

# The Normal Foreskin

## *Puberty, Adolescence, and Growing Up*

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**Abstract:** Puberty marks a time of significant transition in the life of a boy as he progresses toward adulthood—and a time of confusion and concern. Many questions are likely thought or asked by the boy as he approaches and lives with puberty. Sex education is taught formally and informally, in the home, on the schoolyard, in the media. Over the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, publishers have produced numerous books about puberty and its experience for young readers. In this article, I consider a specific debate that unfolds in these books, namely, circumcision. To these ends, I define the circumcision debate, briefly consider the genre of puberty books, and analyze the circumcision debate in these books. While these books recognize a circumcision debate, they ultimately frame the circumcised penis or intact penis as equally viable and normal.

**Keywords:** body, circumcision, foreskin, masculinity, puberty



**Warning:** This article includes images of the circumcised and intact penis taken from puberty books.

### The Circumcision Debate

Debates and questions over circumcision are not new, and in many ways the debate seems far from over. Circumcision involves removing the foreskin (prepuce) from the penis. The question of whether to circumcise a neonate is most often faced by expectant parents, and the reasons range from wanting the neonate to look like dad, religious and sacred reasons, or hygienic and medical reasons. Indeed, circumcision “has been a key debate in health, and particularly men’s health, over the course of the twentieth century,” and “this debate has unfolded in newspapers, parenting manuals, medical studies, and policy papers, and opinions seem to be constantly in flux” (Allan 2021: 359). Importantly, the debates are deeply divided, and since the 1980s, North America has had a rise in anti-circumcision activ-



ism, or “intactivism” (Allan 2018; Kennedy and Sardi 2016; Sardi 2011, 2014). These debates have also seen the rise of the medicalization of circumcision, demedicalization, and remedicalization, as Laura M. Carpenter (2010) has observed.

But this debate extends well beyond the medical. For instance, much has been made of the “ugliness” of the foreskin, especially in the American context, recalling that “the United States is the only nation that has routinely circumcised its male infants for nonreligious reasons” (Sardi 2011: 306). Not only is this debate limited to the medical and activist spaces, but “popular culture is replete with examples of discussion, representations, jokes, and gossip about the foreskin,” so much so that “the question of aesthetics begins to trump other arguments, for it is the one argument that is most difficult with which to argue” (Allan 2020: 568). All of this recalls James Boon’s argument that “foreskins are—cultural facts—whether removed or retained. Absent versus present, prepuces have divided many religions, politics, and ritual persuasions” (1999: 43). Needless to say, circumcision and the foreskin are at the heart of cultural debates over the penis, particularly in the American context, though we can also admit these debates extend far beyond the American context, especially when consider HIV and the Global South (Allan 2019a; Fleming et al. 2017). Moreover, these debates extend to adjacent concerns such as masculinity, virility, the phallus, hygiene, and community. In what follows, I set out to consider how the foreskin is framed and understood in the context of puberty manuals, books written about puberty, usually read by prepubescent and pubescent readers.

## **Puberty Books**

In “Breasts, Butts, and Thighs—Oh My! Weight Spurt and Body Image Messages in Girls’ Puberty Books,” Janelle L. Blazek, Denise M. Saint Arnault, and Rona Carter provide a critical study of thirteen popular books about puberty for girls. In defining these books, they observe that, “books on pubertal development provide information about significant physical changes girls will undergo during of puberty. They may also cover topics like emotional changes, body image, data, and health/nutrition” (2022: 4–5). The same basic definition works for books for boys, insofar as they tend to cover similar topics, though with some particularly tailored to the male experience. The authors continue and note that “books about puberty are often used in a more hands-off approach by allowing the child to read

through it at her own pace or start conversations between mothers and daughters, acting as a resource to alleviate mothers' knowledge-based concerns" (5). These books are likely used in a similar fashion by boys, though they might expect to speak to their father rather than their mother. Surprisingly, "despite the potential boon that puberty education books bring, no study has examined the content within these books and their relation to broader cultural messages" (5).

My study here contributes to this gap in the research by considering what I call the circumcision debate. Thus, while Blazek and colleagues focus on body image and weight, my study is focused on the penis, and particularly whether it has been circumcised. One final note worth adding here is that puberty books and sex instruction manuals for young people have overlaps, to be certain, but puberty books focus on the ways the body changes in preparation for sexuality and reproduction. Thus, they are neither necessarily nor essentially distinct from one another and may do the work of both, but they may also exist in isolation to one another. Thus, a puberty manual may speak about how the body is changing and how those changes relate to sexuality, but they may say little about the mechanics of sexuality beyond the physiological. Importantly, the vast majority of these books are written for normative gender expression, wherein the relationship between gender performance and biological bodies is fixed. These books thus rarely (if ever) attend to genderqueer, transgender, and/or nonbinary folks, though perhaps this will change in the years to come, and likewise, these books do not attend to anomalies of the penis, for instance, hypospadias (Orr 2019).

In this article, I draw on widely available books about puberty and sex education for preadolescent and adolescent readers, most of which were published after 2000. My sample of a dozen books is one of convenience insofar as these are the books that were readily available to me. My approach to these books was to carefully read all discussions of circumcision and/or the foreskin and to then begin cataloguing recurring topics, for instance, the description of circumcision, or to pay attention to the place of publication and how that might affect the overall message, and ultimately the tension between preference for one and normalization of the other.

**Table 1.** Books about Puberty and Sex Education for Preadolescent and Adolescent Readers

Author	Title	Publication Year	Location
Cole, Joanna.	<i>Asking About Sex &amp; Growing Up: A Question and Answer Book for Kids.</i>	2009	USA (New York)
Forssberg, Manne.	<i>Sex for Guys.</i>	2007	Canada (Toronto); originally Sweden.
Frith, Alex and Felicity Brooks	<i>Growing Up for Boys.</i>	2013	UK (London)
Gravelle, Karen.	<i>What's Going on Down There? Answer to Questions Boys Find Hard to Ask.</i>	1998	USA (New York)
Hasler, Nikol.	<i>Sex: An Uncensored Introduction</i>	2015	USA (San Francisco)
Hickling, Meg.	<i>The New Speaking of Sex: What Your Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It</i>	2009	Canada (Kelowna)
Madaras, Lynda.	<i>The "What's Happening to My Body?" Book for Boys.</i>	2007	USA (New York)
Madaras, Lynda and Area Madaras.	<i>My Body, My Self: For Boys.</i>	2007.	USA (New York)
Mar, Jonathan and Grace Norwich.	<i>The Body Book for Boys: Everything You Need to Know about Growing Up.</i>	2010.	USA (New York)
Middleman, Amy B. and Kate Gruenwald Pfeifer.	<i>Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen: Getting Used to Life in Your Changing Body.</i>	2006.	USA (San Francisco)
Price, Geoff.	<i>Puberty Boy.</i>	2005.	Australia (New South Wales)
Richardson, Frank Howard.	<i>For Boys Only: The Doctor Discusses the Mysteries of Manhood.</i>	2007. (1957 originally)	USA (Cincinnati)
Silverberg, Cory.	<i>Sex is a Funny Word: A Book about Bodies, Feelings, and You.</i>	2014.	USA (New York)

## Circumcision and Foreskin in Puberty Books

In *The Body Book for Boys*, the authors explain that “size may be the biggest issue boys have when it comes to the penis. But circumcision is not far behind. That’s because a penis that has been circumcised looks different from one that hasn’t” (Mar and Norwich 2010: 69). Circumcision is a big topic in the pubertal anxiety about growing up, so it is unsurprising that

many puberty manuals address circumcision, which implicitly addresses the circumcision debate.

As noted, the circumcision debate broadly understood tends to revolve around whether the circumcised or the intact penis is better in some fashion or another, whether this be aesthetic, medical, or cultural. The puberty manuals know that this debate is ongoing and thus engage with the debate in various ways, something that is not a new phenomenon. For instance, *For Boys Only* by Frank Howard Richardson ([1952] 2007: 60) presents a question and an answer, and the question begins: “We used to josh one boy in our gym class who had such a long foreskin he was ashamed to take a shower where the other fellows could see him. Why was he so different from the rest of us?” to which the author responds:

Answer. The small difference meant nothing at all. But fellows are pretty cruel, or at least mighty thoughtless the way they make fun of anyone who’s the least bit different from the average. If such a foreskin is tight, as well as long, it might be wise for him to be circumcised so that he could keep himself clean more easily. But that is something for his doctor to advise him about.

The author here, writing from an American context, presents what I see as a recurring normalizing gesture insofar as the foreskin difference “meant nothing at all,” and notes that such “joshing” is “mighty thoughtless.” The difference noted is also the visual one identified by Jonathan Mar and Grace Norwich (2010: 69). However, Richardson does not resist in noting that the boy can still, if necessary, be circumcised, for instance, if the foreskin is too tight (presumably phimosis). What tightness actually looks like is never really explained. Moreover, even when all is well with the foreskin, in this example, the foreskin is always a potential problem to be corrected. While this book is undoubtedly dated, most recent books will continue the trend to note that some boys have foreskins and others do not, and these books tend to work as much as possible to normalize the penis in whichever state. In the case of places wherein circumcision is not the norm, books tend to treat either as equally good, and they tend to explain, as we shall see, why circumcision was performed. In what follows, I consider how these books speak initially about circumcision, discuss the reasons for circumcision, and ultimately show how they normalize both the foreskin and circumcision.

### ***Defining Circumcision***

Each puberty book that I analyzed in this project contained a discussion of circumcision. These discussions tend to explain that all boys are born with

the same kind of penis, and then a procedure may take place after birth. Most provide an explanation of what the foreskin is and why it may or may not be removed. In *Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen: Getting Used to Life in Your Changing Body*, published by the American Medical Association, readers learn that

All boys are born with a fold of skin that covers the head of the penis (the glans). This skin is called the *foreskin*. *Circumcision* (removal of the foreskin) may be done in the hospital in the first day or two after birth. Some religious groups have practiced circumcision for thousands of years and continue to have their boys circumcised, sometimes in a religious ceremony. (Middleman and Pfeifer 2006: 58)

In this example, then, “all boys” have a foreskin, but not all boys will keep the foreskin; instead, some will undergo circumcision after birth. This point will be taken up by anti-circumcision activists who speak to questions of consent, genital autonomy and integrity, and violence (see Kennedy and Sardi 2016; Watson 2014). The reason for circumcision may be tied to religious concerns (a point to which we shall return). Similarly, in *Sex: An Uncensored Introduction*, while not exclusively about puberty but still intended for a teenage audience, Nikol Hasler (2015: 14) explains:

When boys are born, their parents may choose to have them circumcised. This involves removing the foreskin, which is a retractable layer of skin that covers the urethra when a boy doesn't have a boner. The decision to be circumcised can be made later in life, as well. Some reasons that people choose circumcision are religious, health, or wanting the child's penis to look like his father's. Some men decide to have their foreskin removed because they don't like the way it looks. And, in some rare cases, circumcised men will try to have their foreskin restored later on in life, though that type of surgery is not yet very effective.

The discussion in *Sex: An Uncensored Introduction*, which includes colloquial language (e.g., “boner”) to draw in the young reader, is consistent in most ways with other definitions, that is, there is a recognition that boys are born with a foreskin and that parents decide about circumcision, and there is a consideration of reasons for circumcision, including secular and sacred reasons. What is anomalous, however, is the possibility of foreskin restoration. While it recognizes foreskin restoration, there is no explanation as to why a boy or a man might be unsatisfied with his circumcised penis.

### ***Why Circumcision? Religion and Hygiene***

Inherent to these books and the explanations found within them as to why one's penis might be circumcised is a recognition of religious and/or cultural traditions. In *Growing Up for Boys*, the authors write: “Many boys have all of part of their foreskin removed soon after birth in an operation called

circumcision, usually for religious reasons” (Frith and Brooks 2013: 38). In this example, the mention is brief. In another example, *My Body, My Self: For Boys*, Lynda Madaras and Area Madaras (2007: 18) write:

Have you been circumcised? If you have been, your penis won't have a foreskin. If you're unsure, ask your parents. In fact, even if you are sure, you might ask them why they decided to (or not to) have you circumcised. If you were circumcised for religious reasons, you might ask when and where it was done, who was there, and how loudly you howled.

The reader who may be unsure and not ready to ask his parents these questions may well refer to the diagrams included in the book. But what is key here is that religion is mentioned and a ceremonial nature is expected, for instance, there is an audience, thus recalling the Brit Milah. Meg Hickling in her book designed for parents (and thus admittedly a different market), *The New Speaking of Sex: What Your Children Need to Know and When they Need to Know It*, writes, “parents from the Jewish religion and the Muslim religion believe in circumcision for religious reasons, and so their sons are always circumcised” (2009: 40–41). This recognition of cultural difference is important, and in nearly every example, circumcision is framed as a normal part of this religious experience. There is little to no critique of the practice. For instance, there is no mention of rights of the neonate, but rather circumcision is treated matter-of-factly and as a normal part of those religious practices. This is important because the circumcision debate is merely about whether or not it is done, and not about deeper ethical, religious, or moral issues. Thus, the books do not address, for instance, the conflicted nature of religious parents (Goldman 1998; Kimmel 2001).

The other answer to “why circumcision” tends to be medical. For instance, in *The Body Book for Boys*, Mar and Norwich begin by explaining: “Circumcision is an operation that removes the foreskin of the penis. It is a custom of many religions, including Judaism and Islam” (2010: 70).<sup>1</sup> The definition, thus far, is akin to those discussed above; however, the authors continue:

But many boys from other religions are circumcised because some docs believe the procedure prevents disease. Other doctors dispute those claims, and argue that the operation is not as painless as once believed. Whether you're circumcised or uncircumcised, chances are there will be lots of other boys who look the same. (2010: 70)

In this example, medical reasons are provided for circumcision, with a suggestion that one may be better than the other. The medicalization of circumcision is often tied to notions of hygiene and cleanliness. Readers are

often told, especially in American publications, that circumcision is cleaner or that the circumcised penis is easier to keep clean. For example, in *Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen*, published by the American Medical Association, readers learn:

If you are uncircumcised, be sure to always keep the area under the foreskin completely clean. All you need to do is pull back your foreskin while you shower and thoroughly clean the head of the penis, especially where it meets the shaft of the penis. If you don't clean it regularly, a substance called *smegma* can build up under the foreskin. Smegma has a strong, unpleasant odor. This condition can be avoided with careful and thorough washing. (Middleman and Pfeifer 2006: 59)

The discourse here would seem to imply that smegma, beyond being a nuisance, is also a medical "condition" that "can be avoided" if the preventative measures of "careful and thorough washing" take place. What is missing here is a recognition and discussion of phimosis, which makes it difficult to pull back the foreskin. Such a discussion would presumably be helpful for a reader.

In other books, however, we find a sort of historical treatment of the fear of dirtiness. For instance, in *What's Going On Down There?*, Karen Gravelle (1998: 8) writes:

Circumcision helps prevent germs from collecting under the foreskin. Thus, in the past, many boys were circumcised to prevent disease. With careful and regular washing, however, the area under the foreskin can be kept clean, so fewer boys are circumcised for health reasons.

In this instance, we are reminded once more of smegma, though not named, and the need for cleanliness. It is as if the reader is expected to know what is meant by these "health reasons" or to know about smegma. Finally, in *The Body Book for Boys*, the authors reframe the cleanliness debate:

Whether you're circumcised or not, it's important to keep your penis clean by washing it daily, preferably in the shower. This will prevent infection and also keep odors in check. While your private parts don't produce the same body odor as your armpits, it can get pretty smelly down there if you go too many days without a wash. If you haven't been circumcised, pull back gently on the foreskin to rinse your glans. Soap can irritate the soft skin under the foreskin, so just clean the area with warm water instead. (Mar and Norwich 2010: 71)

At a very simple level, *The Body Book for Boys* pays much more attention to the penis and its foreskin than other books, presenting information on how to care for the foreskin and how to clean it. The reality is, of course, that every boy ought to clean his penis, just as he ought to clean the rest of his body. The fear of smegma, however, is as much about disgust as it is about



a myth that smegma is carcinogenic, a myth that continues today (Van Howe and Hodges 2006; for a critique, see Waskett and Morris 2007). The medical discourse of the past, more often than not, still informs the medical discourses of today—after all, we continue to debate whether the circumcised penis is somehow naturally cleaner.

### ***Circumcision and Location***

It has been widely recognized that circumcision is a particularly American practice wherein the majority of neonates are circumcised for nonreligious reasons (Sardi 2011: 306), so much so that it has become a sign of American sexual exceptionalism: “In the American context, then, we find a discourse wherein the circumcised penis has been normalized, and the uncircumcised penis is an anomaly, foreign, and strange” (Allan 2020: 561). Thus, it should not be surprising that *where* the books are published may matter in how circumcision and the foreskin are framed. For instance, those books published where the foreskin is normative treat the foreskin as the norm. In *Growing Up for Boys*, a British publication, the authors explain: “Every boy is born with a foreskin—a flap of skin that covers the tip of the penis. But many boys have all or part of their foreskin removed soon after birth in an operation called circumcision, usually for religious reasons” (Frith and Brooks 2013: 38). While this quotation was appeared earlier regarding religion, it is important to note here that the use of “but” speaks to the anomalous nature of circumcision. That is, this book emphasizes that all boys are born with foreskins (it is worth recalling here that none of these books address trans or intersex issues). In this example, then, the author notes the religious as a reason for circumcision, not the hygienic or the medical. Regardless, the authors affirm: “Your penis will work perfectly well with or without a foreskin. If you don’t have one, your glans will probably be less sensitive” (Frith and Brooks 2013: 39). In *Sex for Guys*, a publication from Sweden, where about 5 percent of males are circumcised (Morris et al. 2008: 5), a similar approach is taken: “If you are a circumcised man, it means you had your foreskin removed. Usually, the foreskin is cut or snipped off in babyhood, but sometimes the surgery is performed during adulthood, most often for religious or cultural reasons” (Forssberg 2007: 17).

Another approach is to help boys determine their own status. In the Australian publication *Puberty Boy*, readers learn:

Some penises are circumcised and some are not. If you have loose skin over the head of your penis (called the foreskin) then you are not circumcised. If the loose

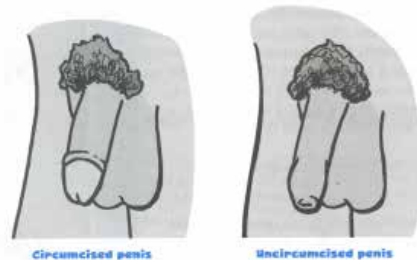
skin of your penis, when it is limp, comes to just over the start of the head of your penis, you are circumcised. (Price 2005: 35)

But what if one's foreskin is not loose but rather tight, and not necessarily in the sense of phimosis? As with other books, there are images of the "types" of penises alongside this description (see Figure 1). To the left of this description in the book are two sets of images (one for the uncircumcised penis and one for the circumcised penis), containing both an erect and a flaccid penis. Images are, indeed, common to these books and are usually drawn, images ranging from serious to more cartoonish, as is the case in *Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen* (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1:** *Puberty Boy*.  
Reproduced with permission  
of Allen & Unwin.



**Figure 2:** *Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen*.  
Image reproduced with  
permission of Wiley & Company.



However, and rather interestingly, while the more "medical" images throughout *Puberty Boy* show the uncircumcised penis, the "realistic" images oscillate between the circumcised and uncircumcised penis. For instance, in a section outlining pubic hair growth, readers find at least one penis that is circumcised. These images are important, as they provide the reader with a sense of the penis, what the differences might be, and how those differences might affect the penis.<sup>2</sup>

American publications, by contrast, often take a different approach to the foreskin in puberty books. They tend to privilege the circumcised penis, insofar as almost all discussions are focused on what becomes the normative American penis. However, nearly all books note the differences between the circumcised and uncircumcised penis. In most, there is a recurring gesture that suggests that though the penises are different, they are all still just as good as any other penis. Additionally, almost all books will pay particular attention to how to care for the uncircumcised penis, which, as we shall see, offers an interesting discursive level to these texts.

While many of the books claim that “a circumcised penis looks different from a penis that hasn’t been circumcised but it doesn’t in any way affect how the penis functions” (Middleman and Pfeifer 2006: 58), they still, at least discursively, favor or privilege the circumcised penis. In *The Body Book for Boys: Everything You Need to Know about Growing Up*, the image that accompanies the section on the male sex organ is clearly circumcised and makes no mention of the foreskin; the same can be said for the images of pubic hair growth. The image here includes various arrows pointing to parts of the penis, noting where the testicles are, what the glans is, and what the urethra does, for instance, but the foreskin is notably absent. Indeed, this same imagery is used in the discussion of pubic hair that follows a few pages later. The foreskin is nearly always absent from images in books published for an American audience. The default penis is always circumcised. In *What’s Happening to My Body? Book for Boys*, the images tracking the development of pubic hair feature a clearly circumcised penis (Madaras 2007: 37). The same is true of *My Body, My Self: For Boys* (Madaras and Madaras 2007: 19) and the Manga-stylized *Asking about Sex and Growing Up* (Cole 2009).

Perhaps one of the more interesting features of puberty books is that they often introduce readers to safe sex practices. But is there a difference for the circumcised and uncircumcised penis? In *Growing Up for Boys*, the authors explain, “If you have a foreskin, you’ll need to experiment to see if you find it more comfortable to roll the foreskin up or down underneath a condom” (Frith and Brooks 2013: 87). Information such as this is, of course, important, but once more highlights the sexuality of the foreskin, which is entirely absent from the American texts.

### ***The Normal Penis***

Despite all these varying discussions, all the books have one thing in common: they seek to normalize the penis, regardless of its circumcision status.

These books stress time and again that neither is better or worse than the other. *Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen*, for example, explains that “a circumcised penis looks different from a penis that hasn't been circumcised but it doesn't in any way affect how the penis functions” (Middleman and Pfeifer 2006: 58). Joanna Cole's (2009: 25) *Asking about Sex and Growing Up* likewise affirms this position:

When a baby boy is born, the end of the penis is partly covered by a piece of skin called the foreskin. Sometimes an operation is performed on babies to remove the foreskin. This operation is called circumcision. If a boy is circumcised, his penis will look different from that of a boy who was not circumcised. But their penises are not really different. They work the same and feel the same.

Another book, *Sex: An Uncensored Introduction*, while being about sex, is very much for a pubescent and adolescent reader and explains: “one way or the other, a penis is still a penis and it works just the same. If you do have a foreskin, you need to pull the skin back and clean the skin underneath on a regular basis. But anyone with any sort of penis should be cleaning it anyway” (Hasler 2015: 14). In *What's Going On Down There? Answers to Questions Boys Find Hard to Ask*, readers are told: “Whether you have a foreskin or not makes no difference in how your penis works. Both types of penises—circumcised and uncircumcised—work in exactly the same way and equally well” (Gravelle 1998: 8). And finally, in *Sex Is a Funny Word: A Book about Bodies, Feelings, and You*, readers are told: “Just like every vulva looks different, so does every penis” (Silverberg 2015: 67). If, as Freud is thought to have said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, then puberty books teach that a penis is a penis, even though they may exist in a range of varieties.

## Discussion

While these puberty manuals remain a largely unstudied aspect of growing up and maturation, they do provide important information to readers (be they preadolescent, adolescent, or adult). In these books, the debates about circumcision are present, but they each work to treat all penises as normal penises. Even though there are undoubtedly differences, which are visual, as well as cultural/national and religious, the authors work to reassure the reader that their penis will work just as well as any other penis. In a world where boys are anxious about their penis, not just its size but also its look, these books do the work of trying to reassure a reader that he, like the boys in his class, his friends, and so on, are all normal. One penis is not better

than another penis—even though, of course, the culture in which he finds himself will have its preferences.

In a review of *Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen*, Timaree Schmit (2007) notes that the book, alongside its companion, *Girl's Guide to Becoming a Teen*, is “easily accessible” and “replete with pictures of friendly-looking adolescents representing any number of ethnic backgrounds, physiques, and interests.” However, Schmit also finds challenges with these books: “ultimately the books are inadequate for the purposes of sexuality education, owing to their general lack of profundity on any given topic, mildly archaic gender norms, and moderate discomfort with the topic of sex,” so Schmit can only “recommend the book as a puberty primer for young people” (2007: 98). All this would certainly seem to be true about the specific example of circumcision, for instance, they may all recognize “religious reasons,” but few ever engage with what those reasons might be, if religions agree on these reasons.

Likewise, when medical reasons for circumcision are discussed, they are generic and often rely on old ideas. For example, the introduction of smegma presents a host of medical ideas. Lurking behind the prose is an allusion to “the myth that smegma was carcinogenic and responsible for penile, cervical, and prostate cancer” that was advanced by the “speculations of Abraham Wolbarst and Abraham Ravich in the early to mid-1900s” (Van Howe 2014: 203). In a certain amount of hyperbole, Robert S. Van Howe and Fredrick M. Hodges open their essay “The Carcinogenicity of Smegma: Debunking a Myth” by declaring that “smegma, the collection of material in the subpreputial space, is perhaps the most maligned of all human products” (2006: 1046). Surely, we might wish to include other human products as being rather maligned, for instance, human excrement, which is so central to theories of anality, abjection, and disgust (Allan 2016). Nonetheless, Van Howe and Hodges highlight a reality that appears in many of the books on puberty and foreskin, the dirtiness of what hides beneath the foreskin: smegma. In these books, it is more often than not treated as a site of disgust rather than as a normal part of the human anatomy. Finally, the introduction of foreskin restoration was left entirely untouched—many parents, who might be asked about foreskin restoration, might not even realize such a thing exists, let alone is possible (Gilman 1997).

## Conclusion

Books about puberty present an interesting and important space to consider debates about the foreskin. These debates are no longer limited to the pages of scientific journals but rather are found in books about puberty, the material of this article, but also sex manuals, parenting manuals, news media, and magazines, including pornographic magazines (Allan 2018, 2019b, 2021; Carpenter 2010). Throughout this study, it has been demonstrated that puberty manuals tend to explain what circumcision is, provide various reasons for why it is done, and ultimately try to assure their readers that a circumcised penis is no better than an uncircumcised penis. However, more work remains to be done, not just on puberty manuals but also more broadly. A key question that persists asks how parents are to respond to questions about circumcision and the foreskin, especially when books introduce ideas that may not be known to parents. Much remains to be written about circumcision and the foreskin, especially with the shifting nature of circumcision with circumcision rates declining in many spaces. Beyond the specifics of the foreskin and circumcision, the puberty manuals are important sites for analysis and study of how boys and girls are taught about their changing bodies, and what that might mean for sense of self and for expectations of gender.

## Acknowledgement of Funders

This research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs Program and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



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## Notes

1. Interestingly, *The Ultimate Guys' Body Book* by Walt Larimore (2012), published by Zonderkidz, a Christian press, has no mention of circumcision and the foreskin. Admittedly, this is only one text published by a religious press, but it does suggest an avenue for future research.
2. Admittedly, there is some concern about representations of the penis, particularly an erect penis, which is why this article begins with a content warning. In "It's Just a Penis': The Politics of Publishing Photos in Research about Sexuality," Louisa Allen (2019: 1024) documents a history of challenges to the publication of photographs and encourages researchers and publishers alike to think about what happens when researchers cannot publish these kinds of images. Quite simply: "When sexuality researchers cannot show photos from their projects, this curtails knowledge generation and circulation within the discipline of critical sexuality studies." Allen's concern is chiefly in terms of sexuality studies, but I suspect much of this is true in adjacent spaces such as gender studies. My intention then in including these images is to provide readers with a sense of the materials available in books about puberty.

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