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 JOURNAL OF
 ADOLESCENT
 HEALTH

www.jahonline.org

Original article

Implications of Pubertal Timing for Romantic Relationship Quality Among Heterosexual and Sexual Minority Young Adults

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Article history: Received January 29, 2017; Accepted June 2, 2017

Keywords: Pubertal timing; Menarche; Relationship quality; Parental relationship quality; Sexual minorities; Longitudinal

 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Relative to on-time or late-maturing peers, girls who begin puberty early typically begin romantic and sexual experiences earlier; however, advanced pubertal status does not necessarily coincide with commensurate interpersonal skills necessary for healthy romantic relationships. Research is limited on the long-term implications of early puberty for relationship quality, and virtually nothing is known about the social implications of early timing for sexual minority females.

Methods: Using linear regression, we examine longitudinal associations between two measures of girls' pubertal timing (self-perceived timing and menarcheal age) and romantic relationship quality in young adulthood, stratified by sexual orientation, among 5,568 females in waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. We also examine whether identified associations are mediated by parent-adolescent relationship quality.

Results: Among sexual minorities, early self-perceived pubertal timing was associated with lower adult romantic relationship quality compared with on-time maturers ($\beta = -2.32$; standard error = 1.44; $p = .05$); this association was mediated by parent-adolescent relationship quality. Among heterosexuals, girls experiencing menarche before age 12 (early maturers) reported lower adult relationship quality compared to on-time maturers ($\beta = -.43$; standard error = .22; $p = .03$); parent-adolescent relationship quality did not mediate this association.

Conclusions: Early maturation is associated with lower romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. However, evidence of the association varies by measure of pubertal timing, and the processes by which pubertal timing is linked to later relationship quality may be different for sexual minority and heterosexual females. Potential explanations and public health implications are discussed.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Pubertal timing can have lasting implications for intimate relationships among both sexual minority and heterosexual women, but the processes underlying the associations may differ. More research on the subjective experiences of early puberty, accounting for sexual orientation, is needed to better delineate avenues of intervention that foster healthy romantic relationships.

Puberty represents a biopsychosocial life course transition with potential short- and long-term implications for sexual well-being. The physical transformations of puberty move

youth into different social positions and contexts, changing how they see themselves and how others see them. As noted by Cavanagh [1], "puberty marks the moment when the cultural meanings, expectations, opportunities and limitations of gender, sexuality and romance become real for girls and boys and the moment when others—boys, girls, adults—perceive girls as sexual actors, laying the foundation for opposite-sex relationships in adolescence and beyond" (p. 1220).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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The timing of puberty and its implications have long been topics of scientific interest and research. Multiple perspectives are relevant to this topic, including the maturation disparity hypothesis (developmental readiness), which proposes that the potential adverse consequences of early puberty emerge from a psychosocial-physical developmental mismatch [2]. Early physical and sexual maturation precede the cognitive and psychosocial maturity needed to accommodate hormonal [3] and bodily changes, and the responses they elicit from others [4,5]. Cognitive development, and executive functioning in particular, continues throughout adolescence into early adulthood [4–6]. Girls with adult bodies may elicit attention from potential romantic and/or sexual partners, and consequently, opportunities for romance and sex may emerge earlier for them than for girls with younger-looking bodies [7,8]. These adolescent romantic/sexual relationships may provide occasions to build interpersonal skills and resilience or may burden the adolescent with “relationship baggage” [9]; either scenario likely has long-term implications for romantic relationships in young adulthood. Early-maturing girls may be at elevated risk for poorer adjustment because, relative to on-time or late-maturing peers, they experience romantic/sexual relationships before they develop the skills to successfully manage them [10].

Early pubertal timing may also have adverse effects on parent-child relationships. According to the “self-in-relation” theory, puberty is a challenging developmental process for girls because female development centers on “deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence” ([9], p. 53), which competes with developmental norms of agency and independence. Therefore, balancing independence and close relationships in the context of pubertal changes could be distressing and lead to conflict in families, particularly for early-maturing girls with less time to adapt to new expectations [11]. Based on attachment theory, impaired parent-child relationships may in turn negatively affect concurrent and future romantic relationships as the former serves as a working model for the latter [12]. Low-quality parental bonds provide limited opportunities for youth to practice important interpersonal skills (e.g., listening, empathy, and conflict resolution). Longitudinal evidence supports this link between parental relationships and future relationships (e.g., [13,14]); for example, Johnson and Galambos [15] found a positive association between parent-adolescent relationship quality and romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. Given the associations between parent-adolescent relationship quality and both pubertal timing and later romantic relationship quality, we investigate whether parent-adolescent relationship quality mediates any identified link between pubertal timing and later romantic relationships.

Measurement of pubertal timing

There are multiple ways to assess pubertal timing, and measurement method may reveal different implications for girls' health. Age of menarche is the most commonly used index [16], and perceived pubertal timing relative to peers is also widely used. Across studies, early menarche and early perceived pubertal timing (i.e., perceiving one's development to be more advanced than same-age peers) are each associated with early sexual initiation, more coital and noncoital experiences, and sexual risk taking [7,17]. Although related to some behaviors similarly, each index captures different aspects of pubertal timing. Menarche is a discrete, typically private event occurring

relatively late in puberty, after secondary sex characteristics are already evident. In contrast, perceived pubertal timing is a self-assessment that, while influenced by actual physical change, may serve as a proxy for viewing oneself as adult-like. Moore et al. [17] argue the subjective nature of perceived timing holds psychological significance that could influence sexual health behavior. As such, girls who see themselves as “mature” and adult-like, even if they are premenarcheal, may be more responsive to romantic/sexual relationship opportunities.

Sexual minorities

There are investigations, with mixed findings, on associations between sexual orientation and pubertal timing [18–20]. However, to our knowledge, studies on the implications of pubertal timing are all based on heterosexual youth or simply do not take sexual orientation into account. The fact that early puberty affords earlier opportunities for sex and romance may present additional challenges for sexual minority (SM) youth. According to Rich [21], heterosexuality is an institution that privileges heterosexual relationships as the only “natural and normal” intimate relationship. Because SM youth experience lower levels of well-being and social support relative to their heterosexual peers [22,23] and poorer relationship quality with parents [24], early puberty may elicit challenges in relationship formation. Previous research, however, has not addressed whether early puberty has similar implications for parent-adolescent relationships (e.g., closeness, warmth, and communication) and future romantic relationship quality among SM youth.

Current study

The current study is the first to examine longitudinal associations between two distinct measures of adolescent girls' pubertal timing and romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. We focus on relationship quality because high-quality relationships buffer against stress and promote wellness, thereby contributing to health [25]. We also examine parent-adolescent relationship quality as a potential mediator of any identified associations between pubertal timing and young adult romantic relationship quality. Finally, we examine these associations among heterosexual and SM women using a diverse, population-based sample of adolescents.

Based on theory and empirical findings described previously, we hypothesize that compared with “on-time” maturers, early maturers (regardless of measure) will have lower romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. However, we also expect that early maturation, as assessed by perceived pubertal timing, will show a larger association (in absolute value) because of the greater psychological significance of perceiving oneself as more mature. Given that menarche occurs relatively late in the pubertal process, other observable indicators of physical maturity (e.g., breast and pubic hair development) precede it. Perceived maturity may lead early-maturing youth to seek out or respond to romantic opportunities that “match” their (older) appearance regardless of chronological age or menarcheal status. We also hypothesize that perceived early timing may be especially relevant for SM females. In a heteronormative society, SM youth are sensitive to and vigilant about how they are perceived by others [26]. We suggest that this salience about how one is perceived by others encompasses the morphological changes of puberty, as puberty is linked to sexuality physically,

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