

Positive parenting associated with less aggression in early-maturing teen girls

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Adolescent girls who go through puberty early and have parents who do not nurture them, communicate with them or have knowledge of their activities appear more likely to display aggressive behavior, according to a report in the August issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

Early puberty in girls is related to conduct problems, delinquency and substance use, according to background information in the article. Many of these problems persist through adolescence and into early adulthood. "As adults, early-maturing girls demonstrate lower academic and occupational achievement and report lower relationship quality and life satisfaction," the authors write. "It is thus important to identify protective factors that may mitigate negative effects of early maturation on girls' adjustment."

Sylvie Mrug, Ph.D., of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and colleagues interviewed 330 fifth-grade girls (average age 11) and their parents from three metropolitan areas. The girls reported how often they engaged in aggressive behavior, such as hitting, teasing and spreading rumors to hurt others; whether they displayed delinquency (fighting at school, getting injured in a fight or inflicting injuries); how often their mother was affectionate and how often they did things together; whether their parents had talked to them about violence, tobacco and sex; and whether and when they had started their periods. Parents responded to seven items measuring the extent to which they knew their child's friends and how he or she spent her free time.

One-fourth of the girls had matured early, defined as beginning their period one year before the average age for females of their racial and ethnic group. Those who did were more likely to be delinquent, but not aggressive. However, those who matured early and also had low levels of parental nurturance, communication and knowledge were more likely to be aggressive. "Also, early maturation only predicted physical aggression when combined with low maternal nurturance," the authors write.

Early-maturing girls may be at higher risk of aggression or delinquency because they are more likely to be accepted by and form relationships with older boys, who are more likely than younger children to engage in undesirable behaviors, the authors note. "Parental nurturance may decrease girls' susceptibility to negative peer influence," they write. "Also, parental nurturance may help girls cope with challenges associated with early puberty. By listening to their daughters' difficulties and providing support and encouragement, nurturing parents can help them develop better coping skills and diffuse negative emotions that might otherwise manifest as aggression."

Parental communication and knowledge may also protect girls from aggressive behavior, they continue. "By discussing difficult peer situations (e.g., provocation, peer pressure) and ways of dealing with them, parents may help their daughters develop a repertoire of adaptive responses that will minimize the need for inappropriate (i.e., aggressive) behavior," they write. "In addition, knowing how their daughters spend free time may help parents identify and prevent negative peer and other influences."

Source: JAMA and Archives Journals

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