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Early puberty may put kids at risk

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- Youngsters who hit puberty earlier than their peers may have a higher risk of later being victimized, including being involved in physical fights or getting shot or stabbed, new study findings suggest.

"There is something unique about early maturity (relative to one's peers) that opens opportunities for victimization experiences," the study's authors write.

"It's not puberty that is what ultimately causes kids to get victimized," study co-author Dr. Alex Piquero, a criminologist at the University of Florida, told Reuters Health. "Early puberty seems to open up a different set of doors and social experiences to kids," he said, explaining that early maturing youngsters may start socializing with the opposite sex and with older, bigger, and stronger youth earlier than those who do not experience puberty early.

"Just like when people date," he said, "it opens up a world of different sets of people that they've never interacted with."

It is well known that young people who experience puberty early have a higher risk of depression, substance use, disruptive behaviors and various other conditions, yet researchers had not before investigated whether these youth were also more susceptible to victimization.

The current findings are based on data from nearly 7,000, 11- to 15-year-olds from 132 schools across the country. Piquero and co-author Dr. Dana L. Haynie, of the Ohio State University, first identified students who had reached puberty in 1995 and then investigated their experiences of victimization during the following year.

Overall, teens who experienced puberty early -- who perceived themselves as looking older than most of their peers -- had a much greater risk of being involved in a physical fight, having a knife or gun pulled on them, being jumped or otherwise being victimized than did other teens, Piquero and Haynie report. This was particularly true for boys, they write in this month's *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*.

Yet, among boys who matured early, those with a higher proportion of female friends appeared to be less likely to experience subsequent victimization. A similar association was not found among early-maturing girls, however.

"(It) seems to be a lot like marriage -- females are really good for men," Piquero said. "Women seem to help curtail men's bad experiences."

Girls who hit puberty early, in contrast, tended to have more older friends than did boys who matured early.

Socializing with older people "places these kids in difficult situations that they may not be cognitively able to handle," Piquero said, explaining that, although a 13-year-old may start hanging out with a 16-year-old, he or she "may not be at the 16-year-old level yet."

Lower levels of victimization were reported among teens from two-parent families -- as were 74 percent of the study participants -- those with more highly educated parents, and those who reported having higher levels of attachment with their parents. White teens also reported lower levels of victimization than did teens of other races, study findings indicate.

In light of the findings, Piquero said parents should "be aware of possible negative consequences" of early puberty. Although they may have no control over when their child experiences puberty, they should instill in their early-maturing child some "worldly knowledge," and inform them about the potential consequences of befriending older people, or people of the opposite sex, he said.