

Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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Early On-Set of Puberty: More Important Than You Think

Early on-set of puberty in adolescence has long been associated with a variety of family challenges, behavioral difficulties and risk-taking, including delinquency.

Although the level of impact is similar for females and males, the reasoning for it varies (e.g. increased aggression among males has been attributed to testosterone, a concept not plausible when applied to females). Additionally, sustained effects into adulthood are only seen among females.¹

"About 15% of American girls now begin puberty by age 7, according to a study of 1,239 girls published last year in *Pediatrics*. One in 10 white girls begin developing breasts by that age - twice the rate seen in a 1997 study. Among black girls, 23% hit puberty by age 7."²

There are several theories based on research as to why females are impacted even though they aren't experiencing a major infusion of testosterone at puberty. It should come as no surprise that these theories revolve around the changes that puberty can cause in a girl's relationships.

Girls who develop breasts and other physical characteristics of maturation at an early age are more likely to date at a younger age as well. Cognitive and emotional development trails behind physical development in all adolescents, but is more pronounced for those with early on-set puberty. As a result, this young woman has less capacity to resist pressure from an older boyfriend to become involved in delinquent or other risky behaviors than she would if she were older. Likewise, she may lack the sophistication to resist the influence of peers who perceive her to be older.

Her relationship with her parents and community are also significant. Puberty often signals an increase in conflict with parents, as girls begin to assert their independence. A girl displaying the physical signs of maturation, may experience an increase in expectations about her maturity in general, for which she does not yet have the capacity. Additionally, if her parents use harsh and inconsistent discipline, she is even more at-risk for developing behavioral problems.³

In her community, whether her school is single-gender (lower risk) or mixed-gender (higher risk), it plays a role in her chances for delinquent behavior. It has also been found that girls who experience early on-set of puberty and who live in neighborhoods characterized by poverty, high unemployment and a high number of single-parent households are at significantly greater risk for exhibiting violent behaviors.⁴

Why should this be of particular concern for us now? In 1800, the average on-set of puberty was 17 years, in 1960, it was 14 years and now it is 11 years. Early on-set of puberty is generally defined as below 12 years of age.⁵ And, according to Paul Kaplowitz, author of *Early Puberty in Girls*, there is no evidence that boys are maturing any earlier.⁶

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Though there appears to be no definitive answer as to why this is happening among girls, some commonly agreed upon potential culprits include: Childhood obesity, premature birth and environmental chemicals.

While researchers continue their efforts to make a solid determination about the causes for early on-set puberty, we need not remain idle. Assuring that girls are getting plenty of exercise, eating a healthy diet and not being overexposed to hormone disrupting chemicals are a good place to start.

Offering adequate and timely support is crucial as well. For adult women, who may not have begun to mature until much later, it may be a matter of not assuming the 9 year old you are interacting with has years to go before puberty hits. She may need your guidance now! Adults must also refrain from any inadvertent tendency to treat girls as more mature than they might actually be based solely on their appearance. Finally, in the juvenile justice system and programs that serve at-risk girls, prevention efforts and comprehensive sexuality education would be more effective if begun at an earlier age.

¹The Impact of Puberty on Aggression/Delinquency: Adolescence to Young Adulthood. Najman, Jake M.; Hayatbakhsh, Mohammad R.; McGee, Tara R.; Bor, William; O'Callaghan, Michael J.; Williams, Gail M.. Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology. Dec2009, Vol. 42 Issue 3, p369-386.

³Causes and Correlates of Girls' Delinquency. Zahn, M.; Agnew, R.; Fishbein, D.; Miller, S.; Winn, D.; Dakoff, G.; Kruttschnitt, C.; Giordano, P.; Gottfredson, D.; Payne, A.; Feld, B.; Chesney-Lind, M. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Apr 2010. p. 4-5.

²"Girls hit puberty earlier than ever, and doctors aren't sure why." Szabo, Liz. USA Today. Apr 2011.

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

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