

A LINE ON LIFE

7/9/95

Menarche and Thinness *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

One of the most noticeable signs of a girl maturing into womanhood is the **menarche** – her first menstruation. However, this is just one of many rapid changes that occur to women in adolescence. What influences these changes? In turn, how do these changes influence the psychology of these young women?

Through the Educational Testing Service, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn studied over 1,200 girls attending private schools in New York and New Jersey, ranging in age from 11-19 years. Included in this sample were about 100 girls in four national ballet company schools and a similar number of competitive swimmers. All subjects were weighed, measured and given a survey. The survey questions covered topics like social maturity, self-esteem, physical development, peer relations, achievement orientation and eating-related behaviors.

One major focus was on the timing of maturation – early, late or on time. The most striking finding related to **early-maturing girls**. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn summarized their problem.

"The problem is that they are expected to act more socially mature than they actually are. They start dating earlier and are expected to exhibit behavior that their peers aren't. They are generally more popular earlier, but in some instances this can hurt their academic performance."

The early maturers may also develop a relatively **poor body image**. Often they are teased about their breast development by others, including their parents. In addition, these same girls stop growing earlier and are typically shorter and stockier than late-maturing girls. This means that they are less likely to match the current ideal of feminine beauty – tall, lean and long-legged – that is overemphasized by the media in our culture.

Brooks-Gunn points out that an accumulation of body fat takes place most rapidly just before menarche. This growth of body fat is a normal part of the maturation process for women. Besides, research indicates that a woman's body fat must reach 19% of the body weight before menarche can occur.



Because of biased ideals of beauty, many normal-weight girls are unhappy about their bodies. They may complain, "*I don't want any hips*," even though this is a normal part of a woman's development. In fact, half of normal-weight girls think that they are too heavy. This obsession with losing weight continues even more with the older girls – 15-19 years old.

The body-image problem is accentuated with the ballet company students. The tall and linear shape is even more emphasized with them. Because their compulsion is to be "*thin*," **delayed menarche** is common with these dancing students. Rather than being caused by selection or genetic factors, the delay in menstruation seems to be environmentally caused. These dancers diet and exercise much more than typical girls. Even with extremes of exercise and dieting, these dancers are more likely to have negative body images – seeing themselves as being

too fat. This leads to the development of eating disorders, like **anorexia** (starving themselves) and **bulimia** (alternately gorging and then vomiting their food). The same problems are typical with female athletes in other sports emphasizing leanness – gymnastics, running and volleyball.

**Women can be more satisfied,
if they learn to accept themselves as they are
rather than striving for the impractical media ideal.**

In contrast, swimmers average about 15 pounds heavier than the ballet dancers and resemble the general population of women in appearance. Swimmers do not exhibit the eating problems typical of dancers, probably because they are more content with their body images. Since they are less likely to starve themselves to lose weight, swimmers do not have the delayed menarche typical of dancers.

The crucial factor that delays menarche is not the athletic activity itself, but that the girls are athletes in sports that *require thinness*. There seems to be an obsession with thinness in our culture. For most young women, this is somewhat ironic. They try to match themselves to the unrealistically thin ideal shown in the media. In contrast to the media ideal, research shows that most men are more attracted to slightly heavier women. In other words – if they want to be physically attractive to most men, women need to abandon this extreme media ideal and develop enough fat to give themselves feminine softness and curves.

* Adapted from Albert Benderson's article, "Growing up is hard to do," *Developments*, Summer, 1985, Educational Testing Service, Princeton NJ, pages 5-8.