Self-Concept of Precocious Puberty Among Girls and the Link to Risky Behavior: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

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Precocious puberty (PP) is the early onset of puberty, a biologically-driven developmental transition with complex secondary effects on social, emotional and sexual development. Early onset puberty is defined by secondary sex characteristics before age 8, and menarche before age 9. Several studies show that early-onset pubertal development is occurring sooner than ever before in female adolescents. While this is problematic in and of itself, concerns about the impact of precocious puberty on young girls include a possible link to detrimental outcomes, including deviant behavior and self-esteem issues.

**Background**

Girls who mature earliest were at greater risk for a range of psychological, behavioral and social problems in adolescence, including higher rates of conduct problems, substance-related problems and precocious sexuality. Most of the evidence suggest increased risk for adolescent depression, anxiety and general emotional distress. They were also more likely to be depressed in young adulthood and were more likely to have had more sexual partners.

**Methods**

An integrative literature review was conducted to determine and analyze previous research studies on this topic. Research centered on self-concept in girls with precocious puberty and the psychosocial and behavioral aspects of girls with early onset puberty was reviewed. Nine studies focused on associations between early pubertal timing and its effects on the self-concept and risky behaviors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1865</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2015</th>
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<td>17 years</td>
<td>12.6 years</td>
<td>12.5 years</td>
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*Trends in Age of Menarche*

**Findings**

Girls who mature earliest were at greater risk for a range of psychological, behavioral and social problems in adolescence, including higher rates of conduct problems, substance-related problems and precocious sexuality. Most of the evidence suggest increased risk for adolescent depression, anxiety and general emotional distress. They were also more likely to be depressed in young adulthood and were more likely to have had more sexual partners.

**Self-Concept and Risky Behavior**

- Girls whose sexual development began before age 7 visually compared their own burgeoning physical body with others, and felt different, and this feeling came to be internalized.
- PP was experienced as a loss of childhood, giving way to psychological vulnerabilities and negative emotional impact. Patients with PP are more prone to distorted self-concept and perception about their body image and this contributed to having depression
- Early menarche had a positive association with depressive symptoms, and these girls also had been found to experience higher rates of lifetime history of major depressive disorder in young adulthood.
- Girls with PP were more vulnerable to sexual attention and unwanted sexual experience.
- Pubertal timing was significantly related to age, intoxication frequency, and delinquency by age 11.
- Age at first sexual intercourse and age at first substance use significantly mediated the relation between age at menarche and age at first pregnancy.
- Early maturing girls displayed higher levels of criminality, substance abuse issues, social isolation, early sexual behavior, multiple sexual partners and psychiatric problems

**Conclusion**

Precocious puberty has many physical, psychosocial and emotional implications on adolescent girls. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between precocious puberty and to clarify its effects on self-concept and risk-taking behavior.

**Nursing Implications**

Nurses play a vital role in understanding the developmental processes of puberty in order to identify the risks of early puberty and its potential adverse effects on the adolescent girl.