



Adolescent Health/Medicine, Developmental/Behavioral Issues, Endocrinology,
Psychosocial Issues, Puberty

Early Puberty: What May Be Contributing and Why Should We Be Concerned?

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We have published studies over the past several years noting that the onset of puberty seems to be coming earlier and earlier. We recently released two studies on this topic—one that focuses on what may be contributing to this phenomenon and the other highlighting some risk behaviors that can ensue as a result of earlier physical maturation.

The first of these two studies by Sun et al. ([10.1542/peds.2016-4099](#)) reports on a longitudinal Australian cohort of over 5000 infants with more than 3700 continuing to be followed to age 10-11 years. The authors in this study wished to determine if social disadvantage was associated with earlier onset of puberty. Interestingly enough for both genders, it does-- with boys four time more likely to experience early puberty and girls twice more likely if they were exposed to an unfavorable household socioeconomic position, although neighborhood disadvantage did not appear to contribute. To help make sense of this finding we asked Dr. Marcia Herman-Giddens from the University of North Carolina (who with her colleagues in the AAP's Pediatric Research in Office Settings (PROS) network did the work we published on early puberty in this country ([Pediatrics, Aug 2001, 108 \(2\) 347-353](#), [Pediatrics, Nov 2012, 130 \(5\) e1058-e1068](#)) to share some insight ([10.1542/peds.2017-0837](#)) into how social disadvantage could be contributing to early puberty.

Rather than dwell on what might be associated with triggering earlier puberty, Chen et al. ([10.1542/peds.2016-2847](#)) focus on what might happen as a result of early puberty and whether the friends a person has when they develop early can increase or decrease their risk of experiencing dating abuse. The authors followed a national longitudinal cohort of 3870 adolescent girls' ages 13 to 17, all of whom were in romantic and/or non-romantic sexual relationships. Each girl also self-rated their pubertal development at the time of enrollment and then were subsequently asked if they had experienced physical or verbal abuse in their sexual relationships with partners. The cohort was also asked about their group of friends—i.e. what percentage were male, older, and what risk-taking behaviors were these friends engaging in. When potential confounders were controlled for, the results indicated that if a subject in this study had a higher percentage of male friends, there was an increased risk of experiencing adolescent dating abuse. Even more concerning was that if a girl had developed early and had a high percentage of male friends, that combination led to the highest percentage of experiencing dating abuse and victimization.

Both these studies and commentary provide us with a more mature look at early puberty so we can be much more aware of what may contribute to its onset and even more importantly inquire as to who our early developing patient's circle of friends might be, so as to educate that patient and parents as to their increased risk of dating abuse so this outcome might be prevented. Check out these two articles and the accompanying commentary and learn more.

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