

Boys who mature rapidly have more depression

May 8 2012, By Karene Booker

(Medical Xpress) -- Boys who reach sexual maturity more rapidly than their peers have more problems getting along with others their age and are at a higher risk for depression, according to a Cornell study published in *Developmental Psychology* (47:2).

"The dramatic physical changes of puberty are paralleled by equally dramatic social and emotional changes because boys are transitioning into the new roles and expectations that go along with biological maturity," said lead author Jane Mendle, assistant professor of human development in Cornell's College of [Human Ecology](#). Co-authors include K. Paige Harden, University of Texas at Austin; Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Columbia University; and Julia Graber, University of Florida.

These changes mean big adjustments not only for the individual but also for their family and social network, she said. "In cases of rapid pubertal tempo, boys may progress through puberty at a rate that is faster than the [social environment](#) can feasibly respond."

During adolescence when friendships with peers are becoming increasingly important, it may be especially difficult for rapidly maturing [adolescent boys](#) to maintain [friendships](#) with their peers who aren't developing at a comparable rate, the researchers said. Problems getting along with others their age heighten the risk for [depression](#) and future [mental health problems](#), they said.

Although there have been many studies on the timing of puberty, Mendle

and colleagues were the first to research the effects of its tempo, beginning with a study published in 2010 that found a link between pubertal tempo and depression in boys. There was no association between the tempo of puberty and depression in girls, although the study replicated the well-established finding that an earlier timing of puberty in girls was associated with depression. The study also found that early pubertal timing in boys was associated with increased depression, though the effect of timing in boys was significantly smaller than the effect of tempo.

"These findings were an important step," Mendle said, "since virtually all of the puberty research to date has been conducted on girls. Very little is known about the role puberty plays in emotional health for boys, and virtually no research had been conducted on individual differences in puberty other than timing."

The current study looks at the potential mechanisms for the links they found between pubertal tempo and depression in boys, using a sample of 128 boys between ages 8 and 12 from the New York City metropolitan area. The parents and children in the study completed annual assessments measuring the child's level of physical development, depressive symptoms and quality of peer relationships over the course of four years.

Mendle and colleagues found that while most boys experienced fewer friendship problems over the transition from childhood to early adolescence, the early maturing and the rapidly maturing [boys](#) experienced more friendship problems over time. Those with the greatest increases in friendship problems had the greatest increases in depressive symptoms. Their analysis indicated that the link between maturation and depression was due to the changes in peer relationships.

When asked about the implications of her research for parents and

people working with youth, Mendle replied, "Probably the biggest advice I can give is that [puberty](#) is a highly individualized process, and the way an adolescent appears externally is no indicator of cognitive or emotional maturity."

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Provided by Cornell University

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