many don't even realize it yet. These changes can cause excitement, confusion, or embarrassment.**

## Common Changes:

- Growth spurts and body shape changes
- Breast development and body hair
- Sweating, body odor, and oily skin
- Erections or vaginal discharge
- Onset of periods for girls
- Curiosity about their body and other's

**"Your child may not tell you about these changes but they are feeling them. Helping them name and understand what's happening builds confidence and reduces shame."**

## What You Can Say

### For your daughter

"You might start noticing changes in your chest or discharge in your underwear. It can feel strange at first, but it just means your body is growing the way it's meant to."

### For your Son

"As you grow, your body might do new things like getting hair or unexpected erections. It's normal and nothing to be embarrassed about. If you have questions, I'm always here."

# WHAT'S HAPPENING EMOTIONALLY

## Your child is now:

- Craving independence, but still needing structure
- Becoming more socially aware and emotionally sensitive
- Tuning in to peer approval and embarrassment
- Beginning to experience early feelings of attraction
- Navigating a lot of "firsts" they may not fully understand

**This is when body image, social pressure, and secrecy often show up. That's why teaching them how to talk about their feelings, set boundaries, and ask questions becomes even more important.**

## What You Can Say

**"You might notice yourself feeling more emotional or unsure about things you used to be fine with. That's okay. Your brain and body are both growing and I'm here to help you make sense of it."**

# WHY NOW IS THE RIGHT TIME FOR SEXUAL SAFETY TALKS

**Some parents wait until their child is "older" but by then, it may be too late. Kids this age are already:**

- Hearing terms they don't understand
- Seeing content online (even accidentally)
- Facing peer jokes, dares, or inappropriate messages
- Feeling uncertain about what's okay and what's not

**Starting early and building conversations slowly and honestly is one of the best forms of protection you can give.**

# LET'S TALK: SIMPLE WAYS TO OPEN THE DOOR

**You understand your child better now but how do you start the actual conversation?**

**Here are a few gentle, practical ways to open the door without pressure or awkwardness:**

## What You Can Say

**Use a quiet moment like a walk, car ride, or bedtime:**

- "You've grown so much lately. Have you noticed anthing changing in your body or how you feel?"

- “We never really talked about puberty or growing up. Would you like to?”
- “I want you to always know you can ask me anything. I’ll always be honest and calm.”
- Feeling uncertain about what’s okay and what’s not

## Keep the Mood Safe and Light

- It’s okay to smile or laugh if it helps ease the tension.
- Let them set the pace one small talk is better than no talk at all.
- Show you’re open by sharing a small memory of your own growing-up experience.
- Feeling uncertain about what’s okay and what’s not.

## Practice Listening First

**Even if they surprise you with what they say, pause, nod, and thank them for opening up. You can say:**

- “That’s a really good question. I’m glad you asked.”
- “Thanks for telling me. That takes a lot of courage.”
- “Do you want an explanation or just someone to listen right now?
- Feeling uncertain about what’s okay and what’s not

**Let them know: there are no silly questions. And there’s nothing they could say that would make you love them any less.**

# YOUR TAKEAWAY AS A PARENT

**You don’t need to know everything. You just need to start with:**

- Understanding what’s going on inside your child.
- Giving them the language to describe it.
- Letting them know that no topic is off-limits in your home.

**“You don’t have to get it perfect  you just have to get it going.”**

# ALSO IN THIS SERIES

This is just one part of the **Tough Talks** series from Nestling Minds. Look out for the other mini-guides:

## Coming up next:

- Mini Guide 2: Talking About the Body  Without Awkwardness
- Mini Guide 3: Teaching Consent Early
- Mini Guide 4: Recognizing Unsafe or Confusing Touch
- Mini Guide 5: Protecting Your Child from Sexual Abuse
- Mini Guide 6: Keeping Your Child Safe Online
- Mini Guide 7: What to Say When They Ask “That Question”
- Mini Guide 8: Your Safety Net as a Parent

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## What's Changing in Their Body, Mind, and World and Why It Matters for Safety

Nestling Minds is an initiative dedicated to promoting emotional wellbeing, life skills, and safe conversations for children, parents, and educators. Through workshops, resources, and school partnerships, we help families navigate the real challenges of growing up together.

**Stay Joyful, Stay Curious,**

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