

Encouraging Fathering in all Kinds of Families: Co-Parenting and Gatekeeping

Fatherhood leadership Circles
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Ellie McCann, Extension Educator
University of Minnesota Extension



The question:

**Co-parenting and gatekeeping –
which is the chicken and which is the egg?**

Co-Parenting

- Describe it
- Advantages and challenges
- How professionals can support co-parenting

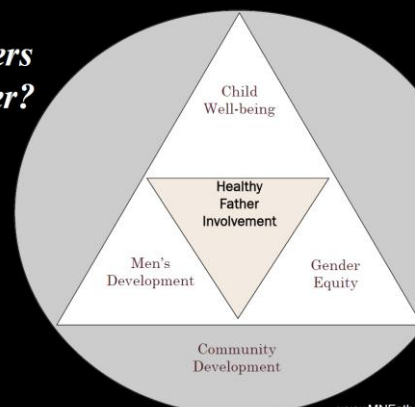
Gatekeeping

- Describe it
- Understand reasons for gatekeeping
- Strategies to open the gate

A Brief Review



Do Fathers Matter?



www.MNFathers.org

Father Engagement Goals for Professionals

Level 3: Achieve father inclusiveness

Level 2: Achieve father friendliness

Level 1: Achieve father awareness

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Does positive father involvement help Mom or Dad?



- Men gain greater emotional literacy.
- Men gain greater ability to care & nurture.
- Men demonstrate higher civic engagement.
- Institutional barriers for parents decrease.
 - Mother-child attachment increases.
 - Mother & father stress decreases.

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True or False

Whether & how a father is involved with his child depends on the quality of his engagement with the child's mother.



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Among Connecticut parents not living together:

Live-with fathers are 9 times more likely to support maintaining child's relationship with live-away mother than vice versa.



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How does this connect to co-parenting?



What is co-parenting?

"Co-parenting" is when both parents work together as a team to raise their children, even after the marriage or romantic relationship is over.

For Our Children – Learning to Work Together, Office of the Attorney General of Texas

Both parents share responsibility for raising and parenting their children

Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for Our Family

Co-parenting: 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?

The co-parenting relationship is different from the romantic relationship.



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

Why is co-parenting important for children?

- Infants and toddlers develop more secure attachments
- Children learn about relationships and cooperation
- A 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 likely to be:

- More responsive to child's needs
- More closely bonded to her child
- Less stressed / depressed
- More in control during labor
- Breastfeed longer



-Fatherhood Institute, 2009

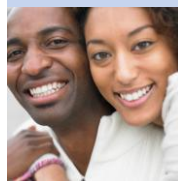
Why is co-parenting important for fathers?

- Fathers learn how to be emotionally responsive to their children and others
- They have a greater ability to care and nurture their children
- Fathers tend to be more civically engaged
- Father involvement strengthens a child's attachment to both parents
- Father and mother stress levels decrease.



What helps fathers successfully co-parent?

The single most powerful predictor of a father's engagement with his child is the quality of the man's relationship with the child's mother.



CO-PARENTING

Coordination and support between adults responsible for the care and upbringing of children

SOLIDARITY ← → **ANTAGONISM**

Cooperation
Warmth and Connection
Affirmation and Validation

Verbal sparring
Undermining
Competitiveness

DIVISION OF LABOR

Level of agreement between parents about who does what and how much

MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT

How engaged or disengaged each adult is with the children

Source: McHale, James P. (2007) *Charting the Bumpy Road to Coparenthood: Understanding the Challenges of Family Life*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

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Can all families co-parent?

Cooperative

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

Conflicted

Constant disagreement, children put in difficult situations

Parallel

Each parent raises their children in their own way and coordinate only when necessary

Disengaged

Separates from the other parent and the children. Very little involvement Not involved in parenting the children

Source: University of Minnesota Extension. 2010. *Parents Forever: Education for families in divorce transition - Impact of Divorce on Children*.

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Qualities of a Successful Co-parent:

- Can communicate and negotiate with the other parent.
- Respects the other parent's ability to care for their child, despite personal differences.
- Sets conflict aside and concentrates on the children.
- Shares control with the other parent and accepts their style of parenting.
- Tolerates differences in child rearing and values – distinguishes between important and not important areas of difference.
- Values what the other parent has to offer the children.



Rating Our Co-parenting Relationship

Review the handout

In small groups talk about how these dynamics play out with the families you work with – or in your own relationship.

Challenges of Co-parenting

- If parents are in conflict, children may be put in the middle.
- When parents can't provide a unified front, children may play one parent against the other.
- If there is abuse, contact between parents may be dangerous.



Advantages of Co-parenting

- Parents have an equal playing field in raising their children.
- Increased satisfaction with their own parenting ability.
- The child has on-going contact with both parents.
- When parents can work out how to parent, the courts are less involved.
- The non-residential parent is able to demonstrate a commitment to parenting.
- Both parents can better balance their own goals and activities.



A few words about grandparents and co-parenting



Positives about Grandparents

- Another attachment figure for child
- Support
- Tactful tips



Five models of family support

- **Parental replacement** –
“I am raising your child for you”
- **Parental supplement** –
“We are all raising this child”
- **Parental apprentice** –
“I will act as your mentor as you learn how to raise your child”
- **Supported primary parent** –
“This is your child and he’s your responsibility to raise”
- **Abandonment** –
no family caregiver available

Source: (Apfel and Seitz, 1991)

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Help Grandparents Understand:

- Benefit to child of having two loving parents
- Perspectives of new parents who need to learn new skills and feel confident
- Child-rearing practices may have changed
- Different child-rearing practices can be valid
- Basics of co-parenting communication skills

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How to Support Healthy Co-Parenting



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What skills do parents need to successfully co-parent?

- Make good decisions
- Effectively communicate
- Manage multi-parental and step family relationships
- Manage anger and conflict, including emotion regulation



Source: Co-parenting Interventions for Unmarried Parents (Unpublished paper, 2009)
Francesca Adler-Baeder and Karen Shirer

Creating a Parenting Plan

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

Parenting Plans consider:

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



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Co-parenting isn't easy...

- How you each view gender roles
- Trust and gate keeping
- Different ideas about child rearing
- Communication and decision making skills
- Finding ways for each parent to build their relationship with the child
- If you are in a committed relationship – how to be good parents and maintain the couple relationship
- If you are no longer in a relationship with the other parent – how to create a co-parenting relationship to meet the needs of your child



Gatekeeping and how to open the gate



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

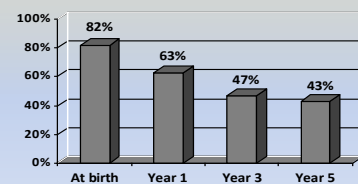


Maternal Gatekeeping

- 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



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.

Why does gatekeeping occur?

On a post-it note describe:

- A good reason for gatekeeping
- An example where gatekeeping is not justified

Reasons for Gatekeeping

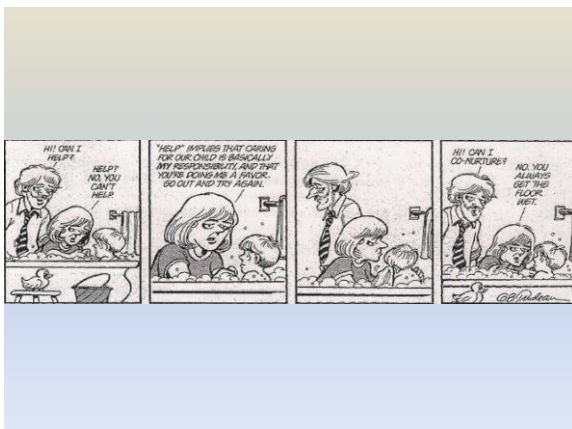
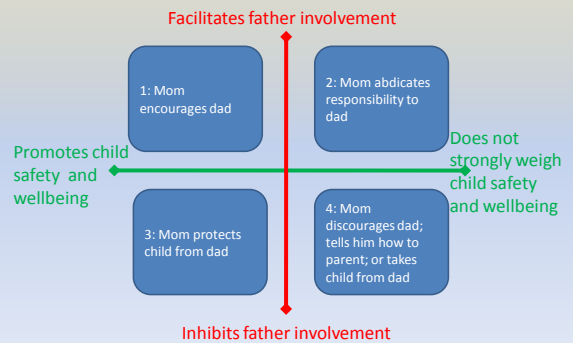
- Belief in gendered parenting (held by either parent)
- Need for mother to feel validated as mother
- Power/control over *mother's domain*
- Too high standards of parenting
 - Allen and Hawkins 1999 (married parents)
- Pessimistic assessment of father's competency
 - Fagan and Barnett 2003 (residential 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

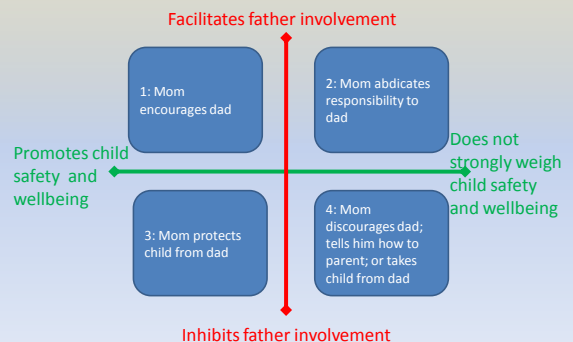
- Moms do more.
 - Allen & Hawkins 1999
- Dads do less.
- Caregiving
- Time with child
- Decision making (school, health care, etc)



Maternal Gatekeeping Matrix



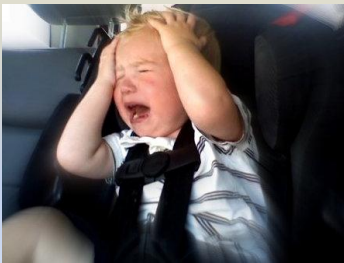
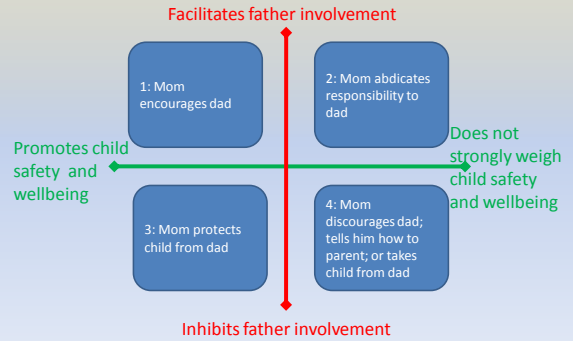
Maternal Gatekeeping Matrix





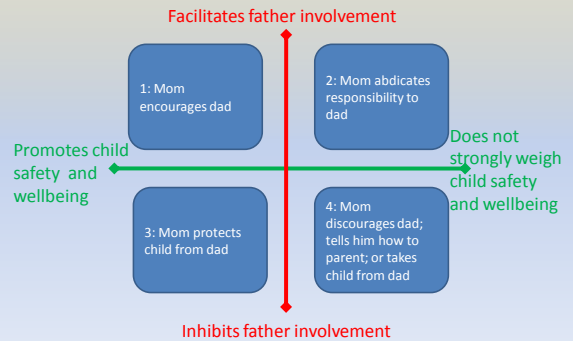
Dad thought this was funny. Mom decides that Dad isn't responsible enough to care for Leo.

Maternal Gatekeeping Matrix



Jack is upset – Dad doesn't know why. Mom just dropped him off and took off!

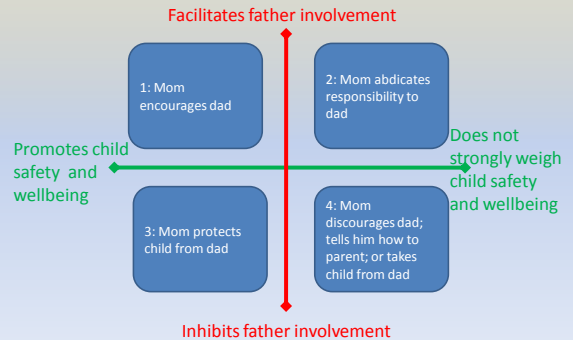
Maternal Gatekeeping Matrix



Mom is gone today.

- Here's the list she left:
- 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)

Maternal Gatekeeping Matrix



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

The dynamics of gatekeeping

On a post it note:

- **Describe what mothers can do to open the gate**
- **Describe what fathers can do to open the gate**

Discuss the following questions with a partner:

How can I improve my work

- with mothers to address gatekeeping?
- with fathers to promote family engagement?



Underlying Message

Mom: let go a little



Dad: step up to the plate

www.wecanparenttogether.org



www.extension.umn.edu

www.mnfathers.org

For Professionals: www.mnfathers.org

The statewide Minnesota Fathers & Families Network is your one-stop shop:

- Educational resources
- Trainings
- Conferences & Networking
- Public Policy
- News about fathers & fatherhood field



Become a member or join their email list-serve for free.