

Early bloomers with poor social skills more likely to smoke

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Children who go through puberty earlier than their peers are more likely to have poor social skills and to smoke cigarettes during their high school years, a new study in *Journal of Adolescent Health* confirms. Additionally, researchers found poor social skills to be associated with smoking in early maturing girls, but not as often in early maturing boys.

“Kids that go through puberty earlier than their [peers](#) are at higher risk for substance use, and at higher risk for not being very socially competent,” said Erika Westling, PhD, the lead author and researcher at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene. “They’re not really able to control their social situations and they may not make friends as easily. That puts them at greater risk for [smoking](#) and other substance use.”

Westling and co-investigators used data gathered from 1,013 students participating in the Oregon Youth Substance Use Project, an ongoing research initiative that follows students over 9 years, from elementary school through 12th grade. Researchers found that those who went through [puberty](#) earlier than their peers tended to smoke more as 9th graders and likely to smoke in high school. In addition, they found that youth in 6th grade who matured early were ranked by their teachers as less socially competent than their peers.

“The gender difference was somewhat surprising because we did find that both boys and [girls](#) who were earlier maturers use [cigarettes](#) earlier and both had lower social competence,” Dr. Westling said. “But for whatever reason, the pathway linking all of those things together was different for boys than for girls.” The researchers suggest that early maturing girls may feel more rejected or excluded by their peers and may smoke to “fit in”.

Westling also explained that the hormonal changes that occur in early maturing kids may actually disrupt their thinking abilities and emotions, putting them at even greater risk for making poor decisions when it comes to smoking or other risky behaviors.

“It’s important that we caution parents and educators that while these kids are physically more mature, they are at greater risk for substance use than their peers,” said Susanne Tanski, M.D., a pediatrician and chair of the Tobacco Consortium of the American Academy of Pediatrics. “They may look like they’re 14 when they’re actually 12—so it’s important to recognize that their appearance does not indicate cognitive or social competence.”

More information: Westling E., Andrews J.A., and Peterson M. (2012). Gender differences in pubertal timing, social competence, and cigarette use: a test of the early maturation hypothesis. *Journal of*

Adolescent Health, In Press.

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