

## Gender Differences at Puberty

Puberty is one of the most important life transitions. There is no other period in the life cycle in which there is such significant, rapid, and simultaneous transformation in biology and social and psychological development. Change at puberty is both dramatic and universal, yet there are few researchers who study this important stage in the life course. Indeed, the study of biological and psychosocial changes at puberty is relatively recent. One of the most interesting aspects of puberty is that it marks a significant separation between the genders: physically, psychologically, and socially. This book focuses on the emergence of gender differences and provides an up-to-date summary of interdisciplinary research in the area, with contributions from an international team of leading experts in the field. Topics covered include biological aspects of puberty, body image, aggression, sexual abuse, opposite sex relationships, and psychopathology.

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This book would not have been written if it were not for the pioneering work of Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and her colleagues. Twenty years ago Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Anne Petersen edited the first book to focus on gender issues at puberty, *Girls at puberty*. This groundbreaking volume spawned interest in an important and long-neglected area of research, namely what happens to girls at puberty. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn continues to lead and inspire faculty scholars, trainees, and students in their effort to understand the complex interplay between biology and psychosocial factors at puberty. We dedicate this book to her, for her unwavering commitment.

## Contents

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<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>List of tables</i>	xiii
<i>List of contributors</i>	xiv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
1 Methodological concerns in puberty-related research CHRIS HAYWARD	1
<b>Part 1 Sex differences in hormones and their effect at puberty</b>	
2 The biology of puberty: new developments in sex differences PATRICIA Y. FECHNER	17
3 Hormonal changes at puberty and the emergence of gender differences in internalizing disorders KATHERINE SANBORN AND CHRIS HAYWARD	29
<b>Part 2 Girls at puberty</b>	
4 Puberty and body image ERIC STICE	61
5 Gender differences in opposite sex relationships: interactions with puberty LAURA COMPIAN AND CHRIS HAYWARD	77
6 Aggression, psychopathology, and delinquency: influences of gender and maturation – where did all the good girls go? STEPHANIE R. HAWKINS, SAMANTHA PIA MILLER, AND HANS STEINER	93
	ix

x Contents

**Part 3 Boys at puberty**

- 7 Boys at puberty: psychosocial implications 113  
 JENICA HUDDLESTON AND XIAOJIA GE

**Part 4 Puberty and psychopathology**

- 8 Puberty and depression 137  
 ADRIAN ANGOLD, CAROL WORTHMAN, AND  
 E. JANE COSTELLO
- 9 Puberty and schizophrenia 165  
 ANDREW GOTOWIEC, MARY V. SEEMAN, AND  
 ROBIN Z. COHEN

**Part 5 Pubertal timing: antecedents**

- 10 Childhood sexual abuse and pubertal timing: implications  
 for long-term psychosocial adjustment 187  
 TANYA A. BERGEVIN, WILLIAM M. BUKOWSKI, AND  
 LEIGH KARAVASILIS
- 11 Psychosocial factors predicting pubertal onset 217  
 LAURIE L. MESCHKE, PAMELA JO JOHNSON,  
 BONNIE L. BARBER, AND JACQUELYNNE S. ECCLES

**Part 6 Pubertal timing: consequences**

- 12 Short-term and long-term consequences of early versus  
 late physical maturation in adolescents 241  
 KARINA WEICHOLD, RAINER K. SILBEREISEN, AND  
 EVA SCHMITT-RODERMUND
- 13 When coming of age means coming undone:  
 links between puberty and psychosocial adjustment  
 among European American and African American  
 girls 277  
 ALICE MICHAEL AND JACQUELYNNE S. ECCLES

**Part 7 Puberty and context**

- 14 Puberty in context 307  
 JULIA A. GRABER
- Index* 326

## Figures

---

1.1 Hypothetical outcome data showing stratification by age and Tanner Stage. This figure shows an age effect but no pubertal stage effect	<i>page 5</i>
1.2 Hypothetical outcome data showing stratification by age and Tanner Stage. This figure shows a pubertal stage effect but no age effect	6
1.3 Hypothetical outcome data showing stratification by age and Tanner Stage. This figure shows an additive age and pubertal stage effect	6
1.4 Hypothetical outcome data showing stratification by age and Tanner Stage. This figure shows an interaction effect between age and pubertal stage. The interaction in this figure represents an early pubertal timing effect	7
1.5 Survival curves using hypothetical outcome data comparing those with early pubertal timing and those with nonearly pubertal timing. This figure demonstrates a short-term early pubertal timing effect	8
1.6 Survival curves using hypothetical outcome data comparing those with early pubertal timing and those with nonearly pubertal timing. This figure demonstrates a long-term early pubertal timing effect	9
1.7 Survival curves using hypothetical outcome data comparing those with early pubertal timing and those with nonearly pubertal timing. This figure demonstrates no early pubertal timing effect	9
3.1 Potential CNS effects of estrogen at puberty	36
3.2 Hypothetical interaction between hormonal changes at puberty and predisposing factors: HPA axis dysregulation in girls with a history of trauma	48
6.1 Age-specific prevalence of self-reported violent offending	95
	xi



xii	List of figures	
6.2	Gender differences in clinically significant behaviors	100
6.3	Gender differences in committing offenses	104
8.1	Four potential pathways linking puberty and depression	142
8.2	Relationship between sex steroid level and depression	151
8.3	Relationship between sex steroid level and mean life event counts	152
9.1	Comparison of the relationship between age at first psychotic symptoms and puberty onset for females and males	177
10.1	Schematic representation of the general model that guided the analyses of the associations between abuse history, pubertal timing, relationship experiences (i.e., compliance), and affective outcomes	204
10.2	Association between sexual abuse and pubertal timing as a function of physical abuse for boys and girls (higher pubertal timing scores indicate a later entry into puberty)	204
10.3	Association between sexual abuse, physical abuse, and compliance in dating relationships	205
10.4	Association between sexual abuse and compliance as a function of pubertal timing	206
10.5	Association between physical abuse and compliance as a function of pubertal timing	207
10.6	Association between sexual abuse and depression for boys and girls	208
10.7	Association between pubertal timing and depression for boys and girls	208
12.1	Model for development of problem behaviors during puberty	246
13.1	Timing of menarche for African American and European American girls	286
13.2	Girls' eating symptoms: interaction of menarche and ethnic group	291
13.3	Girls' self-esteem: interaction of menarche and ethnic group	292

## Tables

---

8.1 The effects of life events on the probability of being depressed in immature and mature girls (logistic regression results)	<i>page</i> 154
9.1 Descriptive statistics and associations: females versus males	176
11.1 Proportional hazards regression to pubertal timing: hierarchical family composition, adolescent stress, and family stress models of pubertal timing for females and males	227
11.2 Proportional hazards regression to pubertal timing: hierarchical family composition, family stress, and adolescent stress models of pubertal timing for females and males	228
11.3 Cross-tabulation of parent–adolescent conflict and grade of growth spurt	232
13.1 Menarcheal timing distribution	285
13.2 Relations between timing of menarche and adjustment	290
13.3 Relations between perception of timing and adjustment	294

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## Preface

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Following a relatively long period of juvenile growth and reproductive immaturity, adolescence commences with a series of rapid endocrinological changes and ends at the completion of body growth. During adolescence, males and females . . . show a spurt in growth, secondary sexual characteristics such as sexual dimorphism and body shape . . . and both sexes attain reproductive maturity. Concomitant with these physical and physiological changes it is clear that there are profound changes in social behavior.

E. Pusey, Behavioral changes at adolescence in chimpanzees,  
*Behaviour*, 115(3–4), 204

This description reflects what we know about puberty in humans, although it was written by Anne Pusey to describe puberty in chimpanzees.

Puberty represents the most salient developmental milestone in early adolescence. Although it is commonly thought of as the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics, there are a multitude of other important biological, psychological, and social changes associated with puberty. In the biological sphere there are changes in sleep patterns, brain neurochemistry, and body habitus, in addition to hormonal changes, during puberty. In the psychological domain, there are dramatic shifts in identity, body image, and relationships with parents. Socially, the peer group becomes predominant, social awareness and social anxiety increase. There are important school transitions – elementary to middle school and middle school to high school – which youth have to navigate. It is at this time that experimentation with drugs escalates, sexual promiscuity begins, and risk-taking behavior becomes a way of life for a small subgroup of adolescents. Puberty is also of interest because males and females enter and complete pubertal development at different ages. There are interactions between gender-specific developmental changes and puberty. For example, the emergence of important gender differences in peer relationships, sexual activity, drug use, body image, depression, and anxiety occur at puberty. Why there is this divergence in life course between the

genders at this critical developmental period is increasingly becoming the subject of scholarly inquiry.

The focus on the emergence of gender differences at puberty is based on the important observation that, during early adolescence, pubertal stage is generally a more important correlate of behavior than is chronological age. This finding requires focusing on pubertal development rather than on age, when considering the emergence of gender differences in risk-taking behavior, symptoms of depression, body image disturbances, and so forth. How developmental changes during puberty increase or lessen the risks for youth has been the focus of a number of research groups, nationally and internationally. Models in developmental psychology now emphasize the role of context in understanding the relationships between the biology of puberty and behavior. Research is beginning to describe the context-dependent ways in which puberty and its behavioral correlates interact. Importantly, the interactions between the social world of an adolescent and the biology of puberty may differ by gender. Understanding this research has important implications for those involved with adolescents, including parents, teachers, administrators, community youth group leaders, officials of the juvenile justice system, and health-care workers. This volume will describe and summarize these research efforts, as well as present the results of new investigations.

Finally, puberty should not be regarded as the cause of difficulties in young people; rather, it is a marker for a developmental phase that has important implications for the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is important to remember that most adolescents who traverse puberty do not suffer ill effects from this transition. For some, puberty may accentuate earlier childhood problems. For others, however, the transition does herald the beginning of a range of psychosocial problems, from substance abuse and emotional problems to disturbed body image and sexually acting out. We know a great deal about the patterns of these behaviors in relation to puberty; we know less about the explanations.

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