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Timing of Maturity, Feelings About Ethnicity and Race Can Positively Affect Black Males' Self-Concept, Well-Being

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Comparing Associations Between Puberty, Ethnic-Racial Identity, Self-Concept, and Depressive Symptoms Among African American and Caribbean Black Boys

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Black males start puberty at younger ages than males of other racial or ethnic groups, and early puberty has been linked to risks for negative outcomes, yet we know little about how Black males navigate the changes in their bodies or understand their social identities. A new study explored how young African American and Caribbean Black males understand these matters and how variations in their understanding affect their self-concept and well-being. The study concluded that the meaning Black males ascribe to their ethnic-racial identity may help explain outcomes related to puberty.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan and Arizona State University. It is published in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

“Black males who adopt healthy beliefs about their ethnic-racial identities during the transition to puberty are likely to have better mental health and stronger self-concepts than their Black peers who do not adopt such beliefs,” says Rona Carter, associate professor of developmental psychology at the University of Michigan, who led the study. “The findings add to the growing recognition that variables linked to ethnicity and race are important mechanisms for understanding outcomes related to young males’ transition to puberty.”

Research on puberty among Black males is limited. To address this gap, researchers examined associations between three pubertal domains (voice change, hair growth, and perceived relative timing of puberty) and their effects on symptoms of depression, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in a nationally representative group of 395 African American and 164 Caribbean Black males from around the United States. Researchers also explored how the teens’ concepts of their ethnic-racial identity affected them. The adolescents, ages 13 to 17, were part of the National Survey of American Life Adolescent sample. Mean family income was $36,693

for African Americans and $38, 580 for Caribbean Blacks.

The study found that positive levels of ethnic-racial identity buffered the effects of early puberty. For example:

- Contrary to expectations, for both African American males and Caribbean Black males, perceptions of early puberty were not associated with high levels of symptoms of depression and low levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Instead, Black males who perceived that their voice changed early reported high levels of self-esteem.
- Consistent with expectations, African American and Caribbean Black males who felt positively about being Black reported higher levels of self-esteem, more self-efficacy, and fewer symptoms of depression.

The study's authors acknowledge several limitations to their work. First, the study relied on self-reports of the teens' voice changes, hair growth, and perceived timing of puberty; it did not assess how the youth experienced their pubertal changes and the potentially racialized nature of those changes within their peer and family contexts. Second, the study is cross-sectional and based on self-reports, which prevents the authors from drawing causal conclusions. Finally, in their study of the Caribbean Black males, the authors could not address immigration status, which prior research has suggested plays a role in ethnic-racial identities.

"Greater attention should be placed on pubertal education programs that include exploration of one's ethnic-racial identity to help Black males process the identity-related messages they receive while navigating the transition to puberty," suggests Eleanor Seaton, associate professor in the T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University, who coauthored the study. "Individual characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and the effects of various layers of social context affect the degree to which experience or context affect the mental health and self-concept of Black males. Furthermore, because this is an understudied area of research, we believe there is room for continued work on this matter."

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Summarized from *Child Development, Comparing Associations Between Puberty, Ethnic-Racial Identity, Self-Concept, and Depressive Symptoms Among African American and Caribbean Black Boys* by Carter, R

(University of Michigan), Seaton, EK (Arizona State University), and Blazek, JL (University of Michigan).
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