

Sexuality in adolescence

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Overview

- Effects of puberty on sexual development
- Psychosocial factors related to early sexual debut
- Timing of sexual intercourse
- Specifics of adolescent sexuality
- New challenges

Biological markers of puberty



- Phase of adrenarche: emissions of androgens from adrenal cortex
 - In girls at age 6 (years), in boys at age 8 (years)
- Growth of primary and secondary sexual characteristics
 - Breast, penis, scrotum growth, pubic hair growth (the start of breast growth at age 10, testes growth at age 12)
- Growth spurt (in girls at age 11, in boys at age 14)
- Changes in the proportion of muscle mass and fat
 - Boys: 1,5 x muscle mass than in girls, girls: 2 x body fat than boys
- Enlargement of the circulatory and respiratory system

Psychological aspects of puberty in general

- Girls:

- Increase of negative emotions (anger, sadness) (due to luteinizing hormone – associated to the menstruation cycle)

- Boys:

- Higher amount of testosterone → less mood problems but more behavioral problems
 - Association with the approaching the ideal of male beauty



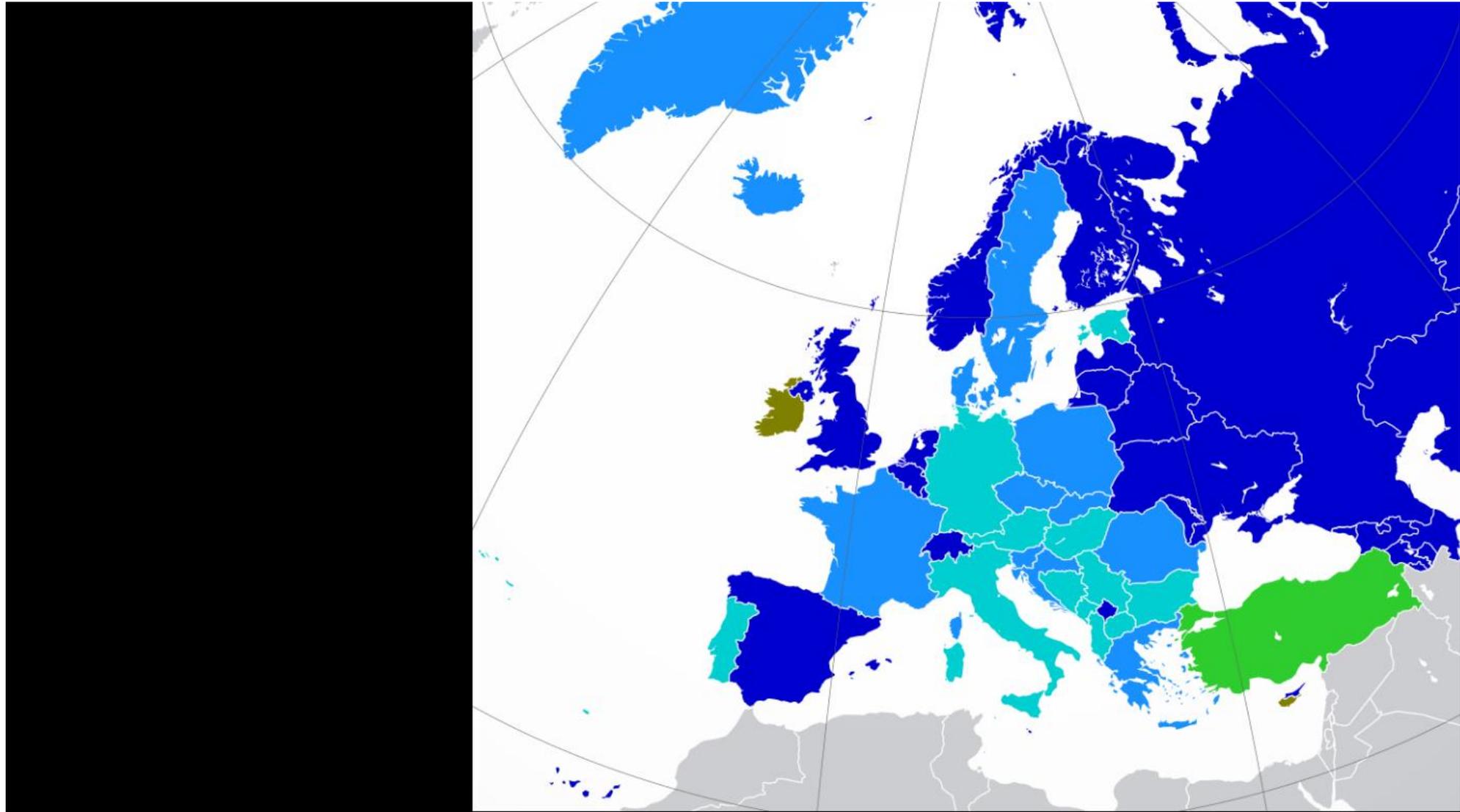
Timing of puberty matters: earlier puberty and consequences

- Rapidity of pubertal changes – effects
 - Faster changes → more problems
 - Slower pace → more time for adjustment → better wellbeing
- Girls:
 - Poor academic career, poor mental health (lower self-esteem, suicidal ideations), problem behavior (drug, earlier sexual debut, conflicts with parents)
 - Reasons for poorer well-being:
 - No longer group belongingness
 - Deviation from female beauty (higher young adult BMI)
 - Greater peer pressure with regards to dating and sexuality
- Boys
 - Higher levels of antisocial behavior, more sex partners, more drug use, less sleep, and higher BMI

Hoyt, L. T., Niu, L., Pachucki, M. C., & Chaku, N. (2020). Timing of puberty in boys and girls: implications for population health. *SSM-population health*, 10, 100549.

(Early) sexual debut

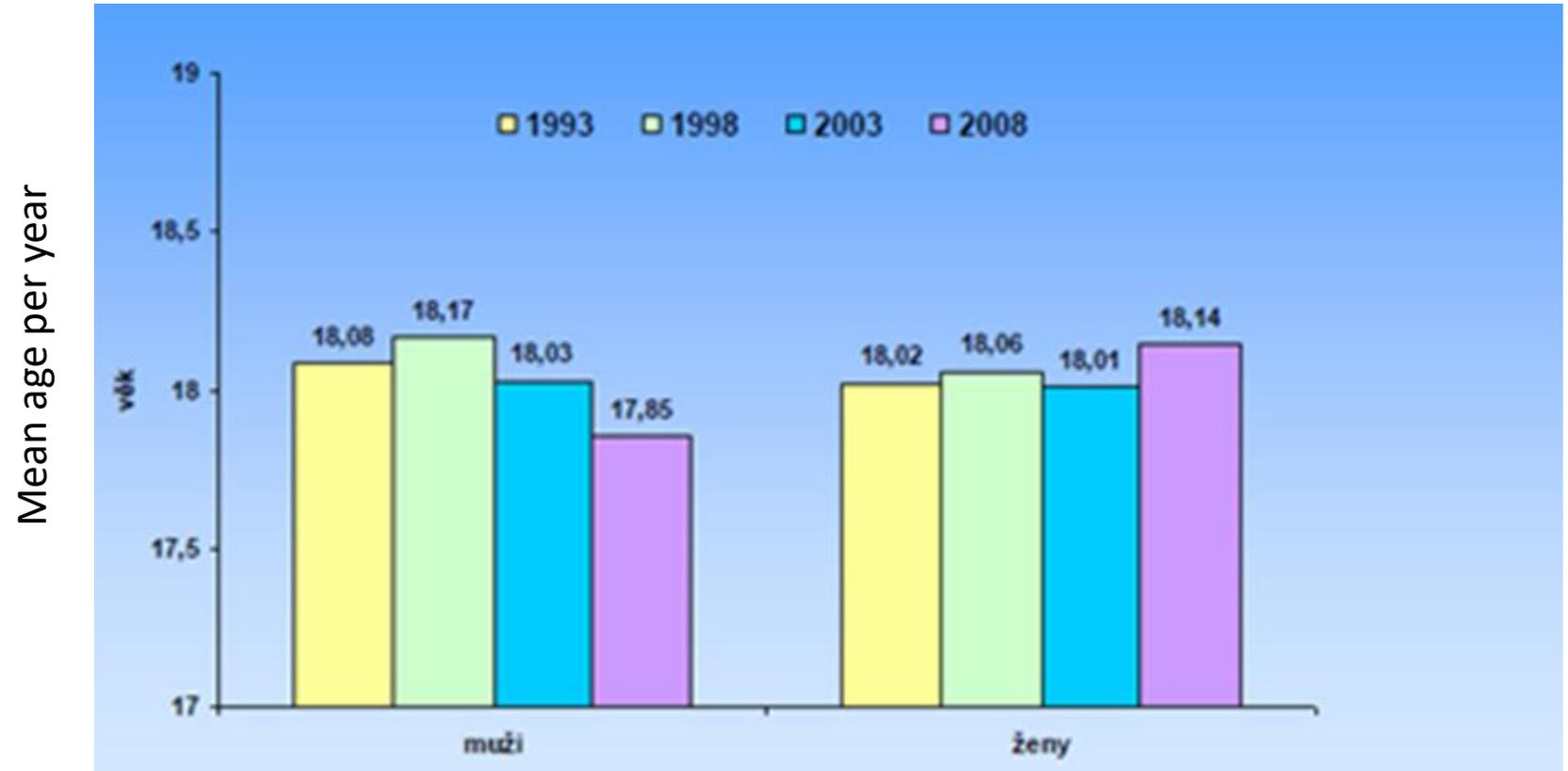
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ages_of_consent_in_Europe



Map showing ages of consent in European countries 14 15 16 17 18

Age of sexual debut in the Czech Republic

- CZ (Weiss, 2012)



Adolescent boys

Adolescent girls

Psychosocial factors related to sexual debut

- Biological characteristics: early puberty + menarché at a lower age – earlier sexual debut (Crockett et al., 2003)
- Quality of relationships and communication between parents and children
- Psychological characteristics (predictors):
 - Depression in younger girls →(↔) earlier sexual debut
 - No association between self-esteem and earlier sexual debut
 - Academic achievement (i.e, better grades, academic ambitions) → delayed sexual debut
 - Problem behavior: criminal or unethical behavior → earlier sexual debut
 - Risk behavior → more sexual experiences
 - Attitudes: stronger religiosity → less sexual experiences
- Family structure as a social predictor of early sexual debut
 - single-parent household
 - Older siblings
 - Lower social-economic status of the family

Contextual factors of risky sexual behavior

(risks such as unwanted pregnancy, STDs)

- Sexual activities not truly legitimized in adolescence
 - The question of a sufficient availability of contraception
- Cultural norms negatively affect contraception use
 - E.g., A norm of a nice girl: a nice girl does not anticipate/initiate sex so that she is not expected to take measures (such as having a condom or negotiating condom use) (Carpentier, 2009)
- Romantic relationships in adolescence are short-term
 - Having regular sex is not common which may challenge contraception use
- Media act as a super-peer
 - Popular media often depict sex among persons who have just met and fail to address the topic of contraception and consequences of unprotected sex (Gunasekera, Chapman, & Campbell, 2005)

Specifics of adolescent sexuality

Characteristics of adolescent sexuality

- Sexual behavior mostly embedded within romantic relationships
 - Less likely to have sex via hookup/dating apps (🕸️ P U R E), one-night stands, or with friends with benefits

Development of peer and romantic relationships

- The initiation phase (early adolescence: 11-13 years):
 - reorienting of social needs towards peers of the opposite sex (Brown, 1999)
 - beginning of experiencing physical attraction and passion toward individuals
 - these feelings **not necessarily** followed by/expressed within mixed-gender interaction (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).
- The status phase (middle adolescence: 14-16 years):
 - focus on status and popularity; growing social pressure from their peer group to have a romantic partner (Brown, 1999); (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999)
 - partner dyads have not been established yet,
 - **meeting romantic partners takes place in larger, mixed-gender groups** (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999)
- The affectionate phase (late adolescence: 17-20 years):
 - **the transition of relationships from the public space of the peer group into an intimate-dyadic space** (Brown, 1999).
 - declaration of dyadic romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999)
 - peer pressure diminishes.

Table 2. Collective online pornography use.					
	Age categories			χ (df)	p
	11-13 yr (adjusted residuals*)	14-15 yr (adjusted residuals*)	16-17 yr (adjusted residuals*)		
	Girls % (N=600)				
With a male friend	9.5(-.1)	14.1(2.4)	7.1(-2.2)	6.4(2)	.04
With a female friend	33.3(-.4)	38.4(1.2)	33.5(-.8)	1.3(2)	.51
With a boyfriend	2.9(-3.5)	13.0(-1.7)	23.9(3.0)	27.6(2)	.001
Alone	64.8(.1)	63.2(-.4)	65.2(.3)	.2(2)	.91
	Boys %(N=629)				
With a male friend	30.4(1.5)	25.7(.4)	19.3(-2.4)	6.9(2)	.03
With a female friend	15.2(.1)	13.5(-.7)	16.1(.6)	.6(2)	.73
With a girlfriend	8.2(-1.7)	6.8(-2.7)	18.4(4.7)	17.6(2)	.001
Alone	77.2(-1.4)	77.5(-1.5)	86.5(2.8)	7.8(2)	.02
Note. * = adjusted residuals for the presence of the experience. χ = Pearson Chi-Square value. df = degree of freedom. p = alpha level.					

Characteristics of adolescent sexuality

- Sexual behavior mostly embedded within romantic relationships
- Double standards of sexual behavior:
 - a nice girl does not anticipate/initiate sex, while a boy is valued for having sexual experiences
- Homosocial norms reinforcing double standards
 - In boys: a positive association between a number of sexual experiences and peer status



[In Cosmopolitan magazine's July issue](#), Johansson calls out one of the oldest (but most prevalent) sexual double-standards in history: when men get lauded for their vibrant sexual activity, but women get shamed.

Double standards & homosocial norms



- Traditional norms producing double standards in sexuality:
 - boys/men are valued for a greater number of sexual experiences/partners while girls/women are valued for a smaller number of sex experiences/partners.
 - boys/men take action, while girls/women are the recipients of sex offer or should be restrained
 - men are expected to insist on having sex, while women are expected express some resistance, at least orally – token resistance, men are expected to overcome this resistance
 - women should be mindful, careful while men are allowed to follow their goals and desires - in sex women face more obstacles when pursuing sexual satisfaction compared to men
- Homosocial norms reinforcing the double standards:
 - Important for boy groups
 - these bands work on a mechanism of social comparison
 - sexual experiences as a tool for boosting self-esteem, peer status, and confirming masculinity

Table 1. Multilevel binary logistic regression models predicting sexting behavior in younger adolescents (11-14 years).

	Younger female non-sexters (<i>N</i> = 5227)			Younger male non-sexters (<i>N</i> = 5225)		
	Younger female sexters (<i>N</i> = 83)			Younger male sexters (<i>N</i> = 115)		
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Intercept(constant)	6.85(.78)***			7.12(.63)***		
Alcohol use	2.34(.39)***	10.38	(4.74-22.48)	1.48(.33)***	4.41	(2.31-8.44)
Emotional problems	1.07(.26)***	2.91	(1.76-4.81)	1.06(.20)***	2.89	(1.92-4.24)
Sexual intercourse	.67(.38)	1.93	(.92-4.08)	1.25(.39)***	3.50	(1.64-7.50)
Self-efficacy	.17(.26)	1.19	(.71-1.98)	.65(.23)*	1.91	(1.15-3.15)

Note. *B* = Unstandardized regression coefficient. *SE* = Standard error. *OR* = Odds ratio. *CI* = Confidence interval for OR. *** *p* < .001. * *p* < .05.

Self-efficacy: beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments

Table 2. Multilevel binary logistic regression models predicting sexting behavior in older adolescents (15-16 years).

	Older female non-sexters (<i>N</i> = 2692)			Older male non-sexters (<i>N</i> = 2524)		
	Older female sexters (<i>N</i> = 102)			Older male sexters (<i>N</i> = 169)		
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Intercept(constant)	4.14(1.01)***			4.65(.65)***		
Alcohol use	1.06(.25)***	2.89	(1.52-4.72)	.50(.17)**	1.66	(1.18-2.29)
Emotional problems	.61(.27)*	1.83	(1.08-3.10)	.99(.21)***	2.68	(1.77-4.08)
Sexual intercourse	.84(.24)***	2.33	(1.45-3.75)	1.22(.18)***	3.38	(2.36-4.84)
Self-efficacy	-.42(.33)	0.66	(.35-1.25)	.02(.21)	1.02	(.67-1.55)

Note. *B* = Unstandardized regression coefficient. *SE* = Standard error. *OR* = Odds ratio. *CI* = Confidence interval for OR. *** *p* < .001. ** *p* < .01. * *p* < .05.



Lippman, J. R., & Campbell, S. W. (2014). Damned if you do, damned if you don't... if you're a girl: Relational and normative contexts of adolescent sexting in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 371-386.

- Girls reported feeling pressured into sexting, if not overtly then more subtly through perceived injunctive norms.
 - some girls feel pressure to sext because they perceive it as something they *should* do if they want to please, or capture the attention of, boys.
- Girls were also evaluated in distinctive ways for sexting.
 - girls were reduced to negative female stereotypes whether they did sext or not, indicating that when it comes to sexting, girls really are “damned if they do, damned if they don't.”

New challenges

- The use of the internet and digital devices
 - Online sexual solicitation (grooming) – at risk adolescents with poorer relationships with parents and peers
 - Effects of pornography use selected sexual attitudes and behavior
 - – at risk boys who excessively consume online pornography
- Double standards ignore female sexual pleasure
 - <http://www.bloggazwithattitude.com/france-new-version-sex-education/>



Summary

- Undergoing puberty: early timing \leftrightarrow psychosocial risks for both girls and boys
- Exploration of sexuality = riskier for girls (due to the double standards regarding sexual expression)
- Type of family structure and poverty - social factors of early sexual debut – worth considering them
- The strongest peer pressure related to sexual expression in mid-adolescence