



Episode 6: How To Support Kids Going Through Early Puberty

Andrea Luna Oviedo got her period for the first time in fourth grade, a year before her school district typically began puberty education for its students. She was able to tackle this new phase of her life with the help of supportive family and friends, and her school district in Berwyn, IL began teaching puberty education to fourth graders the year after. In this episode, reporter Francesca Mathewes explores the increase in early puberty rates among most girls and some nonbinary and trans children, and unpacks the factors that could contribute to Latina girls experiencing early puberty at a higher rate than their white counterparts. Dr. Louise Greenspan, a pediatric oncologist, and health educators at

Chicago Public Schools also explain how best to support children going through puberty earlier than their peers.

Francesca Mathewes: By 2050, [Latinas will make up a quarter of all women in the U.S.](#) They're gaining an education, participating in the labor market, accumulating wealth, and embracing entrepreneurship. The future of the United States is irrevocably tied to the health and wellbeing of Latinas. This is 100 Latina Birthdays, an open source podcast from LWC Studios about the health, wellness, and lifetime outcomes of Latinas in the U.S. I'm Francesca Mathewes, and I'm an independent journalist based in Chicago. I've worked in local news here since 2017, writing about people, neighborhoods, and the systems that shape and change them. Our narrative investigation and celebration of Latina health and wellbeing was reported in the greater Chicago area, but our findings have national implications. In this first season, we will chronicle the lives of Latina women and girls in the first two decades, from birth to age 20. In this episode, we're talking about periods, puberty, and how preteen Latinas are taught about their changing bodies.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: I asked my mom, "Why am I getting little hairs there?" And she's like, "Well, you're starting puberty." And I'm like, "Oh, okay." The next day, and the next times, like, I just see... things. My things are growing, and like... I just get very scared, 'cause like, I have no idea what's happening with my body, 'cause like, no one told me that... how to deal with that.

Francesca Mathewes: That's Andrea Luna Oviedo, an 11-year-old from [Berwyn, Illinois](#). Berwyn is a suburb in the Chicago metropolitan area with a population and history that's closely tied to Chicago. Streets are lined with classic Chicago [bungalow-style houses](#), now occupied by Berwyn's [predominantly Latino population](#). Andrea Luna just started middle school this year. She speaks softly, but with a certain excitement, clearly eager to share everything she's observing during this time of rapid change in growth. She sits on the couch with her mom, Ruth, who sits

back, letting her daughter take up all the space she wants. Andrea Luna is curious, slowly relaxing into her natural, lively confidence while we chat.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: I had school on that day, and I did a mariachi performance in school, and so, like, we had our trajes and everything, I needed to be prepared. Just that the thing is I forgot my gym shoes, so I was stuck wearing heels, and so I was just wearing heels for the whole day. And then when I got to my tía Vero's house a couple... yeah, like a couple hours later, I needed to use the bathroom really bad. And when someone got out, I went in, um... I looked at my underwear, and I see just like, a spot of blood, and I get very scared, thinking that I'm dying.

Francesca Mathewes: At 10 years old, Andrea Luna was in fifth grade, and had just begun learning about menstrual health in school. The following year, her school began teaching about puberty one year earlier, to fourth graders, and there's a reason for that. The average age that girls reach puberty [has been getting lower for decades](#), which [scientists first began observing](#) in the 1990s. [Louise C. Greenspan](#), a pediatric endocrinologist at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in San Francisco, worked on a [study](#) which concluded that the girls she and her colleagues studied started puberty earlier than what had previously been recorded. And within this trend, Dr. Greenspan and her colleagues noticed Black and Hispanic girls on average started puberty earlier than white and Asian girls.

Louise Greenspan: And at age seven, we found that, of the girls that identified as Black, 23.4% of them had breast budding. Of the girls who identified as Hispanic, 14.9% of them had breast budding. And the girls who identified as white, 10.4% of them had breast budding. So we saw that Black girls were starting earlier, Hispanic girls were in the middle, and Asian and white girls were later.

Francesca Mathewes: The reasons behind this change are not just biological. A number of social and environmental factors play into kids' faster development, especially for Latinas. One of these factors is the quantity of adipose tissue, the scientific word for body fat.

Louise Greenspan: We know that girls who carry more adipose tissue tend to have higher estrogen levels, and that is because adipose tissue is a hormonally active organ. People don't realize that. And adipose tissue can increase your rates of estrogen, in all genders. So, people who have more adipose tissue are going to likely have more estrogen, and that could be triggering the breast development.

Francesca Mathewes: However, Dr. Greenspan really underscores the fact that more adipose tissue--or in other words, more fat--isn't necessarily a problem in and of itself, and warns against harmful stigmas about obesity.

Louise Greenspan: So, we know that obesity in this country is absolutely a socioeconomic status problem, and that people of lower socioeconomic status and higher negative social factors in their social environment have higher rates of obesity. And when

you live in a food desert, or you live in a place where you can't exercise because the neighborhood isn't safe, you're absolutely predisposed to obesity.

Francesca Mathewes: In 2022, [29% of Latinos in Chicago](#) reported being food insecure. And according to a [study](#) published in 2020 in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, around 15% of Latinos in the U.S. live in lower income areas, where the nearest grocery store could be up to 10 miles away, compared with 11% of non-Latinos. The second major factor linked to early puberty is exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Exposure to certain chemicals can disrupt the [endocrine system](#), which produces and regulates the hormones in our bodies.

Louise Greenspan: It's very hard to study, because it's very hard to take one group of people and expose them to one thing, and then take the other group and not expose them to that one thing, and then say that one thing is the cause. We all live in a, sorry to say, toxic soup of chemicals, and, we can't really control what we're exposed to. So there are many studies that look at the association between different endocrine-disrupting chemicals and pubertal onset, and there are some that delay and some that make it early.

Francesca Mathewes: Poor communities and communities of color experience exposure to toxic industrial chemicals at [higher rates](#). Episode six of this podcast tells the story of residents in Chicago's Little Village, a predominantly Latino neighborhood on the southwest side, who've been fighting high levels of pollution and toxic industrial waste for decades. Little Village also happens to be where Ruth, Andrea Luna's mother, grew up. Pesticides and BPAs, a chemical commonly found in plastics, are examples of chemicals that cause endocrine disruption.

Louise Greenspan: So yes, if you can minimize your exposure to pesticides and chemicals... for example, when you go to the store and you think, do I want to buy the organic produce or the non-organic, and the non-organic is cheaper--the way that I think about it is there's probably very few things, except donating to very worthy organizations, that's worth my money more than buying organic. But not everybody has that option. But if you do have the option, I would definitely recommend that.

Francesca Mathewes: The third major factor linked to early puberty in girls is psychosocial stress.

Louise Greenspan: And that is something that's hard for people to understand. So I don't mean like, "oh, I have a math test in the morning and I'm stressed!" I don't mean that "oh, my friend was mean to me and now I'm stressed". What I mean is chronic traumatic stress.

Francesca Mathewes: Dr. Greenspan says severe acute stress, such as living in a country impacted by war, or other consistently traumatic circumstances, can actually delay puberty. But everyday peaks of stress and anxiety can cause what she calls chronic low grade stress.

Louise Greenspan: And that can mean families where there's a lot of strife at home, where there's chronic arguing, families where there's food insecurity, housing insecurity, families where there may be other adverse childhood experiences that the children are experiencing.

Francesca Mathewes: According to the nonprofit [Feeding America](#), in 2021, Latinos were two and a half times more likely to experience food insecurity than white individuals. In Chicago, a 2020 [study](#) found that 28% of Latino families with kids experience food insecurity.

Louise Greenspan: It really speaks to health justice, social justice, food justice, housing justice. I mean, I don't even know where to--how many justices we need, but it really speaks to the work that we need to do in this world.

Francesca Mathewes: University of Chicago's UChicago Urban Labs published a [study](#) in 2022 and found that 44% of Hispanic households in Chicago reported having low confidence in paying rent for the next month, compared to 12% of white households. This reflects a 2021 trend in which roughly 40% of Black and Latino households with children that rented or had a mortgage reported having housing insecurity, compared to 15% of their white counterparts that reported the same, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). Compounding these national trends, early puberty diagnoses also [rose during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Dr. Greenspan says that this could be linked to the increased number of pandemic-related chronic stressors that kids were exposed to.

Louise Greenspan: So you may have had a family that was getting along pretty well and doing okay, and then parents lost their jobs 'cause of the pandemic, or other things happened, or the kids were getting food at school and now there was more food insecurity because those lunches weren't as easily accessible. So, we think that probably a lot of kids were exposed to more adverse chronic stress. Adverse chronic stress raises certain hormones, and the body can react to that in various different ways.

Francesca Mathewes: And to be clear, being Latina doesn't necessarily expose someone to more negative social determinants of health such as heightened stress. But Latinas do experience [lack of health insurance](#) and [exposure to harmful chemicals](#) at higher rates than their white counterparts.

Louise Greenspan: When we look at the Venn diagram of people who are subjected to more negative social determinants of health in our country, clearly that--that's more of an overlap.

Francesca Mathewes: But what does it actually mean to get your period earlier than average? What about your life and wellbeing is different if you start developing sooner than your peers?

- Louise Greenspan: We know that earlier onset of first period is associated with many negative health outcomes. During adolescence, being an earlier developer than your peers is associated with higher risk-taking behavior as an adolescent. So, both early sexual experiences, as well as substance use, depression, and eating disorders.
- Francesca Mathewes: There's also evidence that suggests a connection between reaching puberty earlier and encountering health problems later in life.
- Louise Greenspan: So, women who had periods at a younger age seem to have higher death rates at earlier ages, specifically from breast cancer and heart disease.
- Francesca Mathewes: But it's not that getting your period or growing breasts earlier inherently makes someone less healthy. Early development also has to do with the behaviors a young person who looks older might engage in, and that depends on their environment.
- Louise Greenspan: Although, how much of that is because as teenagers, they were smoking cigarettes, they were drinking, maybe they had other behaviors that were then associated with both heart attacks and breast cancer. But that is the data. If you are 10 and you look 14, and you have a 14-year-old brother who brings his friends over, and they think you're 14, they're going to want to hang out with you, and they may introduce you socially to things you shouldn't be introduced to, because you look older. You are exposed to media and substances and clothing and social situations that you're not prepared for, and you don't have the brain development yet to handle that.
- Francesca Mathewes: Because much of the harm is social, early puberty does not necessarily have to be a bad thing, particularly if someone is surrounded by peers going through the same experience.
- Louise Greenspan: In some ways, Latina girls who are going through puberty early who are in the Latina community with other girls going through early are protected, versus girls that are in a community where maybe there aren't other people getting it early.
- Francesca Mathewes: And at the center of this conversation are girls like Andrea Luna, who are trying to make sense of their changing bodies alongside the regular stresses of being a preteen. Social media can make the pressures of adolescence, your appearance, who your friends are, teen drama, and academics feel more heightened. One recent [study](#) conducted in the United Kingdom found that three out of four children as young as 12, the [average age](#) that kids start using social media, dislike their bodies and feel embarrassed about the way they look. Almost 70% of tweens and teens in that same study said that social media makes them stressed, anxious, and depressed.
- The increasing sway that social media has on kids' mental health and self-confidence has an even stronger impact on young girls. One [Pew Research](#)

[study](#) found that girls are 10% more likely to say that they spend too much time on social media. When it came to TikTok, a platform that has [faced scrutiny](#) for having an algorithm that allegedly exposes kids to eating disorder and self-harm behaviors, 71% of Hispanic teens told researchers that they use the app regularly, as compared with just 62% of white teens and 81% of Black teens. And it's not just the impact on body image that can make social media harmful to adolescents. [A similar UK study](#) found that social media can have significant impacts on the amount of sleep that tweens and teens get, which has serious implications for their mental health.

[ABC Clip](#): They looked at over 13,000 teens aged 13 to 16. They found that the teens who use the most social media got the least sleep, the least exercise, had the highest stress, and it hit girls particularly hard. The culprit appears to be not the use of social media, but the fact that they weren't getting enough sleep and physical activity.

Francesca Mathewes: Amidst all the influence and pressure on social media, Andrea Luna tries to stay grounded.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: I feel that you should be very self-confident in your body. Yeah, some girls will judge you on how you look, but like--if you choose not to wear any makeup, and you believe that your own beauty is like, not getting anything done and not getting any makeup, that's fine. Some girls will judge you, but just remember that, like... it's your body, it's your choice.

Francesca Mathewes: Luckily, Andrea Luna is surrounded by supportive family with her mom, Ruth, aunts, and older female cousins, who have ushered her into this new phase of life.

Ruth Oviedo: Also, I remember showing her how to actually put a period--a pad on, which I thought it was really important, you know, 'cause my mom never showed me. But since I had my older sisters, they were able to show me, and tell me, "Every time you go to the bathroom, you want to change yourself, don't keep it too long, y'know."

Francesca Mathewes: For Ruth, having an open dialogue with her daughter about periods and puberty is a step towards addressing the cultural taboos about girls' health and bodies that she was raised with.

Ruth Oviedo: I think what's happening with our generations is that we're breaking those chains that was behind, like--I believe my mom was never taught stuff like that, so it was never implemented to her, so she never implemented it to us.

Francesca Mathewes: Along with more open and well-informed conversations about menstrual health, Ruth still holds onto the values that her mother did pass down to her, and keeps them present in her relationship with Andrea Luna.

- Ruth Oviedo: But one thing that we do have from my mom is that she always implemented us to have--you know, to spend time together.
- Francesca Mathewes: For young Latinas experiencing puberty, adults they trust play an important role in supporting them through the rapid changes.
- Kat Ramirez-Mercado: This is something we have made intentional decisions on, as far as how early we start talking about puberty and the building blocks that lead to those conversations that are filled with, you know, empowerments, and just able to help support families in engaging those types of conversations.
- Francesca Mathewes: That's Kat Ramirez-Mercado, the director of health promotion in Chicago Public Schools. Kat's colleague, Janet Kamiri-Ong, is the health education content specialist in the Office of Teaching and Learning for Chicago Public Schools. She helps educators who teach health create curriculums, and focuses specifically on puberty education. She noted that the curriculum design has also had to respond to students starting puberty earlier.
- Janet Kamiri-Ong: And we start introducing puberty content in third grade. It's just sort of that preparation, that bodies go through changes, so that students, especially those who are starting puberty younger, have... just awareness that this is going to happen, empathy for their peers who maybe start puberty before others, and then we really dive into puberty content in fourth grade, and then build on that in fifth grade, and continue to touch on puberty concepts through sixth, seventh, eighth grade, right--as bodies change at different rates over time.
- Francesca Mathewes: Although puberty health education starts in the third grade in Chicago Public Schools, that's not the case everywhere. There is no federal law that requires sex education, which means each state can individually decide what is taught in public schools and when. Only 39 states actually [require sexual health education](#), and only 22 require health education to be medically accurate, and those standards can also [vary](#). In addition to being different depending on where you grew up and went to school, health education has changed over time.
- Kat Ramirez-Mercado: I know that my experience was very different from what we are promoting and trying to be intentional about at Chicago Public Schools today.
- Francesca Mathewes: Although Ruth did receive health education in school, she said that a lot of what she learned about how to take care of herself during her period came from her older sisters.
- Ruth Oviedo: And the very first time I got my period, I was at a much older sister who had just had her baby. It was during the wintertime. And I remember I went to the bathroom and I was bleeding. So then I remember about my older sister telling me, and I told my eldest sister, and I said, "Hey, I think I need a pad," and she just gave me a pad and started from there.

- Francesca Mathewes: Alongside education about puberty and periods, Janet says that making sure students have the resources they need while at school is a big part of supporting them through this big life change.
- Janet Kamiri-Ong: Anecdotally, teachers are telling us that yes, we're seeing this sooner, or having students asking questions earlier, students are needing period products a lot sooner than they used to. So, we actually made a change to our policy that now we have schools provide menstrual products in bathrooms that serve students beginning in third grade and older, whereas previously our policy said fourth grade.
- Francesca Mathewes: Janet and Kat are also aware of the stigmas that come with talking about puberty. They take measures to ensure that, as the puberty and health curriculum grows and evolves, inclusivity remains a central value.
- Kat Ramirez-Mercado: And so in our policy when we deliver the information, a part of addressing the stigma around it is making sure that every person in that classroom is getting the same information, to sort of dispel the myths and the fears on both the people who menstruate and the people who know people who menstruate. And so, that is something that I think helps address some of the underlining stigma that is inherent when discussing puberty.
- Francesca Mathewes: Janet says that puberty education can be straightforward and reassuring. It's evident in the questions that students ask her.
- Janet Kamiri-Ong: There's simple things that people who've been menstruating for a long time maybe don't remember or don't realize until they stop and reflect back on what their first experience was like, because they're just curious about, why is this happening to my body? They're like, "This thing is happening, I don't know why it's happening, it feels maybe a little weird." A lot of them are like, "It's gross." And then with education, they start to realize that like, "Oh, this is actually a very natural, very normal process that bodies go through."
- Francesca Mathewes: That, of course, comes with a handful of laughs as well.
- Janet Kamiri-Ong: They're just so sweet when they start going down that what-if train, and they're like, "What if it starts at school?" And then I think one of the funniest moments was, "What if it starts on an airplane?" And you're just like, "Well, we're probably going to use the exact same problem-solving techniques that we've used in school." And it's just really cute, because they're just trying to figure out, how would I as an individual manage the situation if--when. When it happens to me.
- Francesca Mathewes: On top of that, she says, students are often in need of something that children that age look for anytime something might be new or scary: a grown-up to tell them that everything is going to be okay.

- Janet Kamiri-Ong: And so having adults in their lives to answer these questions and provide that reassurance is really what we try to encourage our teachers to do--is to be there as a sounding board to help students problem-solve. They want to know, "What happens if I get my period at school? What should I do? Who should I talk to? Where do I go? What if I have an accident?" Like, and they're worried about being embarrassed in front of their peers.
- Francesca Mathewes: Once that baseline level of reassurance and education is present, it's easier for students to form a community and help each other through a new and sometimes confusing part of their lives.
- Janet Kamiri-Ong: And then we find that young people today are becoming more and more open and confident talking about problems, talking about their experiences, and then--young people are just so great at supporting each other, is another really wonderful thing that we see happening with education.
- Francesca Mathewes: Breaking down the stigma about periods doesn't have to mean being overly celebratory either.
- Aszana Lopez-Bell: I mean, right now I'm not like, at the stage where I'm like, "It's a beautiful thing, your body, whatever." But I would just want to tell her, it's not dirty. I feel like a lot of the time girls are just supposed to act like nothing's happening.
- Francesca Mathewes: That's [Aszana Lopez-Bell](#), in an episode of Feeling My Flo, another LWC Studios podcast. When Aszana first got her period, her mother wanted to throw her a period party to celebrate, which Aszana felt was a swing too far in the celebratory direction. She said she'd approach periods a little differently if she ever has children of her own.
- Aszana Lopez-Bell: So, I think I would tell them, you know, like, it's okay to not feel completely yourself, or just feel like you want to take it slow. That you could always talk to me about it.
- Francesca Mathewes: Puberty, periods, and everything that comes along with them are one part of getting older. Birthdays are another. Andrea Luna's birthday is December 30th, and the family usually celebrates in Mexico with family and friends.
- Andrea Luna Oviedo: Well, the party was sort of like, it was chill, but it was also exciting.
- Francesca Mathewes: There's one family tradition in particular that Andrea Luna loves on her birthday.
- Andrea Luna Oviedo: When we were singing Happy Birthday, I know that... I know that, I think--was brother trying to get close to me so he can push my head in? Yeah, my brother... we have a tradition where we blow out the candles, and like, we're going to bite, but one of our family members are always the ones who--the people that don't look suspicious are always the one who always put your whole face into the cake.

Francesca Mathewes: In spite of all the change that comes with getting older, Andrea Luna reflects on it with an attitude that is cool, calm, and collected.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: There's not really much of a change except like, knowing that you're older, and you're always used to telling other people that you're 10, 11, whatever age you were before, and now having to tell them that you're the age now. You keep forgetting.

Francesca Mathewes: And there are of course family members who still see Andrea Luna as a baby cousin or sister.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: I know two of my cousins, and my brother, didn't know that I was 11. My brother thought I was nine. Same thing with one of my cousins, they also thought I was nine, and they were all boys. And then one of my other cousins, they thought I was still 10.

Francesca Mathewes: Something so distinct about our preteen years, those transitional years between our childhood and teenagehood, is a desire to be taken more seriously. It's when the words "I'm not a baby anymore" really start to carry some weight. And when it comes to talking to middle school-aged Latinas about puberty, the experts we talked to said that it's important to approach those conversations with an intention to make them feel more empowered, secure, and comfortable in their growing bodies. Dr. Greenspan says that these conversations about what's happening inside our bodies can happen all the time, and don't have to be about sex and gender. Bodies are bodies, after all.

Louise Greenspan: And again, it's like, no, kids are used to their bodies changing. In third grade, it's usual for your teeth to fall out. Can you imagine if your teeth fell out? Right? They are used to the fact that their shoe sizes change every six months.

Francesca Mathewes: And if you ask her, it's time to lose this idea that getting your period somehow turns a child into a woman. She says periods aren't a symbol of adulthood. They're just one of the many changes our bodies encounter as we grow up. In a way, they're nothing new.

Louise Greenspan: They are--kids are used to their bodies changing. So if you just put periods in that context, it doesn't have to be as scary, and it doesn't have to leap to sexuality and gender and blah, blah, blah. Just like, this is what happens to your body, and bleeding out of your vagina is a thing that happens to people with vaginas. God, no, they're not women! They're third-graders with their periods.

Francesca Mathewes: Perhaps more than anything, preteen years are a time where emotions are coming into full form, in sometimes difficult and hard to understand ways. It can be overwhelming, and challenge a person's sense of self-confidence at that age. For Andrea Luna, drawing brings her back to center.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: When I'm drawing, it's sort of like... I don't really know how to explain it. It's just so relaxing, and like, when you're done with it... by the time you're done with it, you're really proud of how it came out.

Francesca Mathewes: She's learning more and more about how to draw new things and take new steps.

Andrea Luna Oviedo: So basically, I always draw, like... I try drawing things, but I'm not really good at them. What I mostly draw is people. I don't--I'm trying to learn how to draw boys, but I don't know how, so I would always draw girls, and I got better as time passed by. The only thing that I don't know how to do... I can do the top, I just can't do hands, I can't do legs, and, like, drawing little shoes. I can't do that.

Francesca Mathewes: Whether it's through drawing, mariachi, playing sports, or spending time with the older cousins she loves so much, Andrea Luna is embracing the person she's becoming, through the changes and challenges of puberty.

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