Adolescents and the Importance of Parental Supervision

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"It's 10 PM, do you know where your children are?" This ominous public service announcement that was the catch-phrase for broadcaster Tom Gregory on New York City's WNEW-TV in the late 1960s, may sound dated these days, but the importance of the message remains stronger than ever. It has been clear for years that adolescents whose parents monitor and are aware of their activities participate in fewer risky behaviors, including alcohol use. Monitoring is more likely to be effective when combined with an authoritative parenting style. Although the initial parenting-style research was conducted in younger children, authoritative parenting that involves high levels of warmth and support combined with firm limit setting, supervision, and open communication, also promotes healthy development in adolescents. These types of parenting approaches likely serve to enhance family connectedness, which occurs when the adolescent herself perceives and internalizes the warmth, love, and caring expressed by his or her parents. High levels of family connectedness have been shown to protect against a variety of adolescent risk behaviors, including early sexual activity, pregnancy, and tobacco and alcohol use.

The latest study to examine the behavioral impact of parental supervision is in this month's Pediatrics and focuses on a particularly at-risk group: early-maturing girls. Whether children in the United States are entering puberty earlier and earlier is controversial. Although it is clear that the age of puberty is much lower than it was 100 years ago (likely because of improvements in nutrition and public health), whether these trends have continued over the past 50 years is less clear. This lack of clarity is related to our reliance on historical studies involving small homogeneous populations as well as imprecise assessments of puberty. For example, 1 classic study followed 49 girls with pubertal status assessed using photographs. Although contemporary population-based studies have used rigorous methodologies, controversy about pubertal timing persists, particularly regarding the effects of obesity, psychosocial stress, and environmental exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

The behavioral risks of early puberty, however, are not necessarily related to absolute chronological timing; rather, the risks are related to the relative timing of puberty. That is, early puberty in a population is less important than whether an individual child's pubertal status is similar to her peers. Depending on specific definitions and the population under consideration, ~10% to 15% of children may fit into this "early puberty" status. The behavioral risk associated with early puberty in boys seems to be less than for girls, perhaps because early puberty in boys is seen by peers as socially desirable (particularly regarding sports performance), thus leading boys to interact with similar-aged peers regardless of pubertal status. In contrast, girls who begin puberty early tend to associate with older-aged peers who, simply by nature of their higher chronological age, may be more...
likely to be participating in high-risk activities, such as drinking alcohol. Although early-maturing girls appear physically older, their cognitive and emotional maturation often lags behind, making them more vulnerable to pressure to fit in with their older group of friends, and they are less able to make mature assessments of the risks and benefits of their behaviors.

The current study by Dickinson and colleagues\(^5\) examines the interactions of these issues in detail. Using a longitudinal study design, they were able to identify significant impacts of both pubertal timing and parental supervision. Parents of early-maturing girls should take note: higher levels of perceived parental supervision by adolescents can help mitigate the behavioral risks of their early puberty. Additionally, there appears to be a feedback loop regarding parental supervision: as teens continue to increase their drinking, parental supervision decreases, thus increasing teens’ drinking, thus decreasing parental supervision, and so on. Whether this is due to learned helplessness on the part of parents or to an overestimation of their teens’ global maturity is unclear. What is clear, however, is that it is never too late for parents to supervise and know where their children are, whether at 10 PM or any other time of the day or night.

REFERENCES

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