S11E4 - Growing Up BOY

I want to start this episode with a question that I've been asked, in various forms, more times than I can count:

"How do I talk to my son about this stuff when I'm not sure I even have the right words?"

Sometimes it comes from a dad.

A man who's been through his own puberty on a mixture of misinformation, playground rumours and quietly hoping for the best.

A man who grew up in a house where bodies weren't discussed, where the changes happening to him were treated as something to get through rather than something to understand.

Now he's standing in front of a 10, 11 or 12-year-old boy who's starting to change, and more than anything, he wants to do it differently.

He just doesn't know how.

Sometimes the question comes from a mum.

Perhaps she's raising her son on her own, or her partner isn't around for this conversation for whatever reason.

She's sitting with a particular anxiety.

"Am I the right person to be talking to him about this?"

She wonders whether her son will be embarrassed.

She worries she'll say the wrong thing.

She wonders whether the fact that she hasn't lived in a boy's body somehow disqualifies her from helping him understand it.

It doesn't.

Not even slightly.

And we're going to talk about why.

So today's episode is for both of those parents.

Because boys need this conversation.

And they need it from a trusted adult, regardless of who that adult is or whether they've personally experienced what a 12-year-old boy is about to go through.

I'm Ashley Costello.

This is **The Resilient Kid**.

And this is **Growing Up Boy**.

I'm going to tell you about two families.

The first is a dad.

Let's call him **Mark**.

Mark is 45.

He's a very practical man.

Good with his hands.

Comfortable with silence.

The kind of person who fixes things rather than talks about them.

He's got a son, Theo, who's 11 and heading towards 12.

For a few months now, Mark has noticed something shifting.

Theo's moods are bigger.

His body's changing.

There's a new kind of quietness in him.

Not sadness.

Just privacy.

Mark recognises it because he remembers being that age himself.

He remembers feeling like his body was doing things without asking permission.

He remembers the confusion.

The embarrassment.

The absolute certainty that whatever was happening was probably happening only to him...

...and was probably something that was wrong.

Nobody talked to Mark about any of it.

His own father was a good man.

He worked hard.

He loved his family.

But he wouldn't have known where to begin with this conversation.

So Mark got through puberty alone.

For years, he told himself that was fine.

But now, sitting opposite me with Theo approaching the age where it had all started for him, he said something I want every parent listening to hear.

"I don't want him to feel like I did.

Like it's all happening in the dark.

Like there's nobody to ask.

I just need someone to tell me what to actually say."

Brilliant.

The second family is a mum.

I'll call her **Priya**.

Priya is 38.

She's been raising her son, Jude, on her own since he was six.

Not by design.

Just by circumstance.

She's done it with grace, steadiness and the remarkable resourcefulness that so many single parents develop.

Jude is now 12.

Recently, Priya has noticed—with equal parts tenderness and alarm—that he's becoming someone slightly different.

He's taller.

He's quieter.

And increasingly, unmistakably, a young person who does not want to discuss his body with his mum.

She came to see me not because she thought she was doing anything wrong.

She simply wanted to do it right.

She said:

"He's going to get this information from somewhere.

I'd rather it comes from me.

But every time I try to bring it up, he goes completely silent, stares at the ceiling, and I lose my nerve."

Then she smiled.

"I grew up with sisters.

I know everything that happens with girls.

I know considerably less about what's happening to my son."

And I said:

"Okay.

Let's start there.

Let's make sure you know...

so that you can make sure he knows."

What's Actually Happening?

Before we go back to Mark and Priya, I want to spend some time talking about **what** is actually happening during puberty.

Because I think one of the reasons parents find this conversation so difficult—particularly those who haven't lived in a boy's body, but honestly many who have—is that they aren't entirely sure what they're supposed to be covering.

So let's go through it.

Not clinically.

Not like a textbook.

But in the way I wish someone had explained it to me if I were the parent sitting in that chair.

Interestingly, today of all days, before recording this podcast, I happened to see a copy of the statutory sex education slides currently being used in a school.

It wasn't a faith school.

There were around fifty slides spread across two or three sessions.

I happened to know that only ten of those slides actually contained pictures.

And when I say pictures, I mean diagrams of bodies and body parts.

Out of those ten, only about six actually showed the parts of the body they were trying to explain.

When I looked at the illustrations of the naked man and woman, do you know what immediately came to mind?

The old **Joy of Sex** illustrations from decades ago.

That old-fashioned style of drawing.

And I found myself thinking:

"Is this really what we're still showing our children?"

In this day and age?

It felt woefully inadequate.

If I'm honest, I came away thinking that just because something is statutory doesn't mean it's good.

Just because we say children should receive sex education in Year 5 doesn't automatically mean they're receiving good education.

Looking through those slides, I can honestly tell you...

It wasn't.

There were lots of questions.

Very little practical information.

Not particularly engaging.

And certainly not enough to prepare children for what's actually happening.

So...

Let's go through it together.

So, when does puberty actually begin?

Puberty in boys typically begins somewhere between the ages of **9 and 14**.

That wide age range matters because it's one of the biggest sources of anxiety for boys.

If they're developing earlier than their friends, they worry.

If they're developing later than everyone else, they worry.

Research from the PSHE Association is very clear that one of the most reassuring things we can do is normalise that range.

Tell boys there isn't one "right" age.

There isn't a timetable they're supposed to follow.

Every boy develops at his own pace.

That, in itself, can be hugely reassuring.

What Changes?

Let's look at what actually happens.

And I'm always going to use the correct medical terms.

There's a reason for that.

Years ago, I worked for Victim Support.

At the time, I was one of very few therapists working with children, and unfortunately a large part of my caseload involved children who had experienced sexual abuse.

One thing became very clear.

Using the correct anatomical language removes ambiguity.

If a child ever has to report something, there is no confusion.

Teachers understand.

Doctors understand.

Police understand.

Trusted adults understand.

So if you're uncomfortable saying words like:

- Penis
- Scrotum

- Testicles

—or, next week, when we cover girls, the correct words for female anatomy—

then I need to say something that I don't often say to parents.

You need to get over your own embarrassment.

Because this isn't about us.

It's about protecting our children.

It's about giving them accurate information.

It's about helping them communicate clearly if they ever need to.

It's also about protecting them from playground myths and teasing.

Let's simply use the proper words.

We're all grown-ups.

The First Physical Changes

The first signs of puberty usually include:

- Growth of the testicles.
- Growth of the scrotum.
- The appearance of pubic hair.

After that:

The penis grows.

Initially in length.

Later in width.

Hair begins to appear under the arms and eventually on the face.

The voice starts to change.

And if you've ever lived with a teenage boy, you'll know that this often seems to happen without any warning whatsoever.

As someone who has a young singer in the house, I can honestly tell you that one day everything sounded normal...

...and the next day his voice had disappeared.

There was no warning.

No gradual transition.

It simply happened.

For many boys, that's probably one of the most embarrassing parts because everyone around them notices.

Height often increases rapidly.

Muscle mass develops.

The skin produces more oil.

Which is why spots suddenly become part of the picture.

All of these changes are driven by a surge in testosterone.

Testosterone is the hormone responsible for orchestrating male puberty.

It's Not Just the Body That Changes

Alongside the physical changes, testosterone also affects emotions.

Boys often experience what researchers describe as **emotional intensity**.

Their feelings become stronger.

They become frustrated more easily.

They're quicker to anger.

And at exactly the same time...

They become less able to explain those feelings.

Why?

Because their brains are literally being rebuilt.

If you've listened to previous episodes of the podcast, you'll know I often talk about the teenage brain pruning itself.

This is simply the brain reorganising.

The prefrontal cortex—the part responsible for:

- reasoning
- impulse control

- planning
- organisation
- emotional regulation

isn't fully developed in boys until their late twenties.

In fact, research published in late 2025 suggests that development may continue well into the early thirties.

So think about what we're asking of them.

We have a boy whose body is changing rapidly.

Whose emotions are amplified.

Whose brain is literally under construction.

And who, in many cases, has received very little information from the adults in his life about any of it.

The Conversations Parents Avoid

Let's talk about the things parents usually find hardest to discuss.

I remember having this exact conversation with a friend of mine.

She was raising her son on her own.

She's an absolutely brilliant mum.

She said to me,

"I'm not talking to him about that.

His dad can."

Except...

She knew full well his dad wasn't going to have that conversation.

I said,

"You need to help him.

Support him.

Protect him."

She was mortified.

Completely embarrassed.

She simply couldn't imagine saying those words.

So let's start with the obvious.

Erections

Boys begin experiencing erections during puberty.

Many of them happen completely spontaneously.

They are often unrelated to sexual thoughts or arousal.

Research by Dr Andrew Smiler, who specialises in adolescent male development, emphasises that one of the most important things boys need to hear is this:

Spontaneous erections are completely normal.

They haven't caused them.

They haven't chosen them.

They can't reliably control them.

The analogy I often use is hiccups.

Your body is doing something completely involuntary.

Usually...

...at the least convenient moment possible.

It's biology.

Not behaviour.

It doesn't mean anything other than:

Your body is working exactly as it's supposed to.

Wet Dreams

This next one surprised me.

Today I happened to be delivering some training in a Catholic school.

We were talking about sex education and somebody mentioned the medical name for wet dreams.

I genuinely didn't know it.

They're called **nocturnal emissions**.

Wet dreams are simply ejaculation during sleep.

They usually begin somewhere between the ages of **11 and 15**.

They're simply the body's way of releasing semen that has built up.

They're completely normal.

They're not caused by anything a boy has done.

They don't mean anything is wrong.

They don't require anything beyond normal hygiene.

What they do require...

...is a conversation beforehand.

Because imagine waking up one morning, completely unprepared, and finding that something has happened during the night that nobody has ever explained.

Research consistently shows that boys who aren't prepared for wet dreams often describe the experience as frightening.

One five-minute conversation beforehand can completely change that experience.

Instead of fear...

They simply think:

"Oh yes. Dad or Mum told me this might happen."

And they move on.

Masturbation

Now let's move on to the topic that many parents skip altogether.

Masturbation.

Or self-stimulation.

It's a completely normal part of sexual development.

The majority of boys begin exploring their bodies in this way during puberty.

Research by **Dr Debby Herbenick** from Indiana University is very clear.

The shame attached to masturbation—the belief that it's dirty, wrong or something to be hidden—can cause genuine, long-lasting harm.

Boys who grow up believing masturbation is shameful are more likely to carry that shame into adulthood and into their future relationships.

We don't want that.

So what do boys actually need to hear?

It's very simple.

They need to know:

- It's normal.
- It's private.
- It doesn't harm them.
- It's nothing to be ashamed of.

They also need to hear something that sits alongside that.

Pornography is **not** sex.

And it is certainly **not** sex education.

What they may encounter online bears very little resemblance to healthy relationships, respectful intimacy or real life.

We'll go into much more detail about that in Episode Six, where we'll look specifically at talking to young people about sex.

But the foundations begin here.

At this age.

In this conversation.

Five Ways to Help Your Son

So let's move on to something practical.

Whether you're a dad looking for the words...

Or a mum wondering whether you're the right person...

Here are five things that really help.

1. Use the Correct Anatomical Language

Every single time.

Penis.

Testicles.

Scrotum.

Erection.

Ejaculation.

I know they sound clinical.

That's because they are.

They're also accurate.

Respectful.

And protective.

Research from the NSPCC couldn't be clearer.

Boys who know the correct names for their body parts:

- carry less shame
- communicate more clearly
- are better equipped to seek help if something feels wrong.

Slang teaches boys these parts of themselves are somehow too embarrassing to name properly.

Correct language says something very different.

It says:

"Your body isn't embarrassing.

It's simply your body."

2. Lead With Normalising

Before you explain anything, tell them this.

"This happens to every boy."

That one sentence changes everything.

It takes the conversation away from:

"What's wrong with me?"

And turns it into:

"Oh... everyone goes through this."

It reminds them they aren't broken.

They aren't behind.

They aren't different.

They're simply growing up.

That sentence, repeated often, is one of the most reassuring things you can say.

3. Mums – You Are Absolutely the Right Person

This is probably the question I hear most from single mums.

"Am I really the right person?"

The answer is always the same.

Yes.

Absolutely.

Without hesitation.

Your son does **not** need a parent who has lived in a male body.

He needs a parent with accurate information.

Someone willing to have the conversation.

In fact, when a mum talks openly and confidently about puberty, she's teaching her son something much bigger than puberty.

She's teaching him:

Bodies aren't shameful.

Women aren't people we hide these conversations from.

The adults in my life won't leave me to figure this out on my own.

That's incredibly powerful.

4. Use the Car

You've probably heard me say this before.

I'll keep saying it because it works.

The car is one of the best places to have difficult conversations.

So is walking side by side.

Young people don't have to make eye contact.

The conversation can start naturally.

Pause naturally.

Carry on naturally.

Mark had his first real conversation with Theo during a forty-minute drive to football.

He later told me:

"It's the only reason it happened.

I don't think I could have done it face to face.

Looking at the road somehow made it easier."

And sometimes...

The car helps us as parents too.

We can't escape.

Neither can they.

Sometimes that's exactly what gives us the courage to begin.

5. Tell Them What You Wish Someone Had Told You

This one is particularly powerful for dads.

Simply say:

"When I was your age, nobody explained any of this to me.

I want something different for you."

That one sentence does several things.

It tells your son:

This isn't new.

This isn't strange.

Other boys have experienced this too.

The adults around him went through it.

And most importantly...

He doesn't have to work it all out alone.

Back to Mark

Let's go back to Mark.

By the way, we don't spend all our therapy sessions talking about sex education!

I know the last couple of podcast episodes might make it sound that way.

We don't.

We support families.

Sometimes we work directly with young people.

Sometimes we work with parents.

Sometimes we bring everyone together for family sessions.

Sometimes parents simply come in and say:

"I'm struggling with this.

Can you help me?"

That's exactly what happened with Mark.

He wanted help knowing what to say.

Because I'm very matter-of-fact about these conversations, he found it easier than he'd expected.

After our session, he went home.

Well...

Not straight home.

He stopped at the supermarket.

And on the drive there he did something I often recommend.

He practised.

Out loud.

He literally sat in the car saying:

"Penis."

"Testicles."

"Erection."

Again.

And again.

And again.

Until they stopped sounding strange.

Later he laughed and said he felt completely ridiculous.

But it worked.

The words stopped feeling awkward.

Three weeks later...

Saturday morning.

Drive to football.

He turned the radio down.

He didn't launch into a speech.

He didn't announce:

"We're going to have the birds and the bees talk."

Instead he simply said:

"You're getting to the age where your body's probably going to start changing... if it hasn't already.

I thought we should probably talk about it."

Theo didn't say anything.

Then, after a few moments, he simply replied:

"Okay."

And I want to pause here because this is important.

Sometimes young people will say:

"I don't want to talk about it."

That's okay.

For now.

But it can't become a conversation that's avoided forever.

If they don't want to talk during the drive to football, that's fine.

You can say:

"That's okay.

But we are going to have this conversation.

Maybe later tonight.

Maybe this weekend.

But we will have it."

Because they need it.

And they deserve it.

Let's go back to Mark.

After our session, he went home and did exactly what we'd talked about.

He practised saying the words out loud.

Then, three weeks later, on a Saturday morning drive to Theo's football match, he finally began.

He turned the radio down.

He took a breath.

And he simply said:

"You know you're getting to the age where your body's going to start changing, if it hasn't already.

I thought we should probably talk about it."

Theo looked out of the window.

He didn't say much.

Then he quietly replied:

"Okay."

And that was enough.

That was the beginning.

Mark didn't try to cover everything.

He talked about erections.

He used the proper words, calmly and matter-of-factly.

Theo kept looking out of the window.

Mark kept talking.

After about thirty seconds, the awkwardness began to fade.

Then Mark mentioned wet dreams.

He explained what they were.

That they were normal.

That they simply meant his body was doing exactly what it was designed to do.

Theo asked two questions.

Both of them were practical.

Both of them were exactly the kinds of questions you'd expect from an eleven-year-old boy who had just been given some new information.

As they pulled into the football ground, Theo simply said:

"Thanks, Dad."

Just that.

Nothing dramatic.

Nothing emotional.

Later, Mark told me it was one of the best conversations he'd ever had.

And by most measures...

It was deeply unremarkable.

And that's exactly the point.

We make such a huge thing of these conversations.

We build them up into something enormous.

When actually...

They're just conversations.

Priya's Story

Priya approached things differently.

She bought a book.

One she'd researched carefully.

She left it on Jude's desk.

Then, later that evening, she knocked gently on his bedroom door and said:

"I've left something on your desk.

Have a read whenever you want.

If you've got any questions...

Or even if you haven't...

I'm here."

That was it.

No pressure.

No lecture.

No expectation.

Jude read the book.

She knew because...

Well...

Mums notice these things.

It had moved.

He didn't mention it for three days.

By this point Priya admitted she was desperate to ask what he thought.

She wanted to know whether he'd read it.

Whether he'd understood it.

Whether he had questions.

But she resisted.

Then...

On a completely ordinary Wednesday morning...

Halfway through breakfast...

Right in the middle of eating his cereal...

Jude asked one question.

It was very specific.

Very matter-of-fact.

He didn't even really look at her.

He just asked.

Priya answered calmly.

Accurately.

Without making it into a big moment.

He nodded.

Carried on eating his cereal.

And that was that.

Later she laughed and said:

"I could have hugged him...

But I absolutely didn't...

Because I knew that would have ruined everything."

She was right.

She'd judged the moment perfectly.

The information had landed.

The conversation was now open.

And Jude knew something incredibly important.

He knew his mum was a safe person to ask.

That isn't a small thing.

Because in the years ahead...

When the questions become bigger...

When relationships become more complicated...

That knowledge will matter far more than either of them could imagine.

Take It Slowly

I want us to zoom out for a moment and think about the bigger picture.

What happens when boys don't get this conversation?

Research—and the work we do every day—shows that boys who don't receive accurate, age-appropriate information from trusted adults don't simply remain uninformed.

They get their information somewhere else.

From friends...

Who are often just as uninformed.

From the internet...

Which isn't designed to educate.

It's designed to entertain.

Often to shock.

Often to titillate.

And from pornography.

Which is probably the single most distorted source of information about sex, bodies and healthy relationships that they could possibly encounter.

The Internet Watch Foundation estimates that many boys in the UK encounter pornography before they've ever had a meaningful conversation about sex with a trusted adult.

Think about that for a moment.

Their very first understanding of sexuality is shaped by something created for adult entertainment.

Not adolescent education.

And that's why these conversations matter.

That's why they need to happen early.

By law, relationships and sex education begins in Year Five.

Most children are around nine or ten years old.

Some are still only nine.

Some have already turned ten.

Either way...

That's the age we're talking about.

The Consequences

The consequences aren't abstract.

We see them.

We meet boys who have developed completely unrealistic expectations about sex.

Boys who carry shame about their own bodies.

Young men who don't understand what's normal because nobody has ever told them.

Young men who believe pornography reflects real life because nobody explained that it doesn't.

Nobody told them that what they're seeing isn't reality.

Nobody helped them separate fantasy from healthy relationships.

We also see boys who simply don't know how to talk about any of this.

Because nobody ever modelled those conversations for them.

The guidance from both the PSHE Association and the Sex Education Forum is very clear.

Early.

Ongoing.

Accurate.

Age-appropriate conversations.

Delivered by trusted adults.

Using the correct language.

Without shame.

Matter-of-factly.

Those conversations are some of the most protective things we can offer boys.

Not only for their sexual health.

But for their emotional development.

Their understanding of themselves.

Their future relationships.

And ultimately...

For the kind of men they grow up to become.

Mark's conversation on that Saturday morning didn't cover everything.

It wasn't supposed to.

It simply opened a door.

In our next episode, when we talk about **Growing Up Girl**, you'll see why that door matters.

Not just for boys.

But for the relationships they may one day have with girls and women.

These conversations connect.

They build on one another.

And they all begin here.

With one trusted adult.

One quiet moment.

One conversation.

Perhaps simply turning down the radio and saying:

"I thought we should probably talk about it."

As we come to the end of this episode, I want to speak directly to two groups of people.

First...

To the dad who's listening and thinking:

"I don't have the words."

"Nobody had this conversation with me."

"I honestly don't know where to start."

I want you to know this.

You don't have to have had this conversation modelled for you in order to have it with your son.

You need good information.

I've included plenty of that in the show notes.

Later in the season, there's also going to be an episode addressed directly to boys aged ten and over.

That may help open the door.

But what your son needs most...

...is you.

You don't have to be perfect.

You don't have to know every answer.

You just have to be willing to be slightly uncomfortable for twenty minutes.

Because your son isn't going to remember how awkward you felt.

He's going to remember that you showed up.

He's going to remember that you were there.

And that is enough.

More than enough.

If you're struggling to find the words, perhaps this podcast can become the way in.

Everything we're creating this season is designed to give you the confidence, the language and the practical tools to have these conversations openly and honestly with your child.

Now I want to speak to the mums.

Especially the mums wondering:

"Am I really the right person for this conversation?"

The answer is unequivocally...

Yes.

Absolutely.

Without qualification.

Your son does not need a parent who's lived in a male body.

He needs a parent who loves him enough to sit with her own discomfort and embarrassment...

...so that he doesn't have to sit with his alone.

He needs to know that the adults in his life are not embarrassed by his body.

Or by their own.

He needs to know there are no questions too strange...

Too awkward...

Or too embarrassing to ask.

He needs to know that whatever is happening to him is normal.

Expected.

And that there's somebody safe to talk to.

That person can absolutely be you.

In fact...

It needs to be someone.

And I hope it's you.

Because if we don't give our boys accurate information...

They will find information somewhere else.

And that's the part that worries me.

So...

That's **Growing Up Boy**.

Thank you for being here for this conversation.

Next week, we're going to do exactly the same for girls.

If you have a daughter...

If you work with girls...

Or if you simply want to understand what's happening for the other half of your children's friendship group...

Don't miss that episode.

All of the research we've mentioned today...

The puberty timeline...

Further reading...

And additional resources...

Are all included in the show notes.

Later in the season, Episode Seven is addressed directly to boys aged ten and over.

It's safe to share.

It's been designed specifically for them.

They can listen with you...

Or on their own.

Although I'd still encourage you to have your own conversation afterwards.

Think of the episode as opening the door.

I can help you open it.

But you need to walk through it together.

Until next time...

Turn the radio down.

Start the conversation.