



# Predictors of Maternal Gatekeeping: Do Fathers' Characteristics Matter?

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## Abstract

The aim of this research was to examine the relative contributions of mother- and father-reported maternal, paternal, and couple characteristics to maternal gatekeeping. Using paired data from 166 couples, we performed a backward, stepwise regression. Results indicated *maternal perceptions of couple conflict, maternal health and safety knowledge, and father-reported home visiting expectations* predicted maternal gatekeeping.

## Introduction

Father involvement in early childhood has been linked to:

- Better cognitive outcomes (Roggman, 2004)
- Lower levels of internalized disorders (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid & Bremberg, 2008)
- Lower levels of problem behaviors in children (Choi & Jackson, 2011).

Given these potential benefits to children, it is important that we better understand the reasons why mothers may restrict or limit fathers' involvement with their children.

## Review of Literature: Maternal Gatekeeping

### Maternal Gatekeeping

- "A collection of beliefs and behaviors that ultimately inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work by limiting men's opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children." (Allen & Hawkins, 199, p. 200)

### Maternal Predictors

- Lower educational attainment (Gaunt, 2008)
- Lower perception of social support outside the home (Kulick & Tsoref, 2010)
- Maternal endorsement of traditional gender roles (Allen & Hawkins, 1999)

### Paternal Predictors

- Lower income (Coley & Morris, 2002)
- Negative emotionality (Cannon et al., 2008)
- Non-resident status (Fagan & Barnett, 2003)
- Lower father involvement (De Luccie, 1995)
- Lower parenting competency (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; McBride et al., 2005)

### Couple Predictors

- Higher levels of couple conflict (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000)
- Undermining coparenting behaviors (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010)
- Low quality prenatal (Schoppe-Sullivan & Mangelsdorf, 2013) and postnatal couple relationship quality (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010)

## Aim

The aim of this research was to more fully consider the role of maternal psychological functioning and examine the relative contributions of mother-reported and father-reported maternal characteristics, paternal characteristics, and couple characteristics to maternal gatekeeping.

## Sample

### Tennessee Dad®

- An in-home parenting education program for low-income fathers.
- Data stem from baseline surveys gathered via a Qualtrics phone survey instrument.

### Sample

- Fathers and mothers (N = 166 couples)
- Mothers (71% white, mean age = 23.60, SD = 5.47)
- Fathers (61% white, mean age = 26.7, SD = 7.56)
- All female participants were either pregnant with or had recently given birth to the focal child.
- All male participants were either (a) residential biological fathers of the focal child, (b) residential non-biological father figures of the focal child, or (c) non-residential biological fathers who live within 30 miles of the mother.
- 51 couples were married, 105 were romantically involved in a steady relationship, and 10 were in on-and-off relationships

## Measures

### Maternal gatekeeping

9 items, 4-point *SD* to *SA* scale. Sample item: "If my baby is upset, I think I should be the one to comfort her, not [Dad Name]." Alpha = .88.

### Mother-reported couple conflict

10 items, 4-point *Never* to *Almost Always* scale. Sample items: "Over the past month, how often have you had conflict with your spouse/partner about each of the following issues? ... chores, drinking." Alpha = .79.

### Father-reported home visit expectations

8-item 4-point *SD* to *SA* scale. Sample item: "I can benefit from home visiting services." Alpha = .87.

### Child health and safety knowledge

4 item multiple choice test. Sample item: How should you put your infant to sleep? On his/her (a) back, (b) stomach, (c) side.

## Analysis

Pair-wise correlations of mother- reported maternal gatekeeping with all theoretically relevant (mother- and father-reported) maternal, paternal, and couple characteristics were used to identify significantly correlations.

- 5 *maternal characteristics* (all mother-reported depression, financial stress, parenting role satisfaction, knowledge of children's health and safety, and home visiting expectations)
- 3 *paternal characteristics* (father-reported role satisfaction and home visiting expectations, mother-reported engagement)
- 4 *couple characteristics* (all mother-reported; relationship quality, couple conflict, alliance quality, and marriage expectations)

Stepwise regression with a *p* value cut-point of .10 was performed beginning with a model including all predictors.

## Results and Implications

### Significant Predictors

- Maternal perception of couple conflict ( $\beta = .52, p < .001$ )
- Maternal health and safety knowledge ( $\beta = -.23, p < .05$ )
- Father-reported home visiting expectations ( $\beta = -.33, p < .05$ )

Each accounted for variance in maternal gatekeeping beyond the prediction afforded by the others ( $R^2 = .31$ ).

- Results confirm the central role of one key couple construct – couple conflict (as reported by mothers).
- Mothers who performed better on the child health and safety test were less endorsing of gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors.
- Fathers who reported an interest in home visit sessions were less likely to be gate-kept.
- Interventions should focus on the co-parenting relationship, especially reducing couple conflict.
- More research is needed to understand the sole, significant (negative) paternal predictor – fathers' expectations about home visiting. It seems fathers who are eager to participate in home visiting are less likely to be gate-kept.