

Original article

Mass media as a sexual super peer for early maturing girls

Jane D. Brown, Ph.D.^{a,*}, Carolyn Tucker Halpern, Ph.D.^b, and Kelly Ladin L'Engle, M.P.H.^c

^a*School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

^b*Department of Maternal and Child Health, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

^c*Dept. of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

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Abstract

Purpose: To investigate the possibility that the mass media (television, movies, music, and magazines) serve as a kind of super peer for girls who enter puberty sooner than their age-mates. Multiple studies have demonstrated significant associations between earlier pubertal timing and earlier transition to first sex. Does puberty also stimulate interest in sexual media content that is seen as giving permission to engage in sexual behavior?

Methods: White and African-American female adolescents ($n = 471$; average age 13.7 years) recruited from public middle schools in central North Carolina completed two self-administered surveys in their homes about their pubertal status, interest in and exposure to various media, and perceptions of sexual media content.

Results: Earlier maturing girls reported more interest than later maturing girls in seeing sexual content in movies, television, and magazines, and in listening to sexual content in music, regardless of age or race. Earlier maturing girls were also more likely to be listening to music and reading magazines with sexual content, more likely to see R-rated movies, and to interpret the messages they saw in the media as approving of teens having sexual intercourse.

Conclusions: The mass media may be serving as a kind of sexual super peer, especially for earlier maturing girls. Given the lack of sexual health messages in most media adolescents attend to, these findings give cause for concern. The media should be encouraged to provide more sexually healthy content, and youth service providers and physicians should be aware that earlier maturing girls may be interested in sexual information. © 2005 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Puberty; Adolescent girls; Mass media; Sexual behavior

Girls and boys in many countries in the world today are reaching sexual maturity earlier than they ever have. Although the general sequence of pubertal development is similar across individuals, the timing and rate of pubertal change is quite variable. For nearly a century, social scientists have paid attention to the process and the implications of these physical changes, particularly when they occur “off time” compared with age-mates. Because girls, on average, mature earlier than boys, the psychosocial implications of earlier maturation for girls have been of particular interest.

Earlier pubertal timing has been found to be related to a number of negative outcomes, such as deviance behavior [1], substance use [2,3], concerns with weight and body image [4–6], and psychological distress/depressive symptoms (e.g., [7]).

Puberty is also associated with heightened romantic and sexual interest [8,9], and multiple studies have also demonstrated significant, positive associations between earlier pubertal timing and earlier transition to first sex, and other fertility-related outcomes [1,10–16]. For example, in Stattin and Magnusson's [1] work with 1300 Swedish children, girls who reached menarche at or before age 11 showed more sexual activity, along with other indicators of deviant behavior, than did average or later maturing girls. Although some associations were limited to adolescence, even at age

*Address correspondence to: Jane D. Brown, School of Journalism and Mass Communication CB 3365, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3365.

E-mail address: jane_brown@unc.edu.

25 earlier maturing females were less likely to be enrolled in a university and were more likely to have married and had children (see also [17,18]).

The association between early puberty and sexual interest/activity is a complex one, reflecting interactions between biological (e.g., hormonal) changes [19,20] and psychosocial factors. Girls who look more mature will be more likely to be perceived by others, and to see themselves, as attractive and appropriate romantic and sexual partners, opening doors to dating and sexual activity. Early maturing girls may be more likely to both seek out, and be sought by, adolescents with similar appearances and interests. Few studies have examined the processes that link pubertal timing and sexual outcomes. Stattin and Magnusson's [1] findings that earlier maturing girls' affiliation with older males contributed to earlier sexual transition pointed to the important role of peers. More recent analyses using a national sample of U.S. adolescents [21] found that peer group structure and interactions, specifically higher proportions of older boys in the early maturing girl's friendship group and greater involvement with other girls, were predictive of earlier sexual behavior.

Media as super peer?

Another possible mechanism may be the mass media that serve, as some have suggested, as a kind of "super peer" [22]. It may be that girls who are maturing earlier than their age-mates turn to the media as a source of information and models about sexuality that is unavailable in their peer group. In this way the media may serve as a kind of substitute sexual peer. The media certainly are an accessible source for most American adolescents. Recent national surveys show that 8- to 18-year-olds spend from 6 to 9 hours a day with some form of mass media (recorded music, television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and Internet sites). A majority of young people have access to most of these kinds of media in the privacy of their own rooms and thus, personal control over what kinds of media content from this vast array they will attend to [23].

Although there are numerous studies of adolescents' use of media and the media's influence on fear and aggression, only a few studies have addressed the role of media in adolescent development and/or how various aspects of adolescent development influence use of and responses to media. These few studies [24–27] suggest that media use changes as children mature into adulthood. In general, studies have shown that television viewing decreases as music listening increases, and media preferences are motivated primarily by a desire for entertainment but also by informational needs related to development. Typically, in periods of change people seek information to help reduce their uncertainty about what is happening or may happen. Puberty is fundamentally about change and uncertainty as bodies develop physically and as the social world responds. Adoles-

cents report intentionally seeking information about sex from television, magazines and the Internet, and media rank high among adolescents' most important sources (along with school health classes, peers and parents) for sexual information [28].

The media may be especially important sources of sexual information for adolescents who are experiencing puberty earlier than their peers. The media present a great deal of sexual information in a compelling and easily accessible format, and media characters don't laugh at "stupid" or awkward questions. Adolescents may turn to the media as a relatively safe and less embarrassing way to be associated with, and perhaps learn from, adolescents who look more like they do and are thinking more about sex and relationships than their real-life same-age peers.

Sexual content in the media

The media are full of sexual information, and in some of the different kinds of media the portrayals have grown increasingly frequent and explicit. The most recent study of sexual content on television, for example, found that two-thirds of all shows included sexual content (all shows except news, sports, and children's programming shown between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m. on 10 networks in 2001–2002 were coded). In the top 20 shows among teen viewers, 8 in 10 episodes included some sexual content, including 1 in 10 that depicted or implied sexual intercourse; only 15% of the shows with sexual content included any reference to safer sex issues, such as waiting to have sex, contraceptives, or the consequences of having sex [29].

Even though teens younger than 16 years technically are not supposed to see R-rated movies in theatres without being accompanied by an adult, adolescents are frequent viewers of R-rated films in movie theatres as well as at home via cable channels and videotapes [30]. And, the popular music adolescents listen to most frequently is primarily about love, sex, and relationships [31]. One-half to three-fourths of girls aged 12 to 15 years read magazines such as "Seventeen," "Teen," and "YM." The primary theme of these magazines is how girls can make themselves attractive enough to catch and keep a boy. Although teen girl magazines have steadily increased content about sexual health topics such as contraception, pregnancy, and STDs, a much higher proportion of content focuses on sexual attractiveness and strategy [32].

Very few studies have examined the relationship between exposure to sexual content in the media and adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about sex, but the few that have suggest that teens do learn about sex from the media they attend to [33]. One experimental study, for example, found that adolescents who were exposed to music videos containing more sexual references were more likely to approve of premarital sex than adolescents exposed to randomly selected music videos [34]. In other experimental studies,

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