



**FATHERTOPICS™  
BOOSTER SESSION**

**National  
Fatherhood  
Initiative®**  
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# Mom As Gateway™

## INTRODUCTION

In most married or cohabiting American families, mothers and fathers divide their family roles and tasks to achieve maximum efficiency as they raise children. Even when parents expect during pregnancy that they will divide employment and family roles evenly, most new parents take on gender stereotypic roles after the birth of their first child and thereafter (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Even when both parents work outside the home, fathers more often take on the dominant role as economic provider. Regardless of how much each parent works outside the home, mothers generally assume primary responsibility for childcare and associated responsibilities inside the home. In divorced and unmarried families, mothers most often assume legal guardianship of children. Consequently, children most often reside with them, resulting again in mothers' assumption of primary responsibility for their care on a daily basis.

This booster session focuses on “maternal gatekeeping.” Despite an increase in joint custody and the recognized importance of fathering among divorced, separated, or never-married couples, mothers continue to typically serve as the primary caretakers of children, particularly in their children's early years. Even when mothers and fathers are equally or near equally involved in raising children, mothers often feel a sense of ownership or that they have primary rights toward the children in comparison to fathers. This feeling can result from some combination of biology (mothers carry the children in pregnancy and give birth) and social roles selected by many parents—and reinforced by societal expectations—that currently sanction mothers over fathers as primary caretakers of children.

Maternal gatekeeping refers to a mother's protective **beliefs** about the desirability of a father's involvement in their child's life, and the **behaviors** acted upon that either facilitate or hinder collaborative childrearing (often called “shared parenting” or “co-parenting”) between the parents. While each parent undoubtedly serves as a gatekeeper of his or her child's safety and optimal development throughout the child's life, maternal gatekeeping toward fathers has been the subject of research and the focus of concern among divorced families, for the reasons explained above. Maternal gatekeeping occurs regardless of whether parents are married, divorced or unmarried, and regardless of the parents' satisfaction with the relationship between them.

The cognitive aspects of maternal gatekeeping include preferences or beliefs about the father's involvement, satisfaction with his involvement, and the mother's view of the father's competence as a parenting figure. The behavioral aspects can include how the mother speaks about the father in the presence of their child; to what extent the father is included or updated on the child's health, schooling or social life; and the extent to which the mother communicates to the father that she knows what is best for their child and the correct way to do things—while he does not.

The motivations for maternal gatekeeping vary widely. They depend on individual, couple, and familial circumstances and situations. Mothers might have a difficult time relinquishing familial responsibility, might want to validate their identity as “the mother” and garner recognition for their “maternal” or “feminine” contributions to the family, or might view the father as incompetent or even dangerous to the child. This latter view might be based either on actual evidence, the father's past behaviors, or her personal perceptions of him and his failures in the male familial role. Furthermore, she might be protective of her child purely as a function of the child's age. If the child is not old enough to verbalize his or her own needs and desires, she might feel qualified to make decisions and judgments for that child, thus becoming the monitor, supervisor, permission grantor, and controller of all others' involvement with the child—including the father's.

Studies have demonstrated that when mothers perceived their partners as motivated and competent to engage in child care responsibilities, fathers were more involved in childcare. The father-child relationship is thus based on a triangle that includes father, child, and mother. In research on divorced parents, positive gatekeeping (that which supports and facilitates shared parenting) is linked to the mother's beliefs about the importance of the father's involvement and her duty to help nurture and facilitate it. The fathers' positive gatekeeping response is linked to his acknowledgment that the mother's role in his relationship to his child is a real and valid one.

When the father is less involved in raising his child or finds his access to his child constantly hindered and blocked by the gatekeeping actions of the mother, the ability of the child to adjust to parental divorce is weakened. The gatekeeping can damage the father-child relationship and the parents' ability to cooperate and keep their conflict levels low and out of the child's earshot or awareness. It is well established that conflict, low levels of cooperation, and less father involvement contribute to the child's academic, behavioral, and social difficulties in the short and long term. Maternal gatekeeping therefore poses an important and powerful threat to the vitality of the father-child relationship and the overall well-being and adjustment of the child.

The objectives of this booster session are to: 1) increase mothers' awareness of what gatekeeping is, how it operates, and how it is sometimes misused out of anger and hurt; 2) offer concrete examples that will facilitate mothers' understanding of the negative impact of excessive gatekeeping and the importance of supporting father involvement; and 3) engage mothers in exercises that will facilitate the reduction of restrictive maternal gatekeeping<sup>1</sup> behaviors that inhibit father engagement.

Use this booster session as a stand-alone booster session whether or not you use a fathering program. It also serves as an ideal companion to NFI fathering programs such as 24/7 Dad®, InsideOut Dad®, and 24/7 Dad® Key Behaviors Workshop. This booster session helps mothers to gain awareness and learn skills that will help them support father involvement, as the dads learn what they can and need to do to actively and positively engage in their child's upbringing. Mothers should participate in this booster session concurrently with the fathers' participation in these NFI programs (e.g. as fathers start the program, mothers start this booster session). Ideally, you should conduct the booster session over several weeks (i.e. one of the three smaller sessions per week) and then bring mothers and fathers together when the mothers have completed the three smaller sessions to discuss what they have learned and how they will act on it together. You can also use this booster session with other fathering programs.

## RESEARCH REFERENCES

### Primary Source

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Cowan, P.A., Cowan, C.P., Cohen, N., Pruett, M.K. & Pruett, K.D. (2008). Supporting fathers' involvement with kids. In J.D. Berrick & N. Gilbert (Eds.), *Raising Children: Emerging Needs, Modern Risks, and Social Responses*. Oxford University Press, 44-80.

Pruett, K.D. (2000). *Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*. New York: Free Press.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "restrictive gatekeeping" acknowledges that gatekeeping occurs on the part of both mothers and fathers, and that in some instances gatekeeping is needed to protect children. "Restrictive gatekeeping," however, refers to instances of gatekeeping when it is not called for/appropriate.

## SESSION 1:

# The Role of the Gatekeeper

## PRE-SESSION PROCEDURES:

1. Assemble the chairs in a circle. Leave enough comfortable space between chairs so that the mothers don't feel crowded.
2. Have nametags and a magic marker set out for mothers as they walk into the room.
3. Have the flip chart in the front of the room with two or three different colored magic markers.
4. Place blank pieces of paper or note pads on each chair with pens or pencils for each mother.
5. Provide a folder for each mother that she can use to keep handouts, notes, etc. from the sessions.
6. Provide refreshments, if possible.
7. Write the name(s) of the group facilitator(s) on the flip chart.
8. Have the scenario detailed in procedure #5 in Activity 1.1 written on the flip chart.

**ACTIVITY 1.1** Introductions and Defining Gatekeeping

**TIME** 20 minutes

**MATERIALS** Flip chart, magic markers, name tags, snacks, & beverages

## FACILITATOR'S GOAL:

To welcome the mothers and define **gatekeeping**.

## PROCEDURES:

1. As the mothers enter the room, greet them and invite them to make a nametag and to help themselves to snacks and beverages.
2. Welcome all of them to the session.
3. Ask each mother to introduce herself and share a little about her family.
4. Mention that this session will provide them with an opportunity to better understand the need for healthy shared or co-parenting relationships, and to learn how they might support fathers as the other half of their parenting team on behalf of their child. Mothers will become more aware of how they support or create barriers to the father's involvement in their child's life as they seek to protect their child from unhealthy influences.



As fathers participate in a 24/7 Dad® or another fathering program, and learn what they need to do to be the best parent they can be, mothers will learn how to support the fathers in their role as father.

5. Have mothers break into groups of four to discuss the following scenario or any of the alternative scenarios. (If anyone knows each other, try to arrange the groups so that all of the mothers are with strangers rather than acquaintances or friends. If you choose an alternative scenario, use the same questions.) Read the scenario.

**Scenario: Suppose you are a security guard for a public building.**

- a. **What are your responsibilities?**
- b. **How do you decide whom to let in and whom to keep out?**
- c. **What would you look for in people’s demeanor and behavior that makes you trust or be suspicious of them?**
- d. **Which of your observations are based on your own stereotypes and personal experiences?**

Alternative scenarios depending on the group composition:

- Suppose you are a customs official in an immigration office.
- Suppose you are an airline official at the security checkpoint.
- Suppose you are the bouncer/doorman at a nightclub.

6. Bring the moms back together and share their responses. Write the responses on the flip chart. Summarize what kinds of beliefs or actions on both people’s part engender openness to entrance to the building, and what beliefs or actions engender refusing them entrance.



7. Explain that a **gatekeeper** is someone who supervises and maintains boundaries for a person or place. Someone who acts as a gatekeeper of a secured building, for example, monitors the access to this building and makes sure that only authorized or legitimate persons are allowed in. The gatekeeper’s job is to make certain no one enters who will act in ways that hurt the members inside the building, increase the likelihood of a theft, or gain access to information to which they have no right.



**NOTE TO FACILITATOR:**

Think about the composition of the group when you choose a scenario. Ask whether the mothers will have experienced any of these situations and, if not, whether they will be challenged to relate to the scenario.

