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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 series aims at publishing books on the health and disease status of children, adolescents, and young adults and on intervention strategies in medicine, psychology, sociology, public health, and political science. It is supported by the international research network Health Behavior in School Children (HBSC) and is sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe.

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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.

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Preface

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

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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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