

Families Families Families

info sheet 17



Gatekeeping: Mom as a pathway to healthy father involvement

Many fathers don't walk away—some are pushed away, some are never asked to be involved, and some are not given the help they need to become responsible parents.¹

Mothers play a central role in how fathers are involved with their children, whether they live together or not. Mothers can facilitate or hinder the father's involvement, often serving as gatekeepers between dads and kids.

"Gatekeeping" is the term used in this infosheet to describe the mother's behaviors that act as a gate to open or close the door to father involvement. Gatekeeping is not always a bad thing. It can occur for positive reasons (to protect the safety of the child, for example) but it may also happen for reasons unrelated to the child (to punish a father after a break-up, for example).

This infosheet is intended to help professionals engage mothers to engage the fathers of their children in healthy ways. This document provides ideas for working with families to recognize and eliminate or reduce negative gatekeeping behaviors. The focus here on the mother's role in father involvement is not intended to diminish the father's responsibility to participate in the child's upbringing.

Taking the "long view" of father involvement

Short-term behaviors, such as gatekeeping tendencies, can have long-term impact. "Pushing out" a dad today may mean he is gone forever. Therefore, we encourage professionals to help mothers take the "long view" of father involvement and not get tripped up by the day-to-day disagreements, misunderstandings or differences in parenting that may happen between mothers and fathers. Taking the long view means helping mothers see and recognize the importance of the father as it relates to the child's best interests, not just today or tomorrow but far into the future. It means distinguishing justifiable or fair reasons to limit father involvement from unfair reasons. It means distinguishing safety concerns from different styles in parenting. It means finding appropriate

referrals and resources to help mothers and fathers as individuals and also as coparents when there are safety concerns or poor coparent relationships. Remember, in most instances, keeping the father involved, just like keeping the mother involved, is best for the child. But unlike the involvement of most mothers from birth, father involvement doesn't just happen. The mother plays an important role in how the father is or is not involved. And you, as a professional working with the mom, can influence her as a pathway to healthy father involvement.

Evolving research about gatekeeping

Early research described gatekeeping as a collection of beliefs and behaviors that *inhibit* a collective work effort between mothers and fathers by limiting men's opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children.² But later research emphasized that gatekeeping can be conceptualized more broadly to describe beliefs and actions that a mother may take that limit or *increase* father involvement. This infosheet briefly reviews gatekeeping research.

First, a few disclaimers:

- Gatekeeping is not restricted just to mothers. We focus on maternal gatekeeping because of its important connection to father involvement.
- Maternal gatekeeping should not be thought of as the only or primary barrier to father involvement. The impact of maternal gatekeeping on father involvement will vary widely by such things as whether the parents live together, the parents' beliefs about gender roles, and the parents' history together.
- Gatekeeping may not be conscious or deliberate. For example, a mother may think she is helping to increase father involvement by instructing the father in how to provide care for the child or by leaving lists of things to do with the child, when in fact, this action may lessen father involvement over time.
- Research studies in this area may not be generalizable to the population at large.

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Research and practice tips for helping moms to engage dads in healthy ways

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child and family relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

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Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.



Gatekeeping Matrix: Two scales of gatekeeping

As research around gatekeeping has evolved, two distinct scales of gatekeeping have become evident. The first scale, which we have named the Father Involvement Scale, evaluates the degree to which maternal gatekeeping either facilitates or inhibits father involvement. The second scale, Child Safety and Wellbeing Scale, evaluates the degree to which maternal gatekeeping either promotes a healthy child or fails to consider the impact on a child's safety and wellbeing.

Father Involvement Scale: Research in the 1990s by Sarah Allen and Alan Hawkins conceptualized three elements of gatekeeping that influence mothers (their focus was on married, two-parent households).² The theory is that the more a mother engages in these activities, the more likely she would be to act as a gatekeeper who inhibits father involvement (quadrant 4 of the Gatekeeping Matrix).

What are the mother's standards—and her ultimate responsibilities—for family work? This element includes the mother taking charge of tasks, setting unbending standards, re-doing tasks, criticizing the way the father does household work or child care, or overall "managing" the father's participation. The mother may not trust the father to take care of children if he does not achieve her standards. Or, by managing the household or organizing the child's care, the mother may manage the father's involvement such that he is only a "helper". He does what is requested when asked, but if the mother doesn't accept or trust his skills, the mother may continue to manage his involvement and keep him from taking more responsibility. Fathers may also act in ways that support maternal gatekeeping, for example, by refusing to do or not

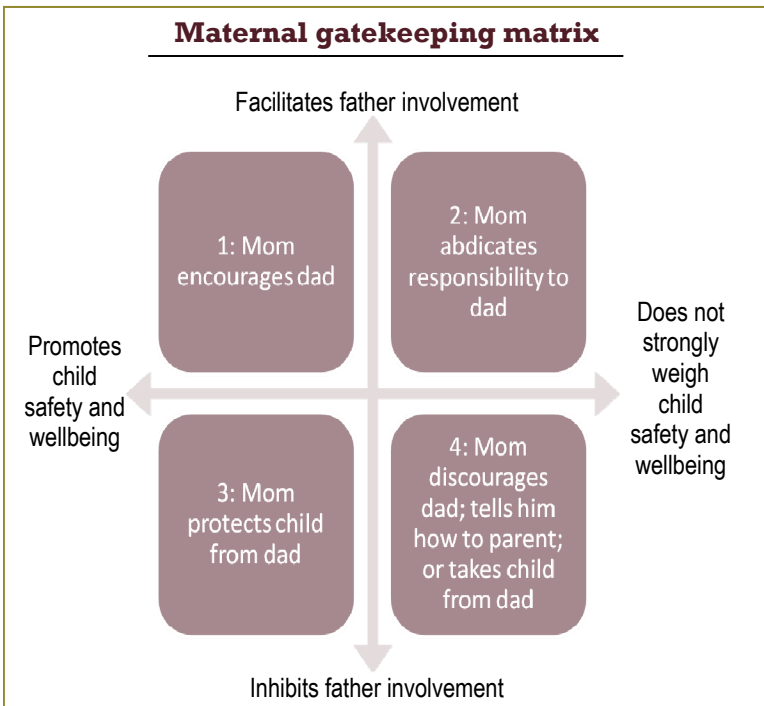
learning how to do certain tasks. But, a mothers' standards also may reflect optimal standards of care for the child, for example, in safety or nutrition, and not be imposed as a way to manage the father's involvement. If done in a supportive manner, sharing standards can provide opportunities for fathers to increase their knowledge of child care and result in both parents being on the "same page".

What is the mother's need for external validation of her identity as a mother? Mothers may hesitate, consciously or not, to share responsibility with fathers for caring for children because this role has traditionally been their exclusive domain in many cultures. Taking care of house and home has served as a way of validating a mother's identity externally and may be a primary source of self-esteem and satisfaction for many women. Some research has shown that the greater the importance the maternal identity is to the mother, the more tendencies she may have to gatekeep.³

How are the family roles differentiated based on gender? Is there a clear division of labor and distinct spheres of influence within the family for the mother and father? Mothers who think family work is only for women may hesitate to encourage father involvement. Some researchers have found that women's traditional beliefs or polarized expectations for family work arrangements were more important than men's beliefs in predicting whether mothers and fathers split family work in a more equal fashion or whether they were likely to leave family work more to women.⁴

Although Allen and Hawkins do not focus on protective behaviors, some mothers will inhibit father involvement for reasons that promote child safety and wellbeing (quadrant 3). These actions would include a limited set of environments where a father is clearly unable or unwilling to create a safe relationship with his child. This quadrant does not include environments, for example, where a mother unilaterally decides to separate a father from his child because the parents are unable to coparent cooperatively.

Child Safety and Wellbeing Scale: The second scale on the Gatekeeping Matrix addresses the degree to which a mother is considering the safety and wellbeing of her child. The theory is that the more a mother considers her child's safety and wellbeing, the higher she would be on this scale (quadrants 1 and 3). A mother who falls on the lower end of this scale (quadrants 2 and 4) is not necessarily promoting unsafe conditions; however, she is not as likely to be considering the importance of safety and wellbeing in her decision making. Take, for example, a mother who stops a father's parenting time because of a recent dispute about money. This mother's gatekeeping would fall into quadrant 4. She has limited the father's involvement and she did so without considering the important ways that the father can create strong benefits for



their child. An example of gatekeeping in quadrant 2 would be a mother who thrusts a child at a noncustodial father after an argument and leaves him with the child for an unknown period of time, without any way to contact her. She may be facilitating father involvement, but not in the healthiest of ways and not with child wellbeing as a primary consideration.

The maternal gatekeeping matrix can be used as a conceptual tool with colleagues and as a practical tool with parents.

Gatekeeping among married parents

Allen and Hawkins conducted a study to see how their theories worked in real life. In their study they classified 21 percent of the mothers as gatekeepers. They found that gatekeeping beliefs and behaviors generally operate as a package deal, with gatekeeping mothers scoring higher than other mothers on all three elements within the Father Involvement Scale. And their research showed that this group did gatekeep: they did five more hours per week of domestic labor than fathers (household chores, child care, etc.) and had less equitable divisions of labor. The number of hours mothers worked outside the home did not affect their likelihood of being a gatekeeper.²



Practice Tip: Help mothers understand that gatekeeping makes them work harder and fails to encourage father involvement. Help them examine their beliefs and behaviors. Show them how to encourage fathers without expecting dads to parent like mothers.

Gatekeeping among new parents

In another study involving mostly married parents living together with a new baby, researchers found that greater maternal encouragement was associated with more father involvement, even after accounting for parents' beliefs about the fathers' role and the overall quality of the coparenting relationship.⁵ They also found that when mothers frequently criticized their partners, they may have "blocked" fathers who thought their role was important from acting more on that belief; but this effect was much less significant than the effect of maternal encouragement. Examples of maternal encouragement included the mother seeking the father's opinion about baby care matters or telling him that he seemed to be making the baby happy. This study is the only one of its kind to look at parents' behaviors in caregiving—using videotapes of parents together with their infants—in addition to the usual questionnaires that measure beliefs and perceptions.



Practice Tip: Help mothers further open the door by encouraging them to encourage father involvement and to eliminate criticism. Especially if you work in childbirth education or with new parents during the transition to parenthood, help mothers and fathers examine their beliefs about father involvement and also their understanding of their joint contributions to the father's role in the day-to-day care of the child.

Gatekeeping among residential vs non-residential parents, and recipients of child welfare services

Looking more closely at the relationship between maternal gatekeeping, fathers' competence, mothers' attitudes about the father role, and father involvement, researchers Jay Fagan and Marina Barnett found a significant negative association between maternal gatekeeping and paternal involvement.⁶ Moreover, mothers reported significantly higher levels of gatekeeping for nonresidential fathers than they did for residential fathers. Mothers' assessment of fathers' parenting abilities impacted father involvement, suggesting that mothers play a significant role in deciding how much time fathers spend with their children, depending on how she perceives the competence of the father.

Fagan and Barnett also studied parents involved in the child welfare system. These mothers, contrary to expectations, did not perceive the fathers of their children to be less competent than mothers in the non-child welfare group. However, the mothers receiving child welfare services reported more negative attitudes about the importance of fathers to children and reported more gatekeeping behavior.



Practice Tip: Provide resources to address the perceived or actual parenting competency of the father. Help moms differentiate between different parenting and harmful parenting. Help mothers understand the importance of fathers to children.

Gatekeeping among unmarried parents not living together

Practitioners who work with fathers sometimes express concern about mothers limiting fathers' access to kids for financial reasons (i.e., mom won't let dad see the child until he pays child support). Studies of mothers not married to the father of their children have found that other factors may be more important (or interplay with lack of support) in mothers' gatekeeping behaviors. These factors include lifestyle differences that create conflict and confusion for the child, behaviors of the father that are potentially dangerous to the child, lying about visits or missing visits, or prolonged father absence.⁷ Children's desires to see the father, and mothers' relationships with their own fathers if they came from single parent families, also influenced mothers' decisions regarding visitation.⁸ Mothers in these studies often felt they were making decisions between perceived benefits (i.e., child gets to see dad) and costs (i.e., dad may be using drugs).



Practice Tip: The best help in these situations may be to suggest resources to accommodate the mother's concerns for safety, or reduction of parental conflict, so mothers feel less pressure to deny parenting time. Consider referrals to separate support groups for mothers and fathers, professional assessments (therapist, guardian ad litem), specific safety resources (supervised parenting time centers, domestic violence interventions,

substance abuse programs, child abuse hotlines), parenting plans, and coparenting resources, as appropriate.

Gatekeeping among teen parents

In a study of teen mothers, researchers found that fathers were perceived as more engaged in caregiving when mothers perceived the parenting alliance as strong.⁹ This was true even after taking into account whether parents were romantically involved and even if the mother believed that the father had high barriers to engaging with his child.

Parenting alliance was defined in this study as the capacity of parents to acknowledge, respect, and value the parenting roles and tasks of each other. Barriers for fathers included: lives too far away, does not have enough time, is not good with young children, maternal grandparents will not let him see his child, visits are too short or infrequent, and does not have enough money. (Only mothers' perceptions of fathers' barriers were studied—fathers were not interviewed.)

For fathers who were not romantically involved with the child's mother, a strong parenting alliance was only linked to increased nurturing activities when barriers were reportedly low.



Practice Tip 1: While strengthening the coparenting relationship is almost always a good strategy for parents, these findings suggest that it is especially important to help young parents strengthen their coparenting relationship in order to foster father-child engagement. Improved coparenting relationships also have additional benefits. Research has linked strong

parenting alliances with lower levels of parenting stress and improved parental functioning for married mothers and fathers.¹⁰ And, because the majority of adolescent mothers are romantically involved with their child's father at the time of birth,¹⁰ it may make sense to focus interventions on these families. As the researchers state: For these fathers, a strong parenting alliance may be just the "push" they need to become and stay actively involved.⁹



Practice Tip 2: When young parents are no longer romantically involved, interventions aimed at decreasing actual barriers to father involvement, along with improving coparenting relationships, may be necessary to foster long-term involvement.

Conclusion

In some instances, gatekeeping can be in a child's best interests. However, in most situations, a strong coparenting relationship is a better route toward improving child wellbeing and increasing father involvement. We encourage practitioners working with mothers to work toward reaching quadrant 1 on the maternal gatekeeping matrix. See MFFN's *InfoSheet 18: Talking with Moms about Engaging Dads* for ideas about how to talk with mothers about the importance of fathers and ways to help mothers move away from inhibitive forms of gatekeeping (www.mnfathers.org/resources.html).

For tools to implement these practice tips and more coparenting resources, go to www.wecanparenttogether.org.

Contribute now

MFFN is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Donations are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law. Donate online at www.mnfathers.org or call for details at (763) 473-7432. Thank you.

1. Paraphrase of Linda Mellgren, In Robert Lerman and Theodore Ooms (Eds.) *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies* (p. 210). Temple University Press, Philadelphia (1993).
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7. Janice Laakso. Key Determinants of Mothers' Decisions to Allow Visits with Non-Custodial Fathers. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*. Vol. 2 No. 2 (Spring 2004): 131-145. Amy Claessens, Gatekeeper Moms and (Un)involved Dads: What Happens After a Breakup? In Paula England and Kathryn Edin (Eds.) *Unmarried Couples with Children* (pp. 204-227). Russell Sage Foundation, New York (2007).
8. Laakso, id.
9. Ted G. Futris and Sarah J. Schoppe-Sullivan. Mothers' Perceptions of Barriers, Parenting Alliance, and Adolescent Fathers' Engagement with their Children. *Family Relations*. Vol. 56 No. 3 (July 2007): 258-269.
10. See internal citations in Futris and Schoppe-Sullivan, id.

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