

## Adolescents' Reports of Dating Abuse: Mothers' Responses

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**Abstract :** Background: Adolescent dating abuse (ADA) is widespread throughout the world and negatively impacts many adolescents. ADA is associated with lower self-esteem, poorer school performance, lower employment opportunities, higher rates of depression, absenteeism from school, substance abuse, bullying, smoking, suicide, pregnancy, eating disorders, and risky sexual behaviors, and experiencing domestic violence later in life. ADA prevention is sometimes addressed through school programming; yet, parental responses to ADA can also be an important vehicle for its prevention. In this exploratory study, the author examined how mothers, including abused mothers, responded to scenarios of ADA involving their children. Methods: Six focus groups were conducted between December, 2013 and June, 2014 with mothers (n=31) in the southern part of the United States. Three of the focus groups were comprised of mothers (n=17) who had been abused by their partners. Mothers were recruited from local community family agencies. Participants were provided a series of four scenarios about ADA and they were asked to explain how they would respond. Focus groups lasted approximately 45 minutes. All participants were given a gift card to a major retailer as a 'thank you'. Using QSR-N10, two researchers' analyzed the focus group data first using open and axial coding techniques to find overarching themes. Researchers triangulated the coded data to ensure accurate interpretations of the participants' messages and used the scenario questions to structure the coded results. Results: Almost 30% of 699 comments coded as mothers' recommendations for responding to ADA focused on the importance of providing advice to their children. Advice included breaking up, going to police, ignoring or avoiding the abusive partner, and setting boundaries in relationships. About 22% of comments focused on the need for educating teens about healthy and unhealthy relationships and seeking additional information. About 13% of the comments reflected the view that parents should confront abuser and/or abusers' parents, and less than 2% noted the need to take their child to counseling. Mothers who had been abused offered similar responses as parents who had not experienced abuse. However, their responses were more likely to focus on sharing their own experience exercising caution in their responses, as they knew from their own experiences that authoritarian responses were ineffective. Over half of the comments indicated that parents would react stronger, quicker, and angrier if a girl was being abused by a boy than vice versa; parents expressed greater fear for their daughters than their sons involved in ADA. Conclusions. Results suggest that mothers have ideas about how to respond to ADA. Mothers who have been abused draw from their experiences and are aware that responding in an authoritarian manner may not be helpful. Because parental influence on teens is critical in their development, it is important for all parents to respond to ADA in a helpful manner to break the cycle of violence. Understanding responses to ADA can inform prevention programming to work with parents in responding to ADA.

**Keywords :** abused mothers' responses to dating abuse, adolescent dating abuse, mothers' responses to dating abuse, teen dating violence

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