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Adolescent and Parental Reactions to Puberty in Nigeria and Kenya: A Cross-Cultural and Intergenerational Comparison



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This qualitative study assesses the cross-cultural and intergenerational reactions of young adolescents and parents to puberty in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, and Nairobi, Kenya.

Methods: Sixty-six boys and girls (aged 11–13 years) and their parents participated in narrative interviews conducted in English or local languages in two urban poor settings in Ile-Ife and Nairobi. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated, and uploaded into Atlas.ti software for coding and analysis.

Results: Reactions of parents and adolescents to puberty were similar across both sites, with few exceptions. Adolescents' reactions to bodily changes varied from anxiety to pride. Adolescents generally tend to desire greater privacy; trying to hide their developing bodies from others. Most female adolescents emphasized breast development as compared with menstruation as the mark for pubertal initiation, while males emphasized voice changes. Among some ethnic groups in Nairobi, parents and adolescents view male circumcision as the hallmark of adolescence. Parents in both sites reported that with pubertal changes, adolescents tend to become arrogant and engaged in sexual relationships. Parents' reported responses to puberty include: educating adolescents on bodily changes; counseling on sexual relationships; and, provision of sanitary towels to females. Parents' responses are generally focused more on daughters. Approaches used by mothers in educating adolescents varied from the provision of factual information to fear/scare tactics. Compared with their own generation, parents perceive that their own children achieve pubertal development earlier, receive more puberty-related education from mothers, and are more exposed to and influenced by media and information technologies.

Conclusions: Adolescents' responses to their pubertal bodily changes include anxiety, shame, and pride. Adolescents desire greater privacy. Parents' reactions were broadly supportive of their

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Adolescents reported reactions to pubertal changes that varied from anxiety, shame, pride, and increasing desire for privacy. These need to be understood by parents to facilitate appropriate support, including education and counseling. Parent-focused interventions are needed to bridge the gap between parents' willingness to educate adolescents on pubertal change and their lack of appropriate communication skills.

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children's pubertal transition, but mothers' communication approaches may sometimes be inappropriate in terms of using fear/scare tactics.

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Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, and pubertal development is its hallmark [1]. Perspectives about pubertal events vary among different cultures. Stubbs [2] has described menstruation as a “Jekyll and Hyde phenomenon” in that it carries both a good and bad reputation: “good” in that signifies growing maturity as well as future fertility potential, but “bad” because of the negative attitudes and fears surrounding menstruation. Adolescents' reactions to their own pubertal development vary considerably in different sociocultural settings and may have implications for their psychological well-being and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) behaviors [3–7]. Girls' negative attitudes toward menarche, for example, contribute to their sense of self-objectification, body shame, and lack of agency in sexual decision-making [2]. Parental actions and reactions toward their adolescent pubertal development can significantly influence adolescents' reaction to their pubertal experience [8].

Understanding adolescents' and parents' responses to puberty is key to evidence-based programming aimed at improving the health and well-being of young adolescents. To date, very few studies have focused on adolescent and parental reactions to puberty in Sub-Saharan Africa. This qualitative article assessed the reactions of adolescents and their parents to puberty in urban poor settings in two African countries—Nigeria (Ile-Ife) in West Africa, and Kenya (Nairobi) in East Africa—and compared the experiences of current adolescents to that of their parents' generation.

Methods

Settings

The study was conducted in two large sub-Saharan African cities—Ile-Ife (Nigeria) and Nairobi (Kenya)—as part of the Global Early Adolescent Study. In Nigeria, the study was conducted in four urban poor communities in Ile-Ife, an ancient Yoruba city in south-western Nigeria. Communities were selected based on their lower socioeconomic status, with housing that consisted of mainly mud or uncemented walls with poor sanitary facilities and no portable water. In Kenya, the study was conducted in the Korogocho informal settlement, one of the most densely populated settlement areas in Nairobi. While Korogocho is ethnically and religiously diverse, members of the same ethnic group tend to cluster in specific villages within the settlement area. The major source of livelihood in the settlement is informal casual employment. As with other slums in the city, Korogocho is characterized by high levels of unemployment, substandard and overcrowded housing, limited social services, high levels of crime and insecurity, and inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure.

Data

Data were collected from adolescents and their parents living in urban poor settings. In Ile-Ife, households with male/female adolescents aged 11–13 years in four communities were

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Ile-Ife	Nairobi
Adolescent sample		
Sex		
Male	17	15
Female	19	15
Ages		
11	10	15
12	7	6
13	19	9
Race/ethnicity ^a		
Hausa	0	
Yoruba	32	
Igbo	4	
Kikuyu		7
Luo		14
Luhya		8
Congolese		1
Family structure		
Two parents	33	26
Single parent	2	4
Other	1	0
Education level		
Junior secondary school	38	
Primary grade 2		1
Primary grade 3		4
Primary grade 4		8
Primary grade 5		10
Primary grade 6		4
Primary grade 7		3
Parent/guardian sample		
Ages		
18–24	0	1
25–34	9	14
35–44	12	8
45–54	11	5
55+	4	0
Not indicated	0	4
Relationship to adolescent		
Mother	27	29
Father	7	3
Grandparent	1	
Other	1	
Education level		
<Secondary school	6	25
Completed secondary	14	5
Trade/vocational	2	0
Some college/tertiary education	3	0
Completed college/tertiary education	11	0
Unknown	0	2
Marital status		
Married	35	24
Single	1	5
Divorced/widowed/separated	0	3

^a In Nairobi, ethnicity data were only collected from parents.

identified, from which 10 households (parent–child dyad) per community were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study. In Nairobi, adolescents and their parents were purposively selected from households participating in the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System, a longitudinal research platform to assess the long-term socio-economic and health effects of residences in urban poor

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