



Pubertal timing and self-reported delinquency among male adolescents

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Pubertal timing has consequences for adolescent adaption, and Moffitt has theorized that puberty is a motivating factor for delinquency. Pubertal timing and self-reported delinquency were examined in a questionnaire-based survey of 14-year-old boys ($n=99$). The questionnaire was completed anonymously, under test conditions, in the school classroom. The results showed that offtime maturers (those early or late) reported a wider range of delinquency, including higher levels of crime and school opposition behaviours. Offtimers also reported a greater frequency of particular delinquent acts over a 12-month period. Overall, the results lend support to the “deviance hypothesis” of pubertal timing. © 1999 The Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of transitions, the most important of which is puberty. Puberty has numerous psychological and social sequelae (Brooks-Gunn and Reiter, 1990) and takes place at a time when peer relations and social comparisons are especially important. A growing body of evidence now suggests that those adolescents who experience puberty earlier or later compared to their age-mates may face various adaptive problems as a consequence (Connolly *et al.*, 1997; Silbereisen and Kracke, 1997).

Although puberty is a universal process which all normal adolescents pass through, there are marked individual differences both in terms of the timing of pubertal processes and the sequence in which these processes take place (Alsaker, 1992). The measurement of pubertal status (i.e. current level of physical development relative to the pubertal process) and pubertal timing (i.e. whether pubertal status is early, on time or relatively late compared to age-mates), however, presents some problems. This is especially the case in relation to boys for whom there is no single salient biological event such as menarche by which pubertal status can be judged. Self-report instruments which ask individuals to report their current status on a number of physical processes (e.g. whether their voice has broken and whether they have developed body hair) have been developed in order to derive a computed pubertal timing measure. Using these instruments the relative timing of pubertal processes among adolescents within a cohort can be assessed. Individuals, however, also have perceptions of the timeliness of their own pubertal development and this can be biased or distorted (Alsaker, 1995). Dubas *et al.* (1991) argue that “... actual and perceived timing are overlapping but distinct timing measures that reflect different biological and psychosocial processes” (p. 580). Thus two individuals with the same scores on a computed pubertal measure might have perceptions of their pubertal timing relative

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to their peer group which differ markedly (Silbereisen and Kracke, 1997). Alsaker (1992) has suggested that perceived pubertal timing may be as, or even more important than actual timing for psychosocial adjustment. Indeed, it has been argued that the perception of pubertal timing rather than actual pubertal timing is associated with problem behaviours (Nottelmann *et al.*, 1987; Dubas *et al.*, 1991). It follows that research into the adaptive problems faced by some adolescents as a consequence of pubertal processes should employ both computed pubertal timing measures based on self-reported physical indicators and perceived timing measures.

There are two principal theories regarding the consequences of reaching puberty offtime compared to the majority of one's age-mates (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1985). The most general is the deviance hypothesis which contends that being offtime, whether early or late, causes difficulties for adolescent adaptation. This disadvantage compared to ontimers is due to the fact that being pubertally offtime relative to the peer group places the adolescent in a socially deviant category of individuals (e.g. Petersen and Crockett, 1985; Alsaker, 1995). Alternatively, the developmental stage termination hypothesis (e.g. Petersen and Taylor, 1980) posits that early maturation rather than late maturation puts the individual at-risk of developmental difficulties. Early maturation is thought to interrupt the developing identity and thrust the individual from childhood to adulthood without consolidating his/her adaptive skills. As a consequence, the early maturer may be ill-prepared to cope with developmental tasks expected of them. Although not suggested by the two theories outlined above, it is also possible that late maturers might exhibit higher levels of externalizing behaviours, compared to their age-mates, as a means of gaining status and prestige within the peer group (see Andersson and Magnusson, 1990; Silbereisen and Kracke, 1993). The deviance hypothesis and the stage termination hypothesis provide divergent predictions about the relationship between pubertal timing and delinquency which is sometimes thought to signal adaptive problems.

Adolescent delinquency has often been explained in terms of psychological pathology, individual deficits, or as a by-product of development processes (e.g. see Emler and Reicher, 1995). During adolescence, rates of antisocial and delinquent behaviour increase rapidly, peaking in mid adolescence and dropping again from the age of 20 years onwards as those who engaged in delinquency during their teens desist from offending (see also Moffitt, 1993). It has been estimated that four-fifths of males have experienced police contact for some minor infringement (Farrington *et al.*, 1986), and this usually occurs during adolescence. Moffitt (see 1993) found that 32% of 15-year-old boys were markedly antisocial, and among 18-year-old males only 7% denied all delinquent activities. The evidence suggests that delinquency is "normal" during mid adolescence (Emler and Reicher, 1995; Pedersen and Wichstrom, 1995) and especially for boys (Moffitt, 1993), but that there is a high degree of individual variation in the extent and range of delinquent behaviour (e.g. Farrington, 1992; Heaven, 1996). Although delinquency among most adolescents is now conceptualized as functional, adaptive and transient (limited to adolescence) rather than mindless, maladaptive and persistent (Moffitt, 1993; see also Compas *et al.*, 1995), there remains a need to explain why some individuals engage in delinquency more than others.

At the beginning of this century Hall (1904) argued that criminal behaviour increased markedly during adolescence as a result of biological drives that had not yet come under the developing individual's control. More recently, Adolescence Limited Delinquency

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