Predators 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 (Pagano, 2000)
• Lower levels of internalized disorders (Sulkunen, Kristiansen, Oberklaid & Brennan, 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
• “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 & Kovalev, 198, p. 200)

Maternal Gatekeeping
• Lower educational attainment (Gurnier, 2006)
• Lower perception of social support outside the home (Rudicke & Toedt, 2010)
• Maternal endorsement of traditional gender roles (Allen & Kovalev, 1999)

Paternal Predictors
• Lower income (Coley & Meinle, 2005)
• Negative emotionallty (Careau et al., 2008)
• Non-resident status (Anger & Barnett, 2009)
• Lower father involvement (Peterson, 2005)
• Lower parenting competency (Anger & Barnett, 2009; Melbrido et al., 2003)

Couple Predictors
• Higher levels of couple conflict (Chickering & Stones, 2006)
• Undermining coparenting behaviors (Anger & Scheppe-Sullivan, 2010)
• Low quality prenatal (Scheppe-Sullivan & Mahtani, 2012) and postnatal couple relationship quality (Meltzoff, 2011)

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 (β = .52, p < .001)
• Maternal health and safety knowledge (β = -.23, p < .05)
• Father-reported home visiting expectations (β = -.33, p < .05)

Each accounted for variance in maternal gatekeeping beyond the prediction afforded by the others (R² = .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.

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