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Identity in Early Adolescence

- How do the changes of puberty affect identity in early adolescence?
- Does a society's lack of formal puberty rites help or hinder early adolescent identity development?
- Do parents of pubertal adolescents change their ways of relating to their children?

The principal at school recently talked to us about options when we get to high school next year and about how important our decisions are for the courses ahead. He said we should be basing our choices for next year on what we wanted to do when we left school. This all jolted me into thinking about how I'm growing up and really gave me a sense of panic.

—John, 13-year-old schoolboy

Will my body ever start changing? Will my body ever stop changing? Is this normal? Am I normal? Do my friends really like me? Can I ever be in with Dan's crowd? Could boys really like me? Will I ever kiss a girl? What will I look like when I'm older? Why am I suddenly interested in

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girls? And why are the girls all taller (and seem stronger) than me? What am I going to do when I grow up? How can I ask Mom if I can shave my legs? When can I stop going to mass? Why is God punishing me?

The responses in the previous paragraph were some of the key identity-related questions that emerged when I recently polled a class of 12- to 13-year-old adolescents regarding the kinds of questions they think most about when they consider who they are. Themes of changing biology pervaded their responses, followed by issues of wanting to fit in, to be normal, and to be liked by significant others. Occasionally, concerns for the future and one's work roles and relationships in it also emerged. Sometimes, just sometimes, came more existential questions about the existence of God and the meaning of life and death.

Themes of biology, individual psychology, and social surroundings, the three components Erikson (1968) describes as contributing to one's overall sense of ego identity, can be clearly seen in previous passages. Although many of these young citizens will be emerging from the Eriksonian stage of Industry Versus Inferiority, we can hope with some sense of their own competencies, interests, and abilities, the task of identity formation has yet to begin. I turn now to the world of early adolescence, to offer an overview of some normative biological and psychological structures emerging during this time, as well as some of the key societal demands experienced by young adolescents in many Western, technologically advanced nations. I define early adolescence here in terms of both chronological age and psychosocial tasks—the time from 11 to 14 years, during which the young person is likely to experience many new events. The biological changes of puberty, the move to more complex ways of thinking, redefining the self within the family, developing new forms of relationships with peers, and adapting to the more complex demands of a junior high or middle school system—all raise important identity considerations for the young adolescent.

Intersection of Biological, Psychological, and Societal Influences on Identity in Early Adolescence: An Overview

Certainly some of the most significant identity issues of early adolescence are associated with the biological changes of puberty and their reverberations in psychological processes and societal responses. The word *puberty* (derived from the Latin *pubescere*, meaning to grow hairy) refers to the complex sequence of biological changes whereby one becomes a sexually mature adult, capable of reproducing and assuming the height, weight, body contours, and

increased strength and tolerance for the physical activity of adulthood (Bogin, 1994). All adolescents undergo puberty (except those with endocrine disorders that prevent puberty), although pubertal timing can vary greatly from one individual to another (Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

In appreciating the enormity of change emerging within the biological, psychological, and societal contexts overviewed in the following paragraphs, it is equally important to appreciate the interaction among these spheres and the identity-related readjustments such interactions among systems bring. Young adolescents, for example, are able to reflect upon and attribute meaning to their biological metamorphoses; furthermore, they also receive many identity-related cultural messages about the implications that having an adult anatomy now holds (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1990). The identity-related difficulties of undergoing multiple transitions within different arenas of development at the same time must also be appreciated when examining the biological, psychological, and social/cultural dimensions of identity separately. For example, experiencing a changing biology at the very time one is likely to be moving from an elementary to a junior high or middle school system may only compound identity readjustments for some.

In the overview of changes in the biology of puberty that follows, the purpose will be to present key features of change affecting identity during early adolescence rather than giving a detailed review of endocrinological activity associated with puberty. Similarly, key psychological issues and societal responses affecting most directly one's sense of identity will be presented, rather than attempting to delineate all major cognitive, social, and psychological features of early adolescent development.

Biological Processes

When does puberty begin? Puberty is not a single process or stage with specific beginning and end points, but rather a continuum of changes that evolve gradually over the course of adolescence. This slow process eventually results in mature reproductive capacity, the development of secondary sex characteristics, and the assumption of adult height and body proportions. Archibald and colleagues (2003) point to five general areas of physical functioning that change over the course of five or six years during pubertal development: (1) the "growth spurt" (acceleration followed by deceleration of skeletal growth); (2) increases in and redistribution of body fat and muscle tissue; (3) changes in circulatory and respiratory systems, bringing newfound abilities in strength and endurance; (4) maturation of secondary sexual characteristics and reproductive organs; and (5) changes in hormonal and endocrine systems, which regulate the timing of pubertal events. These processes are all

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impacted by genetic factors, nutrition and other environment agents, as well as hormonal factors (Archibald et al., 2003).

The phenomenon of accelerated physical development during only some life stages is quite unusual among mammals. “Most mammals progress from infancy to adulthood seamlessly, without any intervening stages, and while their growth rates are in decline” (Bogin, 1994, p. 31). The enormous physical transformations of early adolescence do hold many psychological reverberations, including the need to integrate such changes into a new sense of self and identity, of who one is, how one relates to, and fits into surrounding social contexts. Not surprising, heightened emotionality with more extreme mood swings (moodiness) do seem to be associated with pubertal transitions among young adolescents (Larson & Richards, 1994). In addition, important changes take place in regions of the brain during early adolescence that process emotions (Spear, 2000). The impact of these biological, behavioral, and other identity-related changes will be more fully discussed in the following section.

Puberty actually begins long before any visible signs of biological change occur. For young girls, this process can begin as early as age 7, and by age 9 and a half for boys. The endocrine system regulates levels of hormones circulating in the body. This system receives messages from the central nervous system (primarily the brain) and operates like a thermostat in controlling the secretion of hormones circulating within the body. Between infancy and puberty, parts of the brain (specifically the pituitary gland, which controls hormone levels generally, and the hypothalamus, which controls the pituitary gland) have acted to inhibit levels of sex hormones circulating in the body. However, about a year before any visible signs of puberty appear, there is a change in the regulating system so that levels of sex hormones circulating within the body rise (Archibald et al., 2003). It is this rise in the circulation of sex hormones that induces the many biological changes of puberty. The reasons for this rise are not well understood, although increasing research evidence suggests that increasing levels of a protein produced by fat cells called “leptin” are associated with pubertal events (Apter & Hermanson, 2002). Earlier research suggested that individuals must reach a “critical weight” and body mass before puberty can occur, and the accumulation of leptin from fat cells is consistent with these earlier observations. However, to date there is no evidence that increases in leptin levels actually *cause* pubertal changes (Archibald et al., 2003). Stress, illness, nutrition, and excessive exercise and excessive thinness can all influence pubertal timing.

The two primary classes of sex hormones are called androgens and estrogens. Testosterone is an androgen that plays a key role in male pubertal development, whereas estradiol is an estrogen that plays a key role in female

pubertal development. As testosterone levels increase at puberty for boys, a number of biological changes take place. There is an enlargement in the size of the testicles and penis, accompanied by the first appearance of pubic hair, minor voice changes ensue, followed by the first ejaculation, the peak velocity in the height spurt, more noticeable voice changes, and finally the growth of facial and body hair. As levels of estradiol as well as some androgens rise for girls, breast development occurs first, followed by growth of pubic hair, broadening of the hips, the growth spurt, and the onset of menstruation (Rabin & Chrousos, 1991). Noteworthy is the fact that girls experience their growth spurt before becoming capable of reproduction, although for boys the reverse is true. Additionally, the onset of the skeletal growth spurt occurs about two years earlier for girls than boys (Archibald et al., 2003).

This ordering of pubertal events for the two genders has been viewed from an adaptive, evolutionary perspective, which may hold important identity implications. Boys become fertile long before their bodies assume full adult stature and proportions, generally around 13.4 years of age (Muller, Nielsen, & Skakkebaek, 1989). However, very few teenage men become fathers. In the United States, several surveys have reported that about two-thirds of sexually active school-age mothers have partners who were at least 20 years old (Miller, Bayley, Christensen, Leavitt, & Coyl, 2003). Bogin (1994) notes that one reason for the lag between sperm production and fatherhood may be that the sperm of young adolescent males may not have the motility or endurance to reach an egg cell in the female's fallopian tubes. However, a more probable reason, Bogin believes, is that the average 13.4-year-old boy is likely to be only in the beginning of his growth spurt and not yet physically mature in appearance (or psychosocially ready for fatherhood) and hence not perceived as an adult by any potential mates. Bogin (1994) describes the evolutionary value of this human pattern of early adolescent pubertal development:

In summary, the argument for the evolution and value of human adolescence is this. Girls best learn their adult social roles while they are infertile but perceived by adults as mature, whereas boys best learn their adult social roles while they are sexually mature but not yet perceived as such by adults. Without the adolescent growth spurt this unique style of social and cultural learning could not occur. (p. 33)

Although the gender-specific sequence of biological change is uniform, the timing and tempo of pubertal change varies enormously from one individual to the next (and until recently, from one generation to the next). Within any group of early adolescents, there are likely to be some who have

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completed the entire sequence of pubertal changes, whereas others have not yet begun any visible transformations. Classroom photographs of those in the 11- to 14-year-old age range are likely to present a vivid visual illustration of the enormous variation in individual developmental timetables of puberty. Recent research comparing identical twins (genetically identical) and adolescents who are not identical twins indicates the timing and tempo of pubertal maturation to be largely inherited (Dick, Rose, Pulkkinen, & Kapiro, 2001). Within the United States, research has suggested strong ethnic differences in both the timing and rate of pubertal maturation that is not a result of socioeconomic status, weight, or residential area. For example, African American girls mature earlier than Mexican American females, who, in turn, mature earlier than white American girls (Chumlea et al., 2003). There are many identity related issues involving being early, “on time,” or late in one’s biological development at puberty relative to one’s peers, and these issues are discussed in some detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Psychological Issues

My sisters are real feminine. They help me a lot. They’re a lot more feminine than I am but that’s because I’m younger than they are.

—13-year-old schoolgirl (Archer, 1985, p. 92)

With the advent of puberty and the transition into early adolescence, childhood “proper” comes to an end. Erikson (1963) has stressed that with this new phase of adolescence, all the “sameness and continuity” of earlier years are brought into question. Both the rapidity of bodily growth as well as increasing genital maturity bring new questions of identity at the time of early adolescence. Crises of earlier years are raised again for some, and Erikson has stressed the need for a moratorium period to integrate identity elements from past childhood stages into the present. The demand for an enlarged sense of identity to encompass the physiological changes of puberty is also encouraged by new demands of society.

Erikson does not detail identity-related tasks specific to *early* adolescence, but rather outlines identity-related tasks of adolescence more generally—many of which are more relevant to mid- and late adolescence. In fact, Kegan (1982) has drawn attention to this theoretical gap in Erikson’s writings:

I believe Erikson misses a stage between “industry” and “identity.” His identity stage—with its orientation to the self alone, “Who am I?” time, achievement, ideology, self-certainty, and so on—captures something of late adolescence or early adulthood, but it does not really address the period of

connection, inclusion, and highly invested mutuality which comes between the more independence-oriented periods of latency and [late adolescent] identity formation. (p. 87)

Thus, Kegan describes an Affiliation Versus Abandonment stage, additional to Erikson's eight-stage sequence of psychosocial tasks, as representing the key psychosocial conflict of early adolescence. From the introductory statements by 12- to 13-year-olds that appeared at the beginning of this chapter, concern with being liked and accepted by the group was an important identity issue for many.

Identity concerns with affiliation and abandonment during early adolescence have also appeared in many studies of relationships during adolescence (see Kegan, 1982, 1994, for examples). In 1983, I approached groups of 6th-, 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students in both New Zealand and the United States (California) to compare attitudes toward self and others (Kroger, 1983). Students completed sentence stems dealing with many relationship items, including feelings toward friendships in small and large groups. Toward large groups, at least two-thirds of youths from all age levels in the United States and New Zealand expressed little tolerance for a peer who was not part of the crowd.

- **11-year-old girl:** If someone is not part of the group, they pose a threat to our privacy.
- **11-year-old boy:** If someone is not part of the group, they are probably really thick.
- **13-year-old boy:** If someone is not part of the group, they are outcasts and no one likes them.
- **16-year-old boy:** If someone is not part of the group, they must be highly and totally boring people to be with. (Kroger, 1983, p. 3)

Thus, themes of affiliation and abandonment, of being accepted or left behind by others, appear to be prevalent identity concerns among many early adolescents. It may be that the need for affiliation, completion, being recognized and supported by the family and, later, the group is essential to the process of one's identity formation.

Marcia (1983) has built further upon Erikson's writings and discussed some identity-related psychosocial tasks specific to early adolescence. He has noted that early adolescence is a period of disorganization—and that such disorganization characterizes early adolescence whether it is navigated smoothly or not. Marcia has proceeded to outline key identity-defining tasks of early adolescence, including the necessity of beginning to “free” oneself from the dictates of the “internalized parent.” This internalized parent refers to prohibitions and aspirations from one's parents, which have been taken

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into the self through childhood and upon which one has built a sense of self-esteem. This internalization of parental standards was adaptive in childhood, for it enabled the child to function more autonomously without the parent needing to be physically present. However, the continued, unreflective, and rigid adherence to standards from internalized parents is not adaptive to the many demands presented by adult life, at least in Western, technologically advanced societies. Other writers such as Blos (1979) and Levine, Green, and Millon (1986) have also pointed to the early adolescent task of beginning to disengage from the internalized parents and starting to seek extrafamilial outlets for emotional and sexual energy, until now bound up within the family triangle. Certainly research on adolescents and their families has pointed to increased levels of conflict at the time of puberty and physical maturation, likely to reflect growing desires for autonomy on the part of young adolescents (e.g., Collins & Laursen, 2004).

Thus, there are many necessary but formidable psychological tasks for the early adolescent. Finding one's way in the transition to a new school system and adjusting to new teachers, peers, and organizational systems more generally present important challenges. Beginning to differentiate one's own interests, needs, attitudes, and attributions from those of one's parents and significant others is an initial undertaking. Integrating newfound bodily changes and sexual desires into a sense of personal identity, different from but related to all previous identifications, is a further challenge. And beginning to channel these new capacities into socially available outlets using culturally appropriate forms of expression is yet a further demand required of young adolescents across many cultural contexts.

Societal Influences

When does adolescence begin? Transitions into both adolescence and adulthood are often marked in different ways around the world. In many preindustrial societies, puberty rites are often a hallmark of early adolescence. Schlegel and Barry (1980) have defined such rites of passage "as some social recognition, in ceremonial form, of the transition from childhood into either adolescence or full adulthood" (p. 698). Puberty rites generally involve a separation of the adolescent from society, preparation or instruction from an elder, a transition in status, and a welcoming back into society with acknowledgment of the adolescent's changed status (Delaney, 1996). Oftentimes, puberty ceremonies occur for groups of people, and strong bonds may occur as a result of this special ceremonial time together.

Different puberty rituals often exist for the two genders. Rites of passage for males often include circumcision, tests of physical endurance, tattooing,

and/or segregation in bachelor huts. These ceremonies generally occur when the youth is considered strong enough to undergo the elaborate proceedings. For females, such puberty rites generally occur at the time of the first menstrual period and include such rituals as cleansing, beautification, and/or segregation in menstrual huts (Muuss, 1980). In Navajo communities today, a pubertal ceremony for adolescent girls called the Kinaaldá is celebrated at the time of puberty (Markstrom, in press). Rituals such as the Kinaaldá ceremony clearly delineate a change in status from child to adolescent or adult. Such rites of passage commonly hold three elements: a phase that separates individuals from their previous social roles/identities, takes them through a time of transition to a new identity, and incorporates them into a new role or status. Markstrom and Iborra (2003) illustrate how the ritual aspects of this rite of passage are critical to the identity formation of young Navajo girls. Rites of passage, in general, inform not only adolescents themselves of varied social expectations that will accompany their new status but also the community of a change that is now important for them to recognize in their interactions with the novice adult.

Most Western, technologically advanced nations today, however, have no such clear delineation between childhood and adolescent or adult status. Rather, a period of “dual ambivalence” occurs—ambivalence on the part of both society and adolescents themselves regarding role expectations for youth. In the United States, various states grant adult rights and responsibilities to adolescents at somewhat different ages, but such rights invariably are granted over a number of years. One can commonly obtain a driver’s license at age 15 or 16, at the same time one can legally be permitted to work and leave school. However, it is not until age 18 that one can vote and not until age 21 in many states that one is permitted to purchase alcoholic beverages. Additionally, various institutions of society enable participation in various adult activities less formally but also over a long period of time. Thus, early adolescents often take part in leisure and consumer activities (witness the advertising aimed at early adolescents in any teen magazine), while participation in various forms of political and community activities is generally not encouraged until mid- to late adolescence; social support for moving away from home and entering occupational training is generally not given until mid- to late adolescence (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995). Some adolescent observers have argued that where no clear-cut puberty rites are provided by a culture to delineate adult status, adolescents, themselves, will devise various rituals and “trials by ordeal” with functions similar to those of the puberty rituals in many preindustrial societies. And, indeed, the “hazing,” tattooing, dieting, dress, and beautification rituals found within many contemporary adolescent peer groups do show strong similarities to puberty rituals of many preindustrial societies.

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Elkind (1981) has argued that clear social markers providing societal recognition of a young person's developmental level are essential to adequately recognize the special needs of adolescents. And, no doubt, many living in contemporary Western cultures have longed for some kind of social clarity that differentiates childhood from adolescent or adult status. Marcia (1983), however, has argued that the contemporary lack of societal or culturally sanctioned rites of passage are, in fact, the ideal conditions for ego growth and identity development among adolescents: "By not imposing a particular organization on a temporarily disorganized ego at early adolescence, we make self-definition possible. . . . [However] all of us are aware that our unstructured form of adolescence with its attendant chaos and anxiety has its casualties" (p. 218). Piaget (1972) has indicated that a certain degree of lack of structure, ambiguity, conflict, and provision for hands-on exploratory experience within the child's learning environment is necessary to stimulate cognitive growth and development. Similar conditions are likely to facilitate the process of identity development among young adolescents, if social support during this process is forthcoming.

For young adolescents, shifting expectations within and across various agencies of socialization are taking place. Families, friends, schools, providers of odd jobs, places of worship, and facilities for recreation and community service generally do have different informal expectations of early adolescents than they do of children. Tolerance for the formerly egocentric modes of reasoning and behaving during childhood gradually are replaced with societal expectations of cooperation and coordinating one's viewpoints and activities with those of other people. Special privileges are granted to adolescents, such as being able to drive a car, that are not granted to children. In some countries, such as New Zealand, a special judicial system operates for young offenders. Within such systems of juvenile justice, efforts are often made to avoid providing a label, such as "delinquent" or "criminal," that youths in search of an identity might be only too willing to accept and fulfill. The special status of adolescence thus brings numerous changes in responses from a variety of social institutions, and entry into adolescence is most commonly considered a time of instruction for future adult rights and responsibilities.

Societal responses to an adolescent's physical changes during puberty provide critical input to identity development during early adolescence. In a recent Norwegian study, some 55 percent of girls and 60 percent of boys reported that other people had started to behave differently toward them since their bodies had begun changing; these perceptions were not correlated with the actual degree of their pubertal change (Alsaker, 1995). Most (about 85 percent) of these young adolescents said that they liked this

behavior change on the part of others, whereas the remaining 15 percent of the sample said they found others' responses difficult to handle. A more detailed discussion of the role of societal response to pubertal change and its impact on identity development appears in the following section.

Socialization factors such as relational and institutional responses to early adolescent characteristics and behaviors are implicated in many hormone-behavioral associations affecting identity as well. Brooks-Gunn and Warren (1989) point out that, in fact, social factors may account for more variance than do the physiological processes themselves. Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn (1990) suggest that pubertal changes and societal events may act in concert. If a social change occurs at a certain point during puberty, its impact may have a stronger effect than if the social change had occurred either before pubertal changes had begun or after they had been completed. The researchers give the example of a social event such as a family move, which might occur at the same time as a hormonal change that may increase a pubertal adolescent's excitability or arousability. The event itself may elicit a stronger impact on adolescent identity development due to the young person's heightened state of physiological arousal than the event would have elicited had it occurred before or following pubertal change. Thus, institutional and relational responses to an early adolescent's changing biology, appearance, psychological needs, and cognitive capacities play a vital role in helping answer the questions of who I am and what I can become in the rapidly approaching world of adult life.

Section Summary and Implications

Pubertal processes produce a predictable sequence of changes for both genders, which may have an adaptive evolutionary value. There is evidence that the timing and tempo of puberty are genetically controlled, though subject also to influences of nutrition, health status, and additional environmental factors.

Erikson does not detail psychological identity-related tasks specific to early adolescence, though themes of Affiliation Versus Abandonment and intrapsychic disorganization have dominated research and theory on early adolescent identity concerns.

Most Western nations have no clear delineation of status between childhood and adult status; whereas Elkind believes it is essential for societies to provide clear social markers in recognition of early adolescence, Marcia believes lack of clear social guidelines actually facilitates identity development.

Coming to Terms With Pubertal Change: Identity Implications

Because I was very tall at 13 and my last name was Green, all the boys called me things like “Green bean” or “String bean.” Even now that I’m married, I still am so very self-conscious of my height around men.

—Young adult woman, looking back

From the sometimes bewildering array of changes in physical features and appearance that puberty brings, how do adolescents come to terms with their changed physiques? Furthermore, how do such changes affect their senses of identity—of who they are as gendered people, of how they will relate to others, and of what they can do and be in the world?

Pubertal adolescents are very preoccupied with their physical changes and appearances (McCabe & Riccardelli, 2003). Research has also shown that biological changes of puberty generally are viewed positively by boys and negatively by girls (Dorn, Crockett, & Petersen, 1988; Phillips, 2003). For boys, there are the advantages of increased size, increased muscle mass, and physical strength, whereas girls see only increases in their body weight and in fat deposits at the time of puberty. And such weight and fat increases bring greater body dissatisfaction, probably because of conflict with the North American and European cultural ideals of slimness and an elongated body shape (Petersen & Leffert, 1995; Phillips, 2003). Studies of pubertal changes have examined the psychological impact of the height and weight spurts and the development of secondary sexual characteristics for both boys and girls.

Unfortunately, little is known about the experience of pubertal changes other than the menarche for girls. Brooks-Gunn and Warren (1988) undertook research to learn more about the psychological impact of very early noticeable signs of puberty for young girls, because menarche is a relatively late event in the pubertal sequence of changes among girls. They predicted that the onset of breast development (an event publicly noticeable) but not pubic hair growth (an event not publicly noticeable) would be associated with a better body image, more positive peer relationships, greater salience of reproductively linked sex roles, and superior adjustment, as measured by self-report inventories. These predictions were generally supported. The study also found that height, relative to classmates, was linked to superior adjustment and career importance. Thus, physical changes that can be observed by others seem to have an impact on one’s sense of self more than

other forms of pubertal changes. The authors conclude by speculating that breast development, but not pubic hair development, is imbued with cultural meaning and that such information influences how pubertal girls alter their own sense of identity at this time.

From the previous discussion, however, one should not conclude that unobservable physical changes of puberty do not alter one's self-definition at puberty. Menarche, an event unobservable by others, has attracted much research attention in terms of its associations with changing early adolescent self-definitions. It may be that pubertal events laden with cultural meaning, rather than public observability, have the most impact on identity redefinition among young adolescent girls.

How does menarche affect identity for young girls in early adolescence? Menarche, and its associations with changing self-definition for young adolescent girls, has received much research attention. In one investigation, Brooks-Gunn and Ruble (1982) found a wide range in responses of girls to menarche; however, most responses were quite mild. In fact, menarche was frequently described as a little exciting, a little upsetting, or a little surprising. In interviews with a subsample of their larger investigation, Brooks-Gunn and Ruble obtained more detailed information about the girls' experience of menarche. The most frequently occurring response was positive—that menarche was a signal of their maturity. Other positive responses were ones associated with their new reproductive capacities and being more like their friends. Negative responses were centered on the hassles (of having to carry around supplies) and physical discomfort. Brooks-Gunn and her associates also found that the specific information a young woman receives about menarche from parents, teachers, friends, and health advisors all affect the way in which menarche is experienced (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1993). Another critical factor is the timing of menarche in the life of the adolescent girl, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Do specific pubertal events affect identity for young boys in early adolescence? Studies addressing the effects of specific pubertal changes among boys have been infrequent. One event that has received some attention is boys' reactions to their first ejaculation, which did not appear to be associated with undue anxiety or embarrassment (Gaddis & Brooks-Gunn, 1985). Boys, however, did not discuss their first ejaculation with friends or their parents, unlike girls, who tended to discuss their first menstrual cycle with parents and friends immediately after the event had occurred, the researchers found. Much more information is needed on the impact of specific pubertal events for boys, such as the voice change and increases in acne and body hair, to understand the identity-related significance of puberty for them.

Puberty holds important implications for body image and self-esteem, and much research has examined the relationship between self-esteem, physical attractiveness, and pubertal change. The vast majority of Caucasian adolescent girls are dissatisfied with their bodies and would like to be thinner (Gardner, Friedman, & Jackson, 1999). This body dissatisfaction and feeling overweight spills over into dissatisfaction with one's self and lowered self-esteem. From a large, longitudinal study of over 600 adolescents in the United States, Simmons and Blyth (1987) found consistent gender differences in both body image and self-esteem among early and mid-adolescents. Girls were consistently less satisfied with their weight and body type than boys, from Grade 6 through Grade 10. At each grade level, girls had lower senses of self-esteem than boys and a greater degree of self-consciousness. In general, boys had a more positive body image than girls. Other research indicates girls tend to be most satisfied with their bodies when they perceived themselves to be slightly underweight, whereas boys felt best about their bodies when they were of average weight and worst about their bodies when they were under- or overweight (Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Gardner, Friedman, & Jackson, 1999).

However, a growing number of studies have pointed to some important ethnic differences in terms of how early adolescent girls view their body weights (e.g., Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Ritenbaugh, 1995; Rosenblum & Lewis, 1999). Whereas 9 out of 10 junior high and high school Caucasian girls were found to be dissatisfied with their body weight, 7 out of 10 African American girls were satisfied (Parker et al., 1995). Furthermore from this study, the majority of African American girls sampled felt it was better to be a little overweight than underweight—a marked contrast to statements by the Caucasian American girls.

Are pubertal changes associated with personality changes during early adolescence? In Spain, Canals, Vigil-Colet, Chico, and Marti-Henneberg (2005) studied some 578 school children aged 10 and 11 years old at one-year intervals over five years. They obtained medical examination reports (rather than self-report) measures of pubertal development, alongside measures of personality from the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire. Results showed that few dimensions of personality were stable for either boys or girls over the course of early adolescence. Age 13 was critical for an increase in depressive disorders among girls. Furthermore, with increasing age, there was an increase in extroversion, sincerity, antisocial behavior, and psychotic behavior for both genders. However, there was no effect of stage of pubertal development on personality dimensions. The question of why personality factors during early adolescence are so unstable is in need of further study. Biological factors other than puberty and particular social factors may be responsible.

Do pubertal changes affect one's social relationships? Bulcroft (1991) examined the affects of physical changes associated with puberty on peer and parent relationships for early and middle adolescent Caucasian boys. As anticipated, greater physical maturity among the boys was associated with increased peer status and greater independence from parents. Furthermore, the effects of pubertal changes on these relationships appear stronger in early adolescence. When parents did not grant greater independence to physically changing adolescents, the parent-adolescent relationship was negatively affected. This research also suggested that parents alter their expectations for teenagers and give greater independence to their offspring on the basis of physical appearance alone.

Additionally, several studies have pointed to a "distancing" effect of puberty on parent-adolescent relationships among those living in two-parent families. As puberty progresses for both boys and girls, conflicts intensify and reported distancing occurs, particularly between the adolescent and his or her mother (e.g., Ogletree, Jones, & Coyl, 2002; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1990). In addition to increases in conflict (complaining and expressions of anger), there has been a decrease in positive exchanges (such as support, smiling, laughter) (e.g., Holmbeck & Hill, 1991). Allison and Schultz (2004) also found considerable variation in both the frequency and intensity of conflicts across specific issues; conflicts between mothers and daughters often dealt with issues involved in traditional gender role stereotypes. To date, however, the reason for the increase in conflict is not generally well understood. It may result from hormonal changes of puberty among adolescents, change in their physical appearances, role strains in desire for greater autonomy, or a combination of all of these factors.

Timing of Pubertal Change: Identity Implications

I can remember being a bridesmaid in my sister's wedding. I was overly endowed even then, at age 14. My own sense of joy and beauty on that day, however, came to a screeching halt when I had to dance in front of everyone with the groom's 14-year-old brother, half my size and twice my awkwardness. The cruelty of it all!

—Late adolescent woman, looking back

The timing of pubertal change holds important implications for early adolescent identity development. Being an early, on time, or late maturer in relation to one's peers affects one's sense of self-esteem and identity. Brooks-Gunn

(1991) has found that most timing effects seem to be related to early, not late physical maturation. Among boys, early maturers seem to hold a more positive body image, whereas among girls, the late maturers feel more positive regarding their bodies and more physically attractive than early maturers. (Early maturing girls tend to be shorter and heavier than their late maturing counterparts, and because thinness is generally a socially desired state by girls throughout adolescence, this phenomenon may explain the higher self-esteem found among late maturing girls.) Alsaker (1990) tested a Norwegian sample of adolescent girls to see whether body weight might actually explain the relationship between perceived early maturation and low self-esteem; with the exception of the youngest sixth-grade subjects, timing effects could largely be explained by being overweight relative to population norms. In addition, a higher incidence of eating-related problems has been found among early maturing girls when compared with their on time and late maturing counterparts (Brooks-Gunn, 1991).

Early maturing girls may be particularly vulnerable to a range of adjustment difficulties. For example, early pubertal maturation has been linked with depression, not only during adolescence, but across the life span among Caucasian Americans (Archibald et al., 2003). However, this pubertal timing effect was not found among African American or Hispanic girls. Stattin and Magnusson (1990) found that it was early maturing girls in Sweden who associated with older boys and who were most likely to engage in problem behaviors such as early sexual behaviors and pregnancy following early pubertal development. Reasons that early maturing girls have an especially difficult time are not entirely clear, however. Context may actually determine whether or not being an “off-time” maturer is important (Archibald et al., 2003).

Is there a direct relationship between pubertal timing and an identity crisis? Berzonsky and Lombardo (1983) directly investigated the relationship between pubertal maturation timing and identity development. The researchers used retrospective self-report data from late adolescent men and women to study whether or not there was any relationship between personal decision-making identity crises and pubertal timing. They reasoned that early maturing boys and late maturing girls were less apt to have experienced a personal decision-making identity crisis than late maturing males and early maturing girls. (From previous research, early maturing males tend to be more successful athletically and socially and more apt to possess the socially desirable mesomorphic physiques, whereas late maturing females are more apt to possess the socially desired ectomorphic body types and have a higher sense of self-esteem.) The study found that those males who had experienced an identity crisis did, in fact, report a relatively late pubertal onset, whereas

females who had experienced an identity crisis reported an earlier pubertal onset compared with noncrisis peers. Although self-report data must be viewed cautiously, those who fit the prevailing socially desirable body build norms (i.e., the early maturing males and late maturing females) may be less likely to have experienced a personal identity decision-making crisis than those who do not have such socially desirable physical characteristics. The experience of being “different” in relation to one’s peers may precipitate a crisis of personal identity.

Identity and Sexuality

Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love’s serenity and lust’s darkness. Confusion of the two things boiled within me.

—Augustinus, *Confessions* (1991, p. 24)

A key developmental task of early adolescence is beginning to come to terms with a new sense of sexual identity, which the biological changes of puberty bring (Erikson, 1968). Although recognition of oneself as a boy or girl has occurred well before the time a child reaches the preschool years, it is during the years of adolescence that newfound feelings of sexual interest and awareness must be integrated into one’s sense of identity. Researchers studying gender differences in personality have differentiated the following three elements of one’s sexual self:

1. *Sexual (or gender) identity*, or one’s feelings of being male, female, androgynous, or undifferentiated
2. *Sex (or gender) role*, or the way in which one expresses one’s biological gender in society according to social norms and stereotypes
3. *Sexual orientation*, or the object(s) of one’s sexual interest; one may be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or asexual in one’s sexual orientation

Sexual identity has generally been differentiated from sexual behavior, as sexual behavior has been shown to be more varied than sexual identity (Petersen et al., 1995).

Unfortunately, little research has addressed developmental changes in one’s sense of sexual identity in the transition through puberty. Buzwell and Rosenthal (1996) noted that this lack of research is surprising, given the critical

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importance of sexuality in adolescent identity development. Indeed, even more recently, Brooks-Gunn and Graber (1999) argued that physical changes during adolescence, in combination with their meanings to adolescents themselves, their girlfriends and boyfriends, their parents, teachers, and societies in general become incorporated into their identities. However, the emergence of an adult body is commonly not addressed in discussions of adolescent identity. At the same time, identity has generally been left out of discussions of adolescent sexuality.

Although current researchers have recently begun examining issues of sexual identity from the perspective of sexual minority adolescents (e.g., gay and lesbian youths; see, for example, Savin-Williams, 2001), little is known about the development of a sense of sexual identity among adolescents more generally.

How do early adolescents change in their awareness of gender roles? A number of studies have explored changes in early adolescent awarenesses of gender roles. Hill and Lynch (1983) first elaborated the gender intensification hypothesis—that early adolescence is the time when gender roles become increasingly differentiated for boys and girls. Galambos, Almeida, and Petersen (1990) undertook a longitudinal investigation of young adolescent girls and boys (mean age 11.6 years, sixth grade) to see if young adolescents would experience an intensification of gender-related expectations, with increased socialization pressures to conform to traditional male and female sex roles. Masculine roles have traditionally stressed instrumental behaviors, whereas feminine roles have emphasized expressive behaviors. The researchers argued that puberty, with the physiological changes it brings, may act as a signal to parents, teachers, and peers that the adolescent is approaching adulthood and should begin to act in ways that society regards as appropriate for male and female adults. Thus, the investigators hypothesized that differences in masculinity, femininity, and general sex role attitudes would intensify across the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades (between ages 11 and 13 years) and that pubertal timing would play a role in this intensification. Their analyses showed that sex differences in masculinity and sex role attitudes increased across grades, but there were no sex differences in femininity. Their study also showed that pubertal timing was not associated with this gender divergence.

Results of further research on the gender intensification hypothesis have produced mixed results. For example, Simmons and Blyth (1987) failed to find gender divergence between boys and girls during early adolescence in terms of their plans for future work and education. However, Crouter, Manke, and McHale (1995) did find evidence of gender intensification during early adolescence to be associated with some aspects of family socialization (that is, an adolescent's involvement in dyadic activities with the same-sex parent) but not others (parents maintaining traditional sex roles in the home). In a more

recent cross-sectional study in Norway, Wichstrøm (1999) examined rates of depression among early adolescents and the gender intensification hypothesis. He found that greater incidences of depression among young adolescent girls was linked to increased importance of feminine sex role identification; this depressed mode was not associated with masculinity or school change.

From a further cross-national study of care-based moral reasoning among Canadian and Norwegian early adolescents, Canadian girls scored significantly higher on an ethics of care moral reasoning interview than boys as well as generating more relational, real-life dilemmas (Skoe et al., 1999). No such differences were found among Norwegian girls. Additionally more Canadian than Norwegian girls demonstrated conventions of goodness and caring for others on the interview, an embodiment of "traditional" female sex role values. Norway has been far more equalitarian in its gender role expectations for men and women, and this difference may be reflected in study results. Thus, the gender intensification hypothesis may be a product of societies that sharply differentiate male and female sex role values.

The issue of gender intensification is complex; certainly, children in every society learn expected role behaviors for boys and girls and develop a sense of basic gender identity and roles most appropriate for men and women. Perhaps a statement by Huston and Alvarez (1990) best illustrates possible reasons for such mixed results:

Early adolescents are often intensely concerned with "sex appropriate" attributes, but what they absorb about femininity and masculinity can vary widely, depending on the ideas conveyed by various socialization agents during the particular slice of historical time when they pass through this period. (p. 175)

Contexts Affecting Early Adolescent Identity Development

Early adolescence, with the many biological changes it brings, is also a time when many young adolescents report changed relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and others with whom they interact regularly. Many of these relational changes raise identity-related issues for young adolescents and herald a time of disequilibrium in their relationships with others. A general systems approach has recently been taken in attempting to understand the ecology of adolescence in various contexts (e.g., Granic, Dishion, & Hollenstein, 2003). This approach looks at the interaction among biological maturation, relationships, and the social and historical contexts in which these interactions are embedded. Thus, biological maturation itself has been

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associated with change in family and peer relationships that many young adolescents report. In addition, schools, neighborhoods, places of community service, and cultural norms all interact in multiple ways during the identity-formation process of early adolescence.

This research has focused on central issues of socialization both within the family (connection, regulation, and autonomy) and across the multiple contexts of family, peers, school, and community (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 1997; Eccles, Early, Fraser, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997). Results have demonstrated that parents, first, and peers, second, appear to be the contexts of primary influence for early adolescent identity development, although all contexts and social networks contribute influential socialization experiences. The same research has also demonstrated that as the quality of conditions within the family for optimal identity development decreases, the impact of other socialization contexts increases. Congruence across parenting style, teaching style, and school atmosphere has also been an important factor associated with early adolescent school achievement and positive identity development (Paulson, Marchant, & Rothlisberg, 1998).

The Family

Recent researches on adolescents and their families have increasingly focused on the reciprocal socialization processes involved (e.g., Grotevant, 1998; Patterson & Fisher, 2002). This approach examines not only how parental behaviors impact adolescents, but also how adolescent behavior impacts parents and siblings. For example, a nine-year longitudinal study by Kim, Conger, Lorenz, and Elder (2001) found that negative feelings of both adolescents and their parents had a reciprocal relationship over time. The more negative adolescents felt about their parents, the more negative the parents felt about their adolescents.

For early adolescents, the biological changes of puberty do seem to bring both discontinuous shifts in some personality factors as well as reorganization in parent-child relationships. How the family system adapts and restructures itself will depend upon previously established patterns of relationships and the willingness of all participants to adapt to changed adolescent circumstances (Granic et al., 2003). Pubertal changes, alongside cognitive maturation during early adolescence, bring marked changes to the family system as a whole. As noted earlier in this chapter, conflicts between early adolescents and their parents do often increase around the time of puberty, but begin decreasing thereafter (e.g., Allison & Schultz, 2004; Ogletree, Jones, & Coyl, 2002; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1990). This distancing may be observed through

such adolescent behaviors as increased desires for privacy and diminished physical affection; however, this distancing phenomenon is generally temporary and does not reflect a serious breach in family relationships. Conflicts often involve disagreements regarding chores, dress, and other daily life issues. However, such conflicts are likely to take some toll on parents, though they also generally stay involved and loving (Granic et al., 2003). By late adolescence, relationships between parents and youths are often again more intimate and less conflicted. These rising levels of conflict among family members during early adolescence are best understood in the context of the adolescent's growing need for autonomy (Granic et al., 2003).

A good deal of research exists on the relationship between parental practices and adolescent identity development. Generally, an authoritative (in which warmth and nurturance are coupled with firm control) rather than an authoritarian or permissive parental style of childrearing has been associated with greater self-reliance, social responsibility, and achievement motivation in later childhood and adolescence (Baumrind, 1991). Research has consistently found that for young, mid-, and late adolescents, the quest for autonomy is best facilitated within the context of close relationships with both mothers and fathers (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). The importance of family experience in offering supportive connection while encouraging autonomy and regulating behavior has been strongly linked with positive mental health issues among early adolescents (Barber & Olsen, 1997). Psychological well-being among early adolescents has been concurrently linked with positive paternal and maternal attachment (Kenny, Lomax, Brabeck, & Fife, 1998).

Both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with specific areas of family functioning have been associated more directly to identity development among early adolescents (Papini, Sebby, & Clark, 1989). Identity exploration among early adolescents was highest in families where mothers generally approved of their child's behavior but were dissatisfied with the affective quality of their relationship with the adolescent. In addition, identity exploration among adolescents was highest in families in which the mother reported high frequencies of conflict with the adolescent. Identity exploration among early adolescents was also highest in families in which the father and the adolescent were most dissatisfied with one another's behavior and with the affective quality of the relationship; however, adolescent identity exploration was linked to low levels of father-adolescent conflict. Studies linking styles of parent-adolescent relationships to adolescent identity formation have most frequently been conducted with mid- to late adolescents and thus are discussed further in the next two chapters.

Friendships and the Peer Group

My parents let me spend a lot of time with my friends, and that's been really important. We experience so many new things together and can talk about them all. It makes life so much easier this way.

—12-year-old schoolgirl

For young adolescents, friendships and peer groups provide a further important context for later identity development. Relations with peers established during childhood undergo important transitions in the move to early adolescence. The same-sex peer groups of the middle childhood years begin from loose associations with peer groups of the opposite sex (Brown & Klute, 2003). It is that very sense of self, established within the family, that enables early adolescents to begin expanding relationships outside of it. In contrast to school-aged children, who tend to choose friends on the basis of common activities, this criterion for friendship during early adolescence is enlarged so that friends are also likely to share interests, values, and beliefs—in general, to be supportive and understanding (Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

As the young person enters a period of intrapsychic disorganization, friends and peer groups provide a reference for testing new identity-related skills; social support in the form of approval from peers is a strong predictor of global self-worth among young adolescents (Harter, 1990). The quality and stability of early adolescent friendships are also strongly linked to self-esteem; when friendships become unstable, early adolescents of both genders feel less satisfied with their own appearance and performance during the year (Keefe & Berndt, 1996). Several investigations have pointed to the strong relationship between adolescent problem behavior and involvement in a peer group that places little value on constructive behaviors (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 1997).

Brown and Klute's (2003) overview of 30 years of research about young adolescents' friendships has produced the following findings: Young adolescents are likely to select as friends those who are similar to the self in terms of gender and interests. Most early adolescents have at least one close friend, though the stability of these relationships is not high (six months or less). In multiethnic contexts, there is also a preference for same race friends. Equality and reciprocity are mandates in friendships. And, girls display more intimacy in their friendships than boys. Furthermore, young adolescent friends generally report similar levels of friendship motivation, with girls reporting greater self-determined friendship motivation than boys (Richard & Schneider, 2005). And one of the strongest correlates of behaviors is the behavior of a

close friend; friends do influence young adolescents, particularly in the assumption of risky behaviors. Those who have examined, for example, early pubertal development among girls have found that early sexual activity is strongly influenced by the behavior of friends (Cavanagh, 2004).

With regard to the larger peer group, early adolescence often marks a general shift from the small group interactions of childhood to larger, interaction-based groups called *cliques* (Brown & Klute, 2003). In early adolescence, cliques are generally single-sex, though the leader of one clique may begin to interact with an opposite-sex leader of another clique. In addition to cliques, those moving toward mid-adolescence in many communities may also begin to become associated with larger groups called *crowds* (Brown & Klute, 2003). Crowds are clusters of cliques, with individuals sharing similar basic interests among their members. Crowds are identified by a label that often reflects an area of residence, ethnic or socioeconomic background, peer status, or members' abilities or interests. Most crowds have norms that define a distinctive lifestyle, and membership is determined by reputation. Many of the early adolescent's peer relations are continuations of childhood associations as well as extensions of more formal interests, such as being in a religious youth group or sports club. Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, and Bukowski (1999) have found that those with limited success making friends during childhood are likely to continue struggling with relationships throughout adolescence; those without friends also are good targets for bullies, and it becomes difficult for a young adolescent to break out of this pattern of isolation and peer rejection.

Broader Community Contexts

The roles of contexts beyond the family and peer group for early adolescent identity development are now being explored in systematic ways. Studies of school climate and structure on early adolescent identity have been undertaken (e.g., the impact of single-sex versus coeducational schools on psychological adjustment at puberty; Caspi, 1995). However, discussions of the impact of broader social contexts on identity development for early adolescents have only recently been undertaken (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 1997; Eccles et al., 1997; Sampson, 1997). Such studies point to the potentially regulating effects that broader contexts such as neighborhood and community have for early adolescent social control. They furthermore point to the problematic socialization experiences many early adolescents have in the school environment, particularly in terms of positive connections with teachers, and a school's ability to adequately regulate behavior. However, because such research with early adolescents is in its infancy, more general comments on early adolescent identity development and broader social contexts are presented here.

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Newman and Newman (2001) offer thoughts on the role of group affiliations and social networks for identity development during early adolescence. They point out the critical role that group identifications play in the process of individual identity development: "Especially in early adolescence, young people seek connections, supportive relationships, and an understanding of groups and communities, all of which help them take the risks that eventually give rise to an articulated sense of personal meaning [and identity]" (Newman & Newman, 2001, p. 516). The capacity to invest in and to commit oneself to various social networks during early adolescence provides the foundations and supports necessary for later individual identity exploration and commitment. Most adolescents will experience feelings of both belongingness to and alienation from particular social networks at the same time. Resolution of this group identity versus alienation crisis serves as a prelude to the later Identity Versus Role Confusion crisis. Resolution to this early adolescent task will have implications for one's ability to feel a sense of both identity and belonging to smaller groups and to larger social networks in later life.

Adams and Marshall (1996) also present a theoretical model for the discussion of broader contexts on adolescent identity formation more generally. They note that all societies provide institutions and settings in which early adolescents (and all adolescents) can learn to imitate roles and identify with others, the foundations of the identity-formation process. They argue that social contexts that provide a baseline of values for the maintenance and promotion of the self as well as others are the conditions for optimal identity formation. An expectation of high cohesion and conformity by a social group or institution may facilitate identification and imitation but limit later identity formation. The authors note at the same time that any contextual influence is likely to be mediated through both intra- and interpersonal processes. Specifying exactly what such processes are and how they apply during early adolescence are questions that await future generations of researchers.

Section Summary and Implications

Increasing physical maturity during early adolescence brings a restructuring of family relationships; conflicts on minor issues often begin in early phases of puberty and subside after the changes of puberty stabilize.

A style of authoritative parenting has been associated with both self-reliance as well as social responsibility among early adolescents.

One of the strongest correlates of a young adolescent's behavior is the behavior of his or her close friends.

Research on identity implications for early adolescents of broader social contexts, such as the school, neighborhood, and community, has just begun. However, having a sense of multiple group identities provides a base for the later adolescent task of Identity Versus Role Confusion.

Back to the Beginning

This chapter began with three critical questions about identity in early adolescence and a quotation from John, a 13-year-old boy who suddenly realizes that he is growing up and must begin to think about what he wants to be in the future. John's "jolt" comes when his school principal points out that John must soon make some important, identity-defining decisions. John's plight is characteristic of many early adolescents, not only undergoing the physical changes of growing up but also of beginning to experience changes in social expectations, expectations for developing a sense of identity-defining, personally meaningful psychosocial roles and values that fit.

Answers to Chapter Questions

◆ **How do changes of puberty affect identity in early adolescence?**

Early adolescents must begin to integrate a new sense of sexual identity into their sense of self. Being an early maturing girl or late maturing boy (different from one's peers in terms of physical maturity) is more likely to be associated with an identity crisis.

◆ **Does society's lack of formal puberty rites help or hinder early adolescent identity development?**

This issue is controversial; however, identity research suggests identity development is best facilitated through a lack of predefined social roles for adolescents. Supportive parental and peer relationships, however, are vital to adaptive outcomes.

◆ **Do parents of pubertal adolescents change in relating to their children?**

Yes. Family conflict over minor issues often begins with early signs of pubertal change and subsides when the pubertal apex has passed. When parents have not granted greater independence to physically changing adolescents, the parent-adolescent relationship has been negatively affected.



High school was a time when everyone was trying new things out, from clothes to haircuts, and from new ideas to alcohol and drugs. In fact, it was during this time that lots of my peers tried drugs, and I think the fact that everyone kept an eye out for everyone else helped us all get through this time without really going off the rails. In fact, I believe that if the group of friends you have are really close, it makes the transition through adolescence that much smoother.

—19-year-old female, looking back