



Early-puberty blues

Research linking early puberty with an increased risk of depression and anxiety in early adulthood provides food for thought for parents of girls in particular, writes Karen Fontaine

Article contributed by Karen Fontaine

Goethe mooted his 'storm and stress' theory of adolescence in the 19th century, and G. Stanley Hall articulated the developmental stage's trials and tribulations to widespread acclaim in his classic text of 1904.

Now, a study by Melbourne University and Orygen Youth Health researchers, using magnetic resonance imaging on the brains of 155 adolescents, has found that those who went through puberty earlier than their peers had an enlarged pituitary gland – the part of the brain responsible for triggering puberty – and were in turn more likely to display symptoms of depression by the time they were young adults.

Lead researcher Dr Sarah Whittle says the study shows that the reason early puberty might trigger depression is not purely psychological – that is, it's not only because of social problems brought about by an earlier developing body. Instead, there may be a biological reason why children – in particular girls – who go through puberty early are more prone to depression later in their teens.

"Given we know that the pituitary gland is involved in responding to stress, parents should be aware that if their adolescent child goes through puberty early, they might be more sensitive to environmental stressors – and that this sensitivity to environmental stress might lead to depression if the adolescent does not adequately deal with the stress," Dr Whittle says.

But for parents confused by what constitutes normal, often moody teenage behaviour – and what may indeed point to depression – Dr Whittle says depression is likely to manifest in adolescents as irritability and it may be associated with disruptive, behavioural problems (particularly in boys), a preoccupation with body image, poor school performance, somatic (body) complaints, as well as sleep and appetite disturbances.

George Patton, professor of adolescent health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, says the message for parents is that "early puberty brings, for girls in particular, new emotional experiences that they must deal with."

Professor Patton adds: "What we think is that kids who have difficulties with emotions and emotional control in childhood – those struggling with anxiety, the kids who tend to have angry temper tantrums, the ones who are tense and not relaxed in social situations, those who are a bit shy, a bit avoidant – they're the indications of a child having emotions that they don't have the strategies to deal with. And that's probably the group of kids for whom early puberty brings particular challenges."

For Professor Patton, himself a father of four children aged between 18 and 26, "it's the little things in life that it's really important for parents and teachers to help pubertal kids with – because if they learn to deal with the little things, they'll probably learn to manage the big things as well".

But, as Professor Patton points out, adolescence is about becoming independent and for this reason many kids, even in situations where they're struggling, are not going to be receptive to parental advice. The key is to be subtle.

"Any advice needs to be tailored for your child, so it's about creating the right moment, and that's not going to be 'let's sit down and talk about how you're feeling' – it's about creating a neutral space," Professor Patton says. "For me and my kids, sometimes it's while we're driving in the car or throwing a basketball – in a neutral place, where there is an opportunity for talking. Sometimes it's useful for parents to tell their own stories or the stories of other people – how they dealt with things – as that's often easier for adolescents to respond to than getting direct advice like 'you should do this'. It's important to remember that the nature of your communication with adolescents should differ than it is with younger children and different than it is with adults."



How to help

For parents wanting to best prepare their children for the challenges of puberty, both now and down the track, Dr Sarah Whittle offers the following advice:

1. Provide a supportive and warm home environment. We know that the way parents interact with their adolescent children (and with other family members) is crucial for the onset of depressive problems during adolescence.
2. Seek help if adolescents display depressive or anxiety symptoms. Symptoms often precede clinical disorder in later adolescence or adulthood.
3. Be aware that adolescents may perceive environmental "events" as more stressful than the average person. Promote adaptive ways of coping (for example, help the adolescent to reinterpret perceived stressors in a positive way).
4. Promote good sleep, eating, and exercise habits.
5. Be aware that early and late pubertal development can be problematic in terms of future mental health problems. Late development may be particularly problematic for boys.

Karen Fontaine is a Sydney-based journalist.