



# Queerness and Dating Violence Among Adolescent Mothers in Foster Care

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Adolescent mothers and adolescents in foster care are both groups that have a higher risk of experiencing dating violence. Queer youth, or those who do not conform to heterosexual norms of sexuality, are also at higher risk for experiencing teen dating violence. Queer adolescent mothers in foster care may therefore be particularly vulnerable. However, practitioners and caseworkers may not understand queer relationships in adolescent mothers, which could prevent mothers from receiving the supports that they need.

This study examined sexual fluidity (relationships with partners of multiple genders) within a residential foster care facility for adolescent mothers, and explored how program staff viewed this sexual fluidity. The researchers also looked at how program staff viewed teen dating violence in same-sex relationships, and how these views compared to mothers' own perspectives.

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers interviewed 12 program staff (all women) at a foster home for adolescent mothers. Program staff were asked how they viewed residents' romantic relationships, how conflicts in these relationships were resolved, and what their experience was with teen dating violence in the facility. 13 residents (aged 14 to 22 years) were asked similar questions in two focus groups, divided by age.

## **WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:**

- Although program staff and residents both acknowledged that there were same-sex relationships at the foster care facility, staff downplayed these relationships and viewed them as problematic, while residents viewed them as meaningful.
- Program staff were aware of conflict in same-sex couples at the facility, but they saw it as normal peer conflict rather than teen dating violence.
- These findings highlight the need for training that helps staff recognize teen dating violence among sexually fluid youth, allowing them to intervene appropriately.

### **WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?**

All staff and residents described that there were same-sex relationships in the facility. However, staff were confused by these relationships, noting that the mothers had been in heterosexual relationships previously and it is unclear why they had changed. Residents, on the other hand, were not confused by these relationships.

In contrast to residents, who explained that their same-sex relationships were healthy and based on romantic interest, staff viewed same-sex relationships as problematic. Staff said that girls engaged in these relationships in order to manipulate others, because they lacked social support, or because they were confused about their sexual identity.

Residents expressed that there was dating violence in same-sex relationships at the facility and believed this violence to be a problem, with the potential to escalate. While program staff were aware of this violence, they described it as normative peer conflict rather than teen dating violence and did not think it was as much of a problem as dating violence in other-sex relationships.

This study identified that practitioners and program staff may have different perspectives on sexual fluidity and same-sex relationships, which could interfere with staff's ability to support queer adolescents.

### **HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

This work can be used by organizations, such as foster care facilities and social worker associations, to develop professional development opportunities for support staff. This study highlights the need for training that focuses on sexual fluidity in order to ensure that staff know how to sensitively and effectively respond to teen dating violence in same-sex couples. Social workers and program staff can also use this research to examine how their own biases may interfere with their ability to help queer youth.

### **ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS:**

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### **KEYWORDS**

Dating violence, youth, intimate partner violence, healthy relationships, queer youth, sexual fluidity, foster care, adolescent mothers\

### **FULL REFERENCE**

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