

Lemonick, M.D. (2000, October 30). [Teens Before Their Time](#). *Time*, 156(18), 64-74.

OVERVIEW

The signs of sexual development in girls are appearing at ever younger ages. Among Caucasian girls today, 1 in every 7 starts to develop breasts or pubic hair by age 8. Among African Americans, for reasons nobody understands, the figure is nearly 1 out of every 3.

As disturbing as that may seem, the most startling fact is that there is no conclusive answer given to why girls are experiencing puberty so young. Scientists, psychologists, and sociologists offer many possible solutions, but none is conclusive.

Today's girls grow up in a society that glorifies the female body. The media has saturated society with air brushed perfection and unblemished obsession. The downside is that it creates pressure to be unattainably perfect. It is devastating to consider that this pressure is even felt by eight-year-old girls. In addition to understanding why these things are happening physically, we must also attempt to understand their developmental and social effects.

This phenomenon is not isolated or abnormal. Dr. Michael Freemark, chief of pediatric endocrinology at Duke University Medical Center, says: " 'Young girls (in the 5- to 10-year-old range) with breasts or pubic hair—we encounter this every day we're in clinic.' "

As a result, "young girls who look like teenagers will be under intense pressure to act like teenagers."

Whitney Roban and Michael Conn, in [Girls Speak Out](#) (a report for the Girl Scouts of America), call this "developmental compression." They go on to explain that as being when " 'the stages of childhood development—cognitive, physical, and emotional—have gotten out of sync.' "

In 1997, Marcia Herman Giddens published a paper in the journal, *Pediatrics*, which provided the results of a major study on 17,000 girls. While the study was primarily on white and African-American girls, the results are noteworthy. She found the stages of puberty reflected in two

stages, each with an individual timetable. First of all, " 'the average age of menarche (first menstruation) had fallen dramatically (from 17 to 13) between the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century—mostly owing to improvements in nutrition.' " Secondly, " 'since the 1960s, average age of first menstruation has basically remained steady at 12.8 years (of age).' "

Here are some proposed reasons:

- PCB's—a chemical once used in the electric power industry, may jump start reproductive development.
- Hormones in meat and milk—used to increase cattle size and production, some think they linger in food and cause problems in the human body.
- Fat cells—Leptin, a protein secreted by fat cells, is involved in the progression of puberty. Recent obesity rate increases in the United States make it a prime suspect.
- DDE—a breakdown product of the pesticide DDT, it mimics hormones that play a key role in the reproductive system, and is in the environment.
- Sexualized messages bombarding kids may trigger the brain to jump start the developmental process.

Whatever the cause—and it may eventually turn out to be a mix of some or all these facts—doctors say early development has become too widespread to be treated as a medical aberration.

The scary result of this is how early physical changes create developmental and social difficulties for the lives of the young girls. Mary Pipher, author of [Reviving Ophelia](#), a best selling book on female adolescence, says that " 'between eight and twelve girls are in the so—called latency period, a period when they turn their backs on boys and bond with other girls.' "

'Cultural pressure alone tends to short circuit the latency period...When a girl's body develops early...she is more likely to leave her group before the developmental work of the latency period is done.'

The best proposed solution to this situation is communication. Communicate with girls about the way their body changes, and act towards them in an age-appropriate manner, are the best ways to deal with this

phenomenon. Pipher says, " `If I had a daughter who had a period at 9, I'd say "This does not mean you're a woman; it means you're a nine-year old having a period, and we are going to proceed accordingly."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- 1.If your daughter began developing breasts and pubic hair at age 8, how would you explain to her what is happening?
- 2.How does this information impact how you look at the way media has influence on children?
- 3.How will you talk with boys about sexuality in light of these discoveries?
- 4.How much influence does media have over your own thoughts and feelings?
- 5.How would you counsel a young girl struggling with her self-image?

IMPLICATIONS

- 1.It must be understood that these changes happen frequently, and are not abnormal.
- 2.Be prepared to counsel young girls struggling with these changes.
- 3.Be aware of the signals that the media sends to young girls.
- 4.Help girls understand themselves, and develop a proper self-image.
- 5.Be willing to talk with girls about the changes they are going through physically.

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