

# Maternal Gatekeeping



**How to engage mothers (and fathers) to support father involvement**

Presenters: Julia Johnsen, University of Minnesota School of Public Health  
Paul Masiarchin, Minnesota Fathers & Families Network



Minnesota Social Services Association Annual Training Conference, March 2010  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

## Minnesota Fathers & Families Network

A healthy co-parenting relationship supports the active involvement of fathers and children.

[www.mnfathers.org](http://www.mnfathers.org)

- Public Policy
- Educational Resources
- News
- Professional Training






Website: [www.epi.umn.edu/MCH](http://www.epi.umn.edu/MCH)  
Blog: [healthygenerations.wordpress.com](http://healthygenerations.wordpress.com)

### FRAMING:

What's the strongest predictor of a mother's engagement with her child?


What factors might predict how involved she may be in caring for her child?



### FRAMING:

What's the strongest predictor of a father's engagement with his child?

What factors might predict how involved he may be in caring for his child?

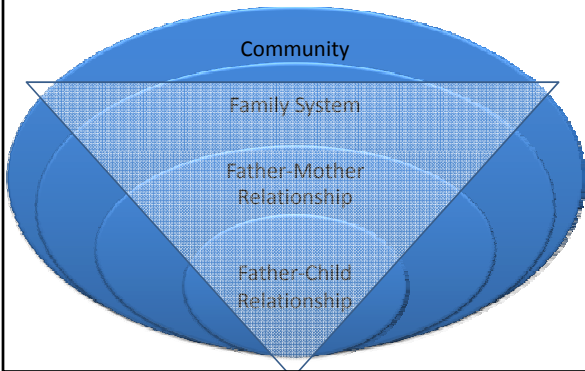


A strong co-parenting relationship can help keep dad engaged

*The single most powerful predictor of fathers' engagement with their children is the quality of the men's relationship with the child's mother.*



## Fathers' Pathways of Influence



## Co-parenting Defined: How parents work together to raise a child

- Do they agree on parenting strategies?
- Do they support each others' efforts in raising the child?
- Do they help each other out?



Co-parenting slides developed by Rose Allen, University of Minnesota Extension, 2009

## Who Co-parents?



- Married parents
- Never married parents who live together
- Parents who live apart
- A parent and a grandparent or other relative
- Same sex parents
- Foster parents
- Parents in a blended or step family

*Any two or more people  
who care for a child*

## Co-parenting and adult relationships



- Parenting is part of adult development
- Learning to co-parent is a sign of maturity
- Co-parenting doesn't mean that you always agree – the key is to learn to work through differences

## Why is co-parenting important for children?

- infants and toddlers develop more secure attachments
- children learn about relationships and cooperation
- good co-parenting relationship results in better parenting practices



*Having two involved parents benefits a child  
no matter what the family form.*

## Why is co-parenting important for mothers?

When dad is positively involved...moms are:

- *More responsive & sensitive to child's needs*
- *Less likely to be stressed/depressed*
- *More closely bonded to her child*
- *More likely to breastfeed longer*
- *More in control during labor; less distress/pain*



- Fatherhood Institute, 2009

Photo photo by stockade, some rights reserved, attribution required, noncommercial, share alike, 2005

## Unpacking this topic

Gender

History

## Power

## Relationship Status

Culture

Experiences parenting and  
being parented

Opportunity to parent

Identity as a Parent

## Gender and Power Mind-opening Exercise



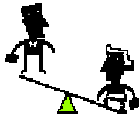
## Gatekeepers

A gatekeeper is someone who supervises and maintains boundaries for a person or place.

(Pruett, 2009)

Gatekeepers:

- Include men **and** women; fathers **and** mothers
- Act consciously **and** unconsciously
- Facilitate **and** hinder others
- Act solo **and** supported



## Maternal Gatekeeping

- Mothers' **beliefs and behaviors that help or hinder father involvement**
- Rationale: *manage* the father's involvement
- Can occur for good ("justifiable") reasons or bad ("unjustifiable") reasons
- Occurs in all family types
- Fathers may implicitly or explicitly support gatekeeping behaviors



## Disclaimers

- Maternal gatekeeping is not the only or primary barrier to father involvement .
- Gatekeeping may not be deliberate.
- Idea is still a bit controversial.
  - Who is responsible for responsible fatherhood?
- Studies are limited & generalizations narrow.
  - Maternal behavior may *reflect* or *influence* father involvement.

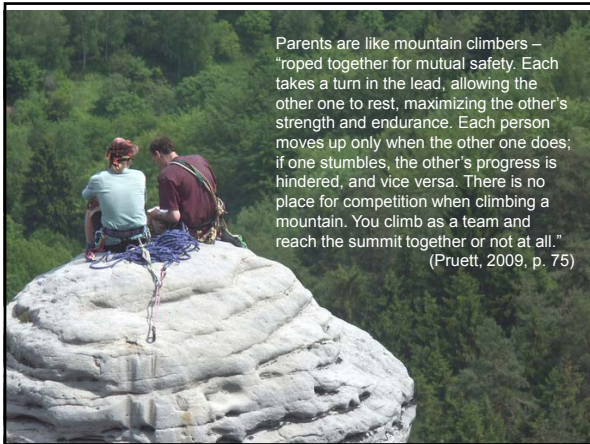


See InfoSheet: 17 "Gatekeeping: Mom as a Pathway to Healthy Father Involvement" online at [www.mnfathers.org](http://www.mnfathers.org)

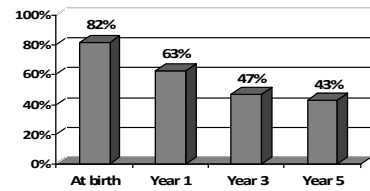
## Coparenting vs Gatekeeping

- Gatekeeping is **one parent exerting power over the other** whereas *good* co-parenting is **both parents agreeing**.
- But even in good coparenting relationship, or even mom's beliefs about dad's importance aside, gatekeeping (positive & negative) can occur.
- In other words, improving coparenting quality may help greatly, but sometimes may not be enough on its own.





## One reason to focus on this topic: Fragile family father involvement



Percent of fathers who had seen their child at some time in the past month.

Source: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

## Reasons for Gatekeeping

- Belief in gendered parenting (held by either parent)
- Need for mother to feel validated as mother
- Power/control over *mother’s domain*
- Too high standards of parenting
  - Allen and Hawkins 1999 (married parents)
- Pessimistic assessment of father’s competency
  - Fagan and Barnett 2003 (residential and nonresidential fathers)
- Lifestyle differences between parents
- Behaviors of father that are potentially dangerous
- Poor parental relationships
- Mothers’ relationships with their own fathers
  - Laakso 2004, Claessens 2007 (unmarried parents)

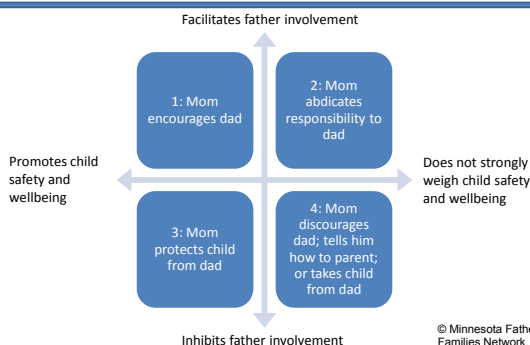
## Effect of maternal gatekeeping

- Moms do more.
  - Allen & Hawkins 1999
- Dads do less.
- Caregiving
- Time with child
- Decision making (school, health care, etc)



## Maternal gatekeeping matrix

*A work in progress*



## Scenario: Lynn and Marcus

Lynn and Marcus were a dual-income married couple. Marcus was laid off from his job of 15 years. Now Lynn is the sole breadwinner. Every morning before going to work, Lynn writes a list of activities for Marcus. Here’s today’s list:

- Take the kids to the library (bring a snack; Johnny will be hungry before you get home)
- Go to the farmer’s market
- Fix the garage door
- Take the kids and dog for a walk (Johnny likes to go by the schoolyard)

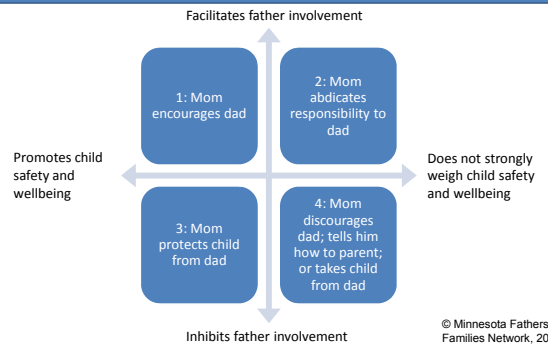
## Scenario: Jenni and Arturo

Jenni and Arturo are teen parents. They each live with their parents, although they are still romantically involved.

Jenni comes to pick up Anna from Arturo. She sees a cut on 12-month old Anna's forehead. Arturo explains how Anna fell from the swing. Jenni is mad that Arturo didn't watch Anna more closely. This is not the first time that Anna has been hurt when with Arturo. Jenni tells him that he can't see Anna alone.

## Maternal gatekeeping matrix

*A work in progress*



## How are children impacted when parents can't co-parent?

<b>Parallel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistent discipline, rules, expectations</li> <li>• Lack of parental coordination and communication can cause problems</li> <li>• Need to adapt to each parent's rules and style - this takes extra energy</li> </ul>
<b>Conflicted</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active conflict is harmful</li> <li>• Children put in the middle of their parents' disagreements can result in mental health issues, stress, difficulty with relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Disengaged</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of attention and emotional support from disengaged parent</li> </ul>

Co-parenting slides developed by Rose Allen, University of Minnesota Extension, 2009

## How parental conflict affects kids

- Higher likelihood of harsh styles of discipline and diminished emotional responses; parenting behaviors associated ultimately with a child's emotional insecurity and withdrawal.
- Supportive mother-father relationship important for positive parenting of very young children – when relationship improves, frequency with which mothers spank diminishes. – Fragile Families

Parental resilience

- Be strong and flexible

## Can all families co-parent?

Cooperative  
(1)

- High levels of communication, cooperation and support for the other parent

Conflicted  
(2, 3, 4)

- Constant disagreement, children put in difficult situations

Parallel  
(2, 3, 4)

- Parents raise their children in their own way and coordinate only when necessary

Disengaged  
(2, 3, 4)

- Disengage from the other parent and the children. Not actively parenting the children

Source: University of Minnesota Extension, 2009. *Parents Forever: Education for families in divorce transition - Impact of Divorce on Children.*

## When co-parenting is not aligned

The primary caregiver	The less involved parent
Disillusioned with other parent	Feels excluded
Does not include them in caring for child	Doesn't learn how to care for child
Dismisses their importance to child	Feels unable to contribute
Puts the other parent down	Tires of the conflict
Restricts access to child	May withdraw and drift away

## Underlying Message

Mom: let go a little



Dad: step up to the plate

## Gatekeeping Exercise

Discuss the following two questions with a partner. (5 minutes)

1. How can I improve my work with mothers to address gatekeeping and fathers to promote family engagement?
2. What systemic barriers exist that prevent me from fully engaging families?



Flickr photo by Alzewan, some rights reserved, noncommercial work, attribution required, 2006.

## Becoming Parents Together



"My wife and I have always been happy and close. She's one of the most loving people in the universe. That's why I'm a bit rattled about how unloved she can make me feel. She doesn't mean to, but she makes me feel incompetent, like a mediocre parent...She just has a way of correcting what I say and do; it's subtle sometimes, and she always pretends she's supporting me while fixing things....I can feel myself withdrawing, and it scares me." – Father of a seven-month-old daughter

"I think my husband is the world's best, and he's really a great father, too. I am surprised, though, how often I feel annoyed at him when he's parenting our little girl. It's like he doesn't get who she really is, so I try to be helpful and steer him in a direction that will help her feel closer to and have more confidence in him. Then he gets this glazed look and I think he's gone off inside his head. I know he gets mad at those moments, but he doesn't realize how often I make things work between them." – Mother of the same seven-month-old daughter

Source: Pruett, 2009.

Flickr photo by Jackal, all trades, some rights reserved, share alike, attribution required, 2009.

## Gatekeeping & Positive Intent

- Mom's Intent: The mix of strong co-parenting and maternal encouragement tends to increase father involvement.
- But, mix of weak co-parenting and maternal encouragement tends to produce mixed results.



- Dad's Intent: Despite dad's desire to be involved, when mothers frequently criticize, paternal involvement may be lower.

– Schoppe-Sullivan et. al. 2008

## Walking the talk?



- Paradox: Moms may say they want dad involved but may be ambiguous about actually giving up power and control.
- Studies show some moms may not want more dads involved, e.g. approx. 50% don't want father more involved in upbringing

– Motherhood Study, large-scale nationally representative sample of total U.S. population; Erickson & Aird 2005

## Am I important to my child?

What percentage of **mom**s (nationally representative sample) think they are replaceable to their child?

- 1 = 0% - 20%
- 2 = 20 - 40%
- 3 = 40 - 60%
- 4 = 60 - 80%
- 5 = 80 - 100%



– Motherhood Study 2005

## Results: % of moms think they are replaceable

- 1 = 0% - 20%
- 2 = 20 - 40%
- 3 = 40 - 60%
- 4 = 60 - 80%
- 5 = 80 - 100%



## Connecting research to strategies and tools (Moms)

### Research Says

- Mothers have great influence over father involvement, regardless of family (intact, separated, etc.)
- Gatekeeping may override the fathers' desires to be involved & what mother says she wants versus what she does



### Tools

- National Fatherhood Initiative, *Mom as Gateway Module*
- 3 classes, all materials included, can run parallel to father's parenting class or separate. Currently free at [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)
  - Another/different: "Am I gatekeeper" quiz?

## Am I important to my child?

What percentage of **dads** (nationally representative sample) think they are replaceable to their child?

- 1 = 0% - 20%
- 2 = 20 - 40%
- 3 = 40 - 60%
- 4 = 60 - 80%
- 5 = 80 - 100%



- Pop's Culture Survey, National Fatherhood Initiative 2006

## Results: % of dads think they are replaceable

- 1 = 0% - 20%
- 2 = 20 - 40%
- 3 = 40 - 60%
- 4 = 60 - 80%
- 5 = 80 - 100%



## Connecting research to strategies and tools (Moms and Dads)

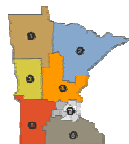
### Research Says

- Mothers do less gatekeeping if they think dad is a competent caregiver
- Less differentiated gender roles can lead to less gatekeeping
- More gatekeeping when lifestyle differences exist

### Tools

- Parenting classes for dad; and/or both parents together
- Coparenting classes
- Parenting Plans

[www.wecanparenttogether.org](http://www.wecanparenttogether.org)



## More Strategies with Dads

### What we do well

Some parents bring certain strengths to the parenting role. Think about the things you do well at and how you might help your child. Think about the strengths of other parents. Sometimes you'll share strengths, sometimes a task is more for one parent than for the other.

How do you think you'll help your child? How do you think you'll help your child? How do you think you'll help your child?

Parent	Child	Parent's Strengths	Child's Needs	How to Help
1	1			
2	2			
3	3			
4	4			
5	5			
6	6			
7	7			
8	8			
9	9			
10	10			

- Address what mom does well – recognize her, even if you're not happy about the situation
- Graduated parenting plans
- Don't fall into "my way or the highway" patterns
- Concrete supports

Concrete support in times of need

- We all need help sometimes

## Creating a Parenting Plan

A written agreement between parents not living together who have a child or children in common

### Parenting Plans consider:

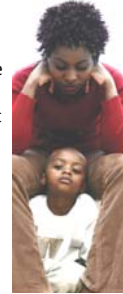
- Parenting decisions
- How to deal with disagreements
- How to make future decisions
- Residential arrangements and parenting time



## Connecting research and tools: Situations of Safety

### Research Says

- More gatekeeping when possible safety concerns exist



COVER

### Tools

- Consider: Harm reduction approach when safety concerns exist
- Professional help: Guardians ad Litem, supervised visitation centers, 1-800-CHILDREN
- *Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact With Current or Former Partners* : [www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)

## Important Resource: YOU Talking with mothers about the importance of fathers & co-parenting



✓ **WHEN YOU RETURN TO WORK**  
(make your elevator speech):

What are 5 benefits that dads bring to kids?

How can improved co-parenting, or decrease in restrictive gatekeeping behaviors, help moms?

## Being comfortable

- If you don't know benefits, hard to convince mom
- Online resources:
  - Infosheet #3: Positive Father Involvement
  - Paternal & Maternal Parenting Styles
  - Infosheet #18: Talking with Moms about Engaging Dads
- How we communicate: Are you comfortable talking about dads?
  - 7% is content and words
  - 38% how we say it/quality of voice
  - 55% visual/body language



How do you start a conversation with mom—  
about dad?

- What activities / conversations can mom use to let dad know he's important? (**invite him in**)
- What resources might ameliorate mom's concerns? (**don't push him away**)
- What resources can reduce barriers to father involvement? (**help with responsibilities**)
- What resources can improve co-parenting? (**improve long-term involvement**)

[www.wecanparenttogether.org](http://www.wecanparenttogether.org)



[www.mnfathers.org](http://www.mnfathers.org)  
[www.epi.umn.edu/MCH](http://www.epi.umn.edu/MCH)