

Individual Differences in Puberty Timetables

There are some general trends in puberty. Nutrition, health, and family stress affect puberty's timing.

- Identical twins go through puberty at about the same age.
- Asian Americans tend to be slightly behind other U.S. children in puberty timetables.
- African Americans and Hispanic boys and girls are ahead of other North American groups ([page 233](#)).
- Undernourished girls may begin to menstruate as late as 16 years.

Overweight and Early Puberty

- For boys, obese boys may enter puberty early, and some may enter it later. The relationship between obesity for boys and puberty is not as straight forward.
- For girls, having a high body mass index (BMI) during elementary school predicts entering puberty earlier.
 - Body fat is tied to girl's entrance to puberty. In the United States, obesity rates of increased—especially among African American elemental schoolgirls and boys.

Individual Differences in Puberty Timetables

Family stress and Early Puberty (for girls)

Although genetics is the most important factor in predicting a child's age of puberty, for girls, family life makes a small contribution.

Early maturing girls are more likely to grow up in mother-headed households and report intense childhood stress ([page 233](#)).

- The general explanation is that from an evolutionary perspective, stress is an indication of “dangerous” environment which triggers biological factors to speed up the puberty timetable to reproduce at an earlier age.
- Mothers' use of power-assertive discipline during preschool (yelling, shaming, rejecting) was associated with earlier menstruation.

Early Maturation for Boys and Girls

Entering puberty early for boys and girls create different problems. Entering puberty early produces more physical changes than cognitive changes. This means that one can look older and look more mature, but still cognitively young and less mature. People around them will treat them like an adult based on outward physical appearance.

	Physical appearance	Cognitive skills	Social skills	
Enters puberty normally	14 years	14 years	14 years	Hangs out with 14 -year-olds
Enters puberty normally	11 years	11 years	11 years	Hangs out with 11-year-olds
Enters puberty early	14 years	11 years	11 years	Hangs out with 14 -year-olds

Early Maturation for Boys and Girls

Because we tend to choose friends who are “like us”, early maturing girls are more likely to become friends with older girls and boys who are more likely to be involved with “adult activities” such as

- smoking,
- drinking,
- drug use and
- sex.

Younger boys and girls are more susceptible to peer pressure and impulsive decisions. Early maturing girls are more likely to get worse grades and less likely to graduate from high school than their later-developing peers ([page 236](#)).

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Early Maturation for Boys

The “good”

- Because males become much stronger during puberty and better at sports, entering puberty early can boost a boy’s popularity and self-esteem.

The “bad”

- Early-maturing boys are more prone to substance abuse—especially if teens are low in impulse control.
- Boys are at risk of developing depression if they have prior personality problems and an unhappy family life.

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Early Maturation for Girls

Early maturing girls, look physically older than they are and associate with older boys. However, their physical maturity may be early, their cognitive and social skills may not develop as quickly. They may not have the cognitive and social skills to resist the social pressure of older boyfriends and at a greater risk of having intercourse (whether protected or not) at a younger age and at a greater risk of becoming pregnant as a teen, and at risk of not completing high school.

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Early Maturation for Girls

Early onset of menarche before 11 years of age was correlated to higher rates of

- distress disorders,
- fear disorders and
- externalization disorders.

Early maturing girls tend to

- engage in sexual intercourse earlier and have more unstable sexual relationships,
- increased risk of physical and verbal abuse in dating,
- tend to cohabit and marry earlier.

Early maturing girls, especially in affluent environments are more likely to experience a reduced sense of self-worth ([page 236](#)). In the fourth or fifth grade, early maturing girls are at risk of being bullied because they look so different from other children in class.

In addition, they are more likely to be heavier during elementary school shorter and stockier because their height spurt occurs at an earlier point in their development. Late-maturing girls are more likely to fit the tall ultra-slim model shape.

Early Maturation for Girls

Reaching puberty early sets girls up for having a poor body image and becoming depressed ([page 236](#)). Heavier social media use was associated with greater body dissatisfaction. However, early maturation may not pose body-image problems in ethnic groups that have a healthier, more inclusive idea about the ideal female body.

If the child has authoritative parents, strong religious values, and doesn't gravitate to older "at-risk" friends, her puberty timetable will have less of a negative impact.

Minimizing Puberty Distress (page 238)

It is tempting for parents to avoid discussing puberty because children are sensitive about their changing bodies. However, we should remind ourselves what are values are when faced with our anxieties—we value a healthy child. When we think of our values, it can reframe our actions in a way that is less threatening to ourselves so that we can do what is necessary instead of avoiding difficult discussions that are uncomfortable.

For Parents:

Developmental psychologists urge parents to discuss what is happening with a same-sex child (e.g., mother with daughter or father with son). It is recommended to begin these discussions when the child is at an age when talking is emotionally easier—*before* the changes take place and develop an early relationship where talking about sensitive issues and emotions is the norm. Having an explanation for the physical and emotional changes is important for reducing the misinterpretation of these emotions (see Two-Factor Theory in Psy 202).

For parents of early-maturing daughters, parents should try to get their daughter involved in positive activities, especially with friends of the same age, and if possible, pick the best school or classes.

For Society:

As a society, to help build a healthy adolescent, we need to focus on what the science of developmental psychology tells us about our developing bodies. Some cultures do not talk about puberty or sex education because it is too anxiety provoking or fear that it will increase sexual behavior.

Sexuality

Sex is a top-ranked issue that people want information and discussions but tends to be an awkward topic and avoid it. There is the anxiety that if you talk about sex with a child, you might encourage them to have sex. Like politics, there is a wide range of attitudes toward sex ([page 243](#)).

For example,

- Some advocate abstinence until marriage
- Sex within a loving relationship is fine
- I want to try out the sexual possibilities but promise to use contraception!
([page 243](#))

Who is having Intercourse (for adolescents)?

Ecological, developmental systems theory suggests that social and biological factors influence “the transition to intercourse” and associated with sexual activity at an earlier age.

- For boys and girls, entering puberty early.
- African American (ethnicity) and lower income (SES).
- Teens who are more impulsive with externalizing tendencies.
- For European American girls, risk taking personality and low social self-worth.
- For girls, having religious parents and close religious friends who reinforce abstinence increases abstinence.
- Peers are an important factor for having intercourse. Having an older boyfriend or girlfriend increases the chance of an adolescent becoming sexually active.

Externalization tendencies is a broad personality style that involves acting on one’s immediate impulses and behaving disruptively and aggressively ([page 174](#)).

Internalization tendencies is a broad personality style that involves intense fear, social inhibitions, and often depression ([page 174](#)).

- Teens who reported watching a heavy diet of programs with sexually oriented talk, especially in mixed gender groups were twice as likely to have intercourse in the next year as children who did not. One caution is that this research finding is correlational and bidirectional. The two increase at the same time and likely caused by third factors. Interest in sex will lead you pursue those media that include sexual content. (Being interested in trains causes you to read about trains and watch train shows. Likewise, those already predisposed to conspiracy theories are more likely to seek out information about conspiracy theories).

Sexually active adolescent couples often fail to use contraception, partially because they are cognitively immature and don't take seriously the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases or teenage pregnancies (see Piaget and formal operations). The adolescent who has a child is more likely to have an interrupted education and low income, which makes it difficult to escape poverty.

In a survey of college men and women, women are more insistent than men that physical intimacy (sex) and emotional intimacy (love) go together (61% vs. 29%). Women are more likely than men to have been in a steady relation with their first sexual partner. This difference in expectations for sex and love create misunderstandings and hurt feelings can help explain why women are more likely than men to wish they waited to have sex.

Toward teenager-friendly sex education

With regards to sex, whatever your belief is, you should acknowledge there is a wide variety of attitudes and problems associated with sexual behavior. Ignoring sexual behavior is probably the least effective method for dealing with sexual related problems.

One goal of sex education is to prevent teenage pregnancy and the risks and social costs associated with teenage pregnancies.

Parents are deeply divided about what to say to teens about sex and this can lead to wide variations and inconsistencies of sex education.

There is the general fear that teaching contraception might encourage teens to have sex. The evidence does not support this fear. Comprehensive sex education not only helps prevent pregnancy, but it can delay the transition to intercourse.

Some (not all) Themes from
Why Teens Are Impulsive, Addiction-Prone And Should Protect Their Brains
(Fresh Air, 1/28/2015)

What are the physical changes in the teen brain?

What changes in thinking accompany the physical changes in a teen brain?

Why are teens more prone to addiction?

How does alcohol affect the teen brain? How is this different from adults?

How does marijuana affect the teen brain?

Why do some medical treatments with adults but not children?

What is “dementia of the preoccupied?”

What changes did the Harvard medical school make in teaching their students (Frances Jensen discusses this in regards to physicians)? Why was this done?