

# ADAPTIVE AND MALADAPTIVE GATEKEEPING BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD OUTCOMES AFTER SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

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*Gatekeeping has been used as a theory and a measure to describe and assess family dynamics within the context of separation and divorce. Although originally focused on maternal gatekeeping behaviors that either facilitate or restrict the father's involvement with the child, recent attention has expanded gatekeeping to a gender-neutral framework for assessing the ways in which both parents' behaviors and attitudes can impact the involvement and the quality of the child's relationship with the other parent. While gatekeeping intersects with interparental conflict, parent alliance, and parent-child relationships, gatekeeping provides a unique perspective for assessing and measuring behaviors and attitudes that facilitate or restrict the other parent's relationship with the child. In this paper, we explore adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes that can affect the other parent's relationship with the child. Implications are presented for connecting adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping responses to child outcomes of safety, wellbeing, and positive parent-child relationships following separation and divorce. We build on the recent attention to gatekeeping as a potential framework within the child custody context.*

Key points for Family Court Community:

- Gatekeeping is a useful framework for assessing parental behaviors and attitudes that can facilitate, protect or restrict the involvement of the other parent with the child.
- Gatekeeping originally focused on maternal behaviors that facilitate or restrict the involvement of fathers with the children,
- Attention has shifted toward a more gender neutral framework for assessing how parents' attitudes and actions affect the involvement and quality of the relationship between the other parent and child.
- Rather than a set of hardline rules that govern behaviors, gatekeeping requires working hypotheses to consider the various factors that may contribute to both adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping responses.

**Keywords:** *Separation and divorce; Parent-child relationships; Gatekeeping; Adaptive; and Maladaptive*

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## Case Study

Rob (age 38) and Anne (age 37) were married for 7 years and have one child named Emily (age 4) from their union. Nearing the end of the marriage, Anne became increasingly dissatisfied with Rob's substance use (both in the presence of Emily and outside the matrimonial home). Rob's use of alcohol and crack cocaine created strain on the family. Anne filed for divorce when she found out that Rob was involved in an affair with her best friend. Following the separation, Rob did not have contact with Emily for a period of four months. He attended a 30-day addiction program and he began doing random drug testing once a week (where Anne received emails from the drug clinic indicating the outcome of the test) in order to regain contact with Emily. Since being drug-free, Rob has been visiting with Emily every other weekend supervised at his parents' home. Rob has recently purchased a home in close proximity to Anne's home and he is wanting more contact with Emily. He said he eventually wants to share parenting time but at this time, he wants more time with Emily and he wants the opportunity to have unsupervised visits in his new home. Anne wants to support the time that Rob spends with Emily but is concerned about his past substance use and his overall consistency as a parent.

### *Preliminary assessment of the case study*

Gatekeeping has been used as a theory to describe family dynamics within the context of separation and divorce (Drozd, Olesen & Saini, 2014). Although gatekeeping alone should not be the sole basis for making decisions regarding child custody disputes, it can nevertheless provide a useful framework for generating hypotheses regarding the parents' behaviors and attitudes about the child's relationship with the other parent and the impact of gatekeeping on the child's overall safety and wellbeing. Some preliminary questions based on the above case study may include:

- What attitudes and behaviors demonstrated by the parents facilitate or interfere with the other parent's involvement with Emily?
- Anne has concerns that Rob may abuse drugs while Emily is in his care, are these concerns warranted (protective gatekeeping) or unwarranted (unjustified restrictive gatekeeping)?
- Why was it important for Anne to receive Rob's drug testing results by email?
- How does Rob view Anne's concerns about Emily spending time in his care?
- What were Anne's reasons for restricting Rob's contact with Emily for the first four months after the separation?
- Does Rob support Emily's relationship with Anne? What are some examples of this?
- Do either parent's behavior during the exchanges have an impact on Emily's relationship with the other parent?
- What strategies could be put in place to limit the safety concerns so that Anne supports more contact between Rob and Emily?
- How can the concept of gatekeeping inform our understanding of this case?

In this paper, we will build on a growing body of literature on gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Austin, Pruett, Kirkpatrick, Flens, & Gould, 2013b; Ganong, Coleman, & Chapman, 2016; Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007; Trinder, 2008) to explore these questions by considering facilitative and restrictive gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes. We will also extend the concept of gatekeeping to consider whether facilitative and restrictive gatekeeping is adaptive or maladaptive to the child's overall safety and wellbeing. Gatekeeping can complement other

factors that should be included in a comprehensive assessment of family dynamics post separation, including parental attunement, parent competency, parent-child attachment, parent-child conflict, age, special needs, and development of the child, to name a few.

### **Introduction to Gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping is a set of beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes about the child's relationship with the other parent that can influence the amount of time a child spends with that parent, the quality of that relationship, and the other parent's overall involvement (Trinder, 2008). Allen and Hawkins (1999) originally defined maternal gatekeeping within intact families as a "mother's reluctance to relinquish responsibility for family matters setting rigid standards, wanting to be ultimately accountable for domestic labor to confirm to others and to herself that she has a valued maternal identity, and expecting that family work is truly a woman's domain" (p. 205). In metaphoric terms, gatekeeping involves leveraging control of the other parent's influence and access to the child by either opening the gate to support the other parent's relationship with the child or closing the gate to restrict the other parent's relationship with the child (Austin et al., 2013b; Trinder, 2008). Gatekeeping develops throughout parental relationships in both intact and separated families and can define parental roles and tasks according to parent's availability and expertise and how the other parent perceives these roles (Austin et al., 2013b).

The conceptualization of gatekeeping has sparked a growing body of research that has explored mothers' beliefs and attitudes about fathers' role in the family and the involvement of fathers with the children in intact families (Holmes, Dunn, Harper, Dyer, & Day, 2013; McBride et al., 2005; Trinden, 2008). McBride et al., (2005) for example, studied intact families and found an association between mothers' support of the fathers' involvement and fathers' positive self-perception of themselves as parents and their physical presence with their children. Likewise,

Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski (2008) found a correlation between mothers' expressions of progressive beliefs about the equal distribution of household chores and parenting duties and parents reporting greater father involvement. Further, Cannon et al., (2008) found an association between fathers' progressive beliefs about their role and their reported feelings of competency in their interactions with their children. In contrast, Holmes et al., (2013) found a relationship between mothers who exhibited restrictive gatekeeping (e.g., not permitting the father to take part in child care duties) and adolescents reporting that their mothers as psychologically controlling and less involved with them. Maternal gatekeeping and maternal interference with father-child relationships can harm mother-child relationship as well (Holmes et al., 2013; Walper, Kruse, Noack, & Schwarz, 2005).

### **Parental identity and implications for gatekeeping**

According to Allen and Hawkins (1999), maternal gatekeeping has been understood as a means of mothers limiting the father's involvement of both childcare responsibilities and household chores as a way to maintain control of family work and remain at the center of family life. Likewise, Gaunt (2008) highlighted the conceptual association between gatekeeping and traditional women's identity by suggesting that women can gain power from family work because it reinforces their maternal identity.

More recently, Pedersen (2012) studied married couples and found that fathers and mothers view themselves differently in their roles within the family. Mothers often perceive good parenting as being reliable, providing a predictable structure, and consistent discipline, whereas fathers tend to perceive good parenting as participating in family life and spending time with children. At the same time, mothers also tend to feel pressure from the demands placed on them to comfort and nurture the children. Feinberg and Kan (2008) found that when fathers are

supportive of the mothers, mothers can feel more competent as parents. Kulik and Tsoref (2010) also found that when mothers are more educated, wealthier, hold more liberal gender role ideologies, and perceive more support from extended family, they are significantly less likely to restrict the fathers' time with the children.

Fathers have been found to view the importance of their role as providing an alternative to the mothers' roles (Pedersen, 2012). Fathers have described their roles as being more logical whereas they tend to view the mothers' role as more emotional. Fathers tend to perceive themselves as providing support to mothers, but often do not perceive child rearing as their main responsibility (Pedersen, 2012), but this perception of gender roles tends to be changing with more fathers involved in instrumental parenting duties (e.g., changing diapers, making meals, doing laundry, etc.).

Research on fathers' involvement has also found a link between the fathers' identity as a parent and the amount of time they are in the physical presence of their children (McBride et al., 2005). In a study of 30 two-parent families, McBride et al. (2005) found that the more fathers spend time in their children's presence, the better fathers felt about their role as a parent and this was related to whether mothers believed that the fathers should be involved. When mothers were more supportive, fathers tended to be closer to their children and feel more competent as parents.

Men in intact relationships are typically more likely to be involved and interested in their roles as fathers when the coparenting relationship is satisfying. In a study of intact families, Brown, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, and Neff (2010) defined supportive coparenting as parents' ability to respect the other parent, recognize the other parents' abilities, while also cooperating with the other parent when parenting issues arise. When parents believed that their

coparenting relationship is positive, fathers tended to cite greater encouragement and less criticism from the mothers.

In summary, the growing body of research about parental relationships with their children in intact families seems to suggest that parental roles and their availability of the parents with the children tend to be associated and influenced by the other parent's views and perceptions of the potential benefits of the involvement of the other parent. When a parent supports the contribution of the other parent, this seems to influence the amount of time and the quality of the relationship with the children. Gatekeeping develops throughout parental relationships and it defines roles and tasks according to parent's availability and expertise. An understudied aspect of gatekeeping is the potential influence of context specific factors, such as culture, religion, and attitudes toward perceived gender differences.

### **Gatekeeping in the context of separation and divorce**

The concept of gatekeeping has expanded to include: 1) both mothers and fathers as gatekeepers; 2) gatekeeping as a continuum that varies in degrees; and 4) a growing attention of gatekeeping in the separation and divorce literature (Austin et al., 2013b; Austin, Fieldstone, & Pruett, 2013a; Austin, 2011; Austin, 2005a; Austin, 2005b; Pruett et al., 2007).

Mothers have been found to have a significant contribution to facilitating father-child relationships post-separation (Cannon et al., 2008; Moore, 2012). Fagan and Barnett (2003) studied both residential and non-residential fathers and found that greater restrictive maternal gatekeeping behaviors were reported with non-residential fathers than with residential fathers. They found that mothers reported non-residential fathers as less competent, thus increasing the likelihood that mothers would choose to restrict the time the father spends with the children. Sano, Richards, and Zvonkovik (2008) found that 20% of the separated mothers interviewed did

not trust the fathers and maintained control over access to the children because the mothers were concerned with their children's safety when the children were in the care of their fathers, including concerns about the father's substance abuse, violence, abuse, and criminal activities.

By introducing a gender neutral conceptualization of gatekeeping, Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little (2003) opined that the level of mutual support and regard for the other parent are important determinants for assessing gatekeeping behaviors. They found that if mothers and fathers experienced positive feelings towards the other parent, there was an increased chance that the other parent would be involved with the children. Similarly, in a study among fathers one-year after divorce proceedings, Madden-Derdich and Leonard (2000) found that fathers who felt supported by their ex-partners in maintaining their relationship with their children also reported being able to positively interact with their ex-spouses on issues of childrearing and decision-making. Likewise, Whiteside and Becker (2000) found that the prior relationship between parents before the separation can influence the time the parents spend with their children after the separation. Therefore, it appears that gatekeeping is context specific and depends on the quality of the prior relationship between parents, the reasons for and events surrounding the separation (e.g., violence, traumatic separation, feelings of betrayal), the time passed since separation, ages of the children, and any special needs of the children, to name a few.

### **Gatekeeping continuum in child custody disputes**

Austin et al. (2013b) described a gatekeeping continuum in the context of custody disputes, ranging from facilitative to restrictive. In custody dispute situations, parents who engage in facilitative gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes are more likely to demonstrate flexibility in the parenting plan arrangements, such as exchanging the children between homes

and maintaining telephone contact. They may also support the child's relationship with the other parent, allow for a symbolic representation (photos) of the other parent in each home and are more likely to speak positively about the other parent and actively encourage the child's relationship with the parent (Austin et al., 2013b; Austin et al., 2013a; Pruett et al., 2007).

Restrictive gatekeeping practices in custody disputes often involve higher conflict situations that result in numerous court appearances, limiting children's contact with the other parent, interfering with ongoing contact, and/or a rigid compliance with the parenting plan orders or agreements (Austin et al., 2013a). They may also not permit the child to have photographs of the other parent, they may ask the child to keep secrets from the other parent and may withhold information about the child to the other parent (Austin et al., 2013b; Austin et al., 2013a; Pruett et al., 2007).

Pruett et al. (2007) interviewed fathers and mothers going through the process of divorce and both parents described facilitative behaviors to include being flexible regarding the parenting schedule and encouraging contact with the other parent. In contrast, restrictive behaviors were described as rigidity in the parenting schedule and not allowing children to communicate with the other parent by telephone.

Scholars have also separated restrictive gatekeeping as either unjustified or justified (Austin et al., 2013a). Unjustified gatekeeping has been referred to as behaviors and attitudes that interfere with the child's relationship with the other parent without foundation for these interferences, such as a parent's questioning the competence of the other parent to appropriately parent without basis for the concerns and parent's anger that contributes to the parent wanting to punish the other parent by interfering with the child's time with that parent. In contrast, justified restrictive gatekeeping involves attitudes, actions, and/or legal positions designed to limit the



other parent's access, contact, or involvement with child based on stated reasons that such involvement would place the child at risk for harm, emotional distress, behavioral problems, adjustment difficulties, or negative developmental impact (Drozd et al., 2014). Justified restrictive gatekeeping may occur when a parent acts to limit the other parent's involvement because of concern about possible harm to the child or when a parent believes the inhibitory behaviors serve a protective function (see Austin et al., 2013a, for a discussion about justified versus unjustified restrictive gatekeeping).

### **Assessing for gatekeeping**

Despite the growing attention in the published literature and conference proceedings on gatekeeping, there remains little attention on the assessment of gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes. Further, no studies have distinguished gatekeeping from other constructs, such as parental alliance, interparental conflict, alienation, and justified estrangement (Austin, 2011; Drozd et al., 2014; Ganong et al., 2016; Pruett et al., 2007). Ganong, Coleman, and McCaulley (2012) stated the "lack of measures of gatekeeping behaviors is of a concern" (p. 391) and they encourage the field to develop operational definitions of gatekeeping behaviors.

A search for published literature on gatekeeping has found four measures of gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Pruett et al., 2007; Puhlman, 2013). Allen and Hawkins (1999) developed a measure to assess mothers' perceptions of standards and responsibilities, maternal identity, and differentiated family roles. Fagan and Barnett (2003) developed the Gatekeeping Behaviors Measurement to assess the degree to which mothers restrict access of their children to the father. Puhlman (2013) developed a three dimensional tool to measure gatekeeping, including control, encouragement, and discouragement to represent the maternal gatekeeping construct. Rather than exclusively targeting maternal gatekeeping, Pruett et

al. (2007) developed a gatekeeping questionnaire to examine gatekeeping within the dynamics of the family, which included nineteen statements about past and present couple, parent-child, and triadic (parent-parent-child) dynamics. Likewise, Austin et al. (2013a) developed a Bench Book for judges to assess parental gatekeeping in parenting disputes along a continuum of facilitative to restrictive gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes.

With the exception of Pruett et al. (2007) and Austin et al. (2013a) gatekeeping measures primarily focus on maternal gatekeeping to assess the degree to which mothers restrict access of their children to their father. It is important to assess for facilitative and restrictive gatekeeping by both parents (Austin et al., 2013a; Pruett et al., 2007).

Gatekeeping is only part of a larger coparenting process. Several proxy measures of gatekeeping have been used in the literature (e.g., father involvement, parent alliance, interparental conflict, etc.) suggesting that gatekeeping is a dyadic and complex process, and therefore, gatekeeping should not be considered in isolation (Drozdz et al., 2014). Further research should also explore the connection of these coparenting dynamics with this emerging understanding of adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping framework.

### **Impact of gatekeeping on children**

Austin et al. (2013b) discussed social capital as a way to describe the impact that gatekeeping and coparenting relationships have on limiting children's access to the other parent. "Social capital refers to the benefit a child derives from the social and psychological resources available to him or her in a particular living environment, community, or family, especially in the most significant relationships for the child" (p. 490). Therefore, when both parents practice facilitative gatekeeping, this enables children to benefit from the resources that are within their parents' environment. On the other hand, when parents use restrictive gatekeeping tactics,

children cannot benefit from these resources. Limiting the child's relationship with the other parent can weaken the parent-child relationship and can hinder the children's ability to develop with the positive influences of social resources found in the other parent's environment.

Although there remains a lack of research specific to the impact of gatekeeping on children, studies have suggested that parents who are able to disentangle from hostility after separation are generally more focused on the safety and wellbeing of their children, more sensitive and responsive to their children's needs, less likely to use parenting techniques based on their own states, wishes, and general ideas, and more likely to have positive feelings of efficacy in their parenting roles (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Saini, 2012; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999).

Protecting children from the negative consequences of separation and divorce can help to reduce levels of stress due to effects of the family breakdown (Amato & Keith, 1991), as well as reduce externalizing problems (Sandler et al., 2008). Sandler et al. (2008) found that lower levels of conflict between the parents and the warmth of the relationship of each parent with the child were associated with decreased levels of internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety. Neither gender nor child age was correlated with child reports of warmth by their mother or father. Children had the fewest internalizing problems when they had positive and warm relationships with both parents, suggesting that children do best when their parents are able to shelter them from the presence of conflict, and meet their needs for warmth, attention, affection, support, and affirming parent-child relationships.

### **Adaptive and Maladaptive Gatekeeping**

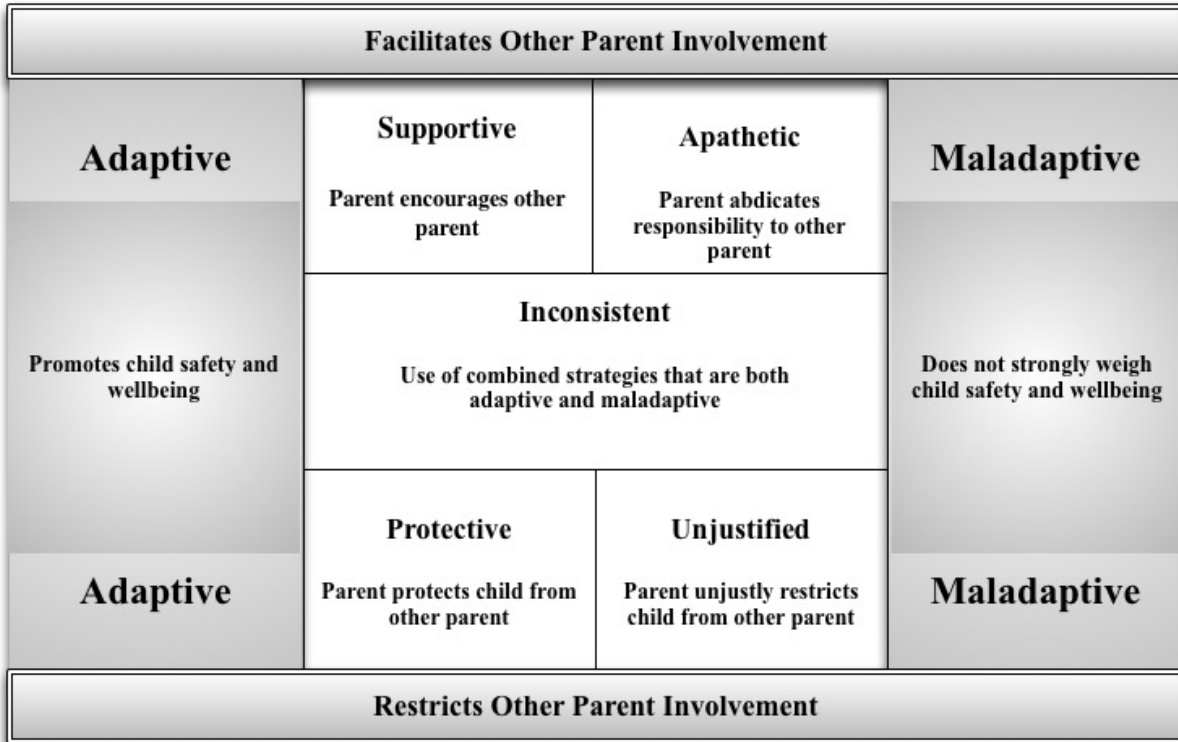
Some parents are able to prioritize their children's needs to have a positive relationship with both parents, despite their own emotional difficulties with adjusting to the separation of the

adult relationship. Other parents seem to limit the children's relationship with the other parent because of their own struggles with separating their feelings towards the other parent. There are also some parents who seem to restrict the other parent due to their belief they need to protect the child from the other parent's behaviors (e.g., use of drugs, inconsistency of spending time with the child, previous and ongoing violence, etc.) (Saini, Drozd, & Olesen, 2016).

Given the conceptual connection between gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes with the impact of gatekeeping on the children's sense of safety and wellbeing, we suggest that gatekeeping should be assessed based on the nexus between the gatekeeping behaviors (facilitative or restrictive) and the consequences (either positive or negative) on the impact of children's sense of safety, wellbeing and the quality and time they spend with each parent.

Within this conceptual model, the paramount focus is the impact of gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes on the child's safety and wellbeing. The child's safety includes protection against physical, psychological, emotional, social, spiritual, or other types of harm or non-desirable consequences. The child's wellbeing includes the dynamic state of the child that is enhanced when the child can fulfill his/her personal, relationship and social goals. Based on the focus of the child's safety and wellbeing, we define adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping as the degree to which gatekeeping either promotes a healthy child or fails to consider the impact on a child's safety and wellbeing.

**Figure 1 – Adaptive and Maladaptive Gatekeeping Typologies**



The more the parent considers the child’s safety and wellbeing, the higher the parent would be on the left side of the diagram (Adaptive Gatekeeping). A parent who falls on the right side of the diagram (Maladaptive Gatekeeping) is not necessarily promoting unsafe conditions; however, they are not as likely to be considering the importance of safety and wellbeing in gatekeeping decision making.

Adaptive gatekeeping is related to either “facilitative – supportive” (behaviors and attitudes that promoted the child’s relationship with the other parent that seemed to benefit the child) or “restrictive – protective” (behaviors and attitudes that restricted the child’s relationship with the other parent with respect to the child safety and wellbeing).

Contrarily, maladaptive gatekeeping is related to either “facilitative - abdicating” (resigning to allow the child to be with the other parent but failing to consider the impact on the child’s overall sense of safety, wellbeing, and feelings about the quality of the other parent’s

relationship) or “restrictive – unjustified” (behaviors and attitudes that interfered with the child’s relationship with the other parent based on the parent’s inability to separate his/her own struggles, feelings of anger, and/or betrayal resulting from the family breakdown.

### ***Adaptive Gatekeeping***

Adaptive gatekeeping occurs when parents seek to encourage and support the child’s sense of safety and wellbeing, by either encouraging the child’s relationship with the other parent in a safe situation, or protecting the child if they need to be protected from the other parent.

#### **Facilitative - Supportive Gatekeeping**

Facilitative – supportive approaches to gatekeeping include: acknowledging other parent’s strengths; flexibility and accommodation in supporting the time that the child spends with the other parent; actively supporting the child’s relationship with the other parent; focusing on the child’s wellbeing; and encouraging supportive coparenting relationships (Pruett et al., 2007).

Being flexible, accommodating, and supportive of the other parent is considered central to facilitative- supportive gatekeeping. Flexibility in the schedule is related to parents supporting the child to contact the other parent, and allowing the child to contact the other parent (e.g., telephone, email, text messages) when the child is away from them and in the other parent’s care.

Acknowledging the strengths of the other parent and speaking to children in positive terms about the other parent can also have a positive impact on the child’s relationship with both parents. Being able to separate the marital relationship from the interests of the child is another important characteristic of facilitative-positive gatekeeping.

#### **Restrictive - Protective Gatekeeping**

Restrictive – protective actions are described as attempts to limit the child’s contact with the

other parent arising out of concerns about the child being harmed by the other parent. These rational motivations to restrict the time with the other parent may benefit the child, such as in situations of intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect and in cases of parental substance abuse (Austin, 2008). The term “protective gatekeeping” was first coined by Leslie Drozd (as cited in Austin, 2008) to explain the benefits of limiting or monitoring the other parent’s time with a child to shield the child from potential harm due to dangerous and unsafe parenting practices and/or the risk of harm due to the risk of abuse. In these situations, concern about safety takes precedence over the desire to help the child maintain ties with the other parent (Ganong et al., 2016). In cases of previous intimate partner violence, Hardesty and Ganong (2006) found that even when mothers encourage the child with the father, the mother is more likely to monitor the interactions of the child with the other parent to ensure the child remains safe while in contact with the other parent.

### ***Maladaptive Gatekeeping***

Maladaptive gatekeeping emerges as behaviors and attitudes that fail to consider the impact on the children’s safety and wellbeing while spending time with the other parent or that interferes with the child’s relationship with the other parent based on the gatekeeper parent’s own struggles with separating his/her feelings towards the other parent. Gatekeeping in these situations seem to be based on the parent’s own needs (e.g., to get revenge against the other parent, difficulties in coping with the family breakdown, mental health issues, etc.).

### **Facilitative - Apathetic Gatekeeping**

Some parents may appear uncaring, apathetic or disengaged to adequately protect the child from risk of harm with the other parent due their own struggles to cope with the family breakdown, mental health problems, unresolved trauma, fear of being harmed by the other parent or the fear

of being blamed for not supporting the child's relationship with the other parent. A parent who ignores, either directly or indirectly, the signs that the child may not be benefiting from the contact with the other parent may facilitate access to the other parent despite the signs that the contact with the other parent may pose risk to the child.

Another form of apathetic gatekeeping is when a parent does not adequately prepare the child for the contact with the other parent (e.g., not advising the child of the scheduled pick up, not assisting the child to pack a travel bag, etc.) because of their own discomfort with interacting with other parent or dealing with the other parent during transitions, which can result in the child not feeling prepared to engage with the other parent. Although on the surface the parent appears to be facilitating the child's relationship with the other parent (e.g., compliant with the court order for access, not speaking negatively about the other parent in front of the child, etc.) the parent's lack of supportive gatekeeping may further strain the child's relationship with the other parent and may impact the child's overall wellbeing.

Abdicating the sole decision making powers to the child in deciding whether to have contact with the other parent is another strategy used by some parents when they do not want to support the child's relationship with the other parent but do not want to appear as though they are restricting the child's relationship with the other parent. Although children generally want to share their perspectives in the parenting plan arrangements (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012), placing the child in the sole decision making role without without parent input may not be helpful for child's overall sense of wellbeing as they attempt to navigate complex parent-child relationships.

### **Restrictive / Unjustified Gatekeeping**

Restrictive –unjustified gatekeeping is as a strategy to interfere with the child's relationship with the other parent or to become overly rigid in the parenting plan so as to limit the child's time



with the other parent. A parent's dislike of the other parent and ongoing interparental conflict may be contributing factors for not supporting the child's relationship with that parent. Similar to alienating behaviors, restrictive -unjustified gatekeeping may also be related to a parent's own mental health problems and psychological disturbances (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2012). This prevents the parent from considering the potential value of the other parent's relationship to the child.

There are numerous examples of how parents attempt to interfere with the child's relationship with the other parent, including denigrating the other parent by communicating extremely negative views about the other parent to the child; disclosing private information to the child in hopes that the parent would be perceived as the better parent; being routinely late for scheduled exchanges; not answering the telephone during scheduled telephone contact with the child and the other parent; not respecting the other parent's contribution to the child; and not informing the other parent about information pertinent to the child.

### ***Inconsistent Gatekeeping***

Inconsistent gatekeeping refers to the lack of an organized pattern of gatekeeping (facilitative or restrictive). In these situations, decisions may not be based solely on the child's safety and wellbeing. Instead, parents may vacillate between non-protection and appropriate protection and overprotection. With the desire to support the other parent's relationship while still struggling with the emotional turmoil of the separation, attempts to facilitate the relationship with the other parent may be interrupted by interparental conflict, hostility and sabotaging behaviors. These inconsistent interactions might be characterized by a high degree of boundary ambiguity (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999) about the perceived roles of each parent as the family reorganizes itself post separation. As Cole and Cole (1999), suggest the

“ghosts of the past fade in and out at both expected and unexpected times in the lives of both the formerly married and their children” (p. 271). As parents struggle to support the child’s relationship with the other parent, they may also be struggling to see the value of the coparent relationship. The uncertainty about the other parent’s motives can create inconsistent feelings about whether to support the child’s relationship with the other parent or whether to restrict that relationship.

## **Discussion**

Gatekeeping has its roots in efforts to explain maternal behaviors that either facilitate or restrict a father’s involvement with the children. Scholars expanded the concept of gatekeeping to include a gender-neutral framework for assessing how parents’ (both mothers and fathers) attitudes and actions impact the involvement and quality of the other parent’s relationship with the child (Austin et al., 2013a; Drozd et al., 2014; Pruett et al., 2007; Trinder, 2008).

There are factors that need to be considered when assessing for gatekeeping within separated families. These factors include gatekeeping patterns formed in the parental relationship prior to the family breakdown, the parents’ adaptation to the separation and extent to which a parent can separate their negative feelings about the other parent and separation from the children and; a parent’s perception of the other parent’s ability to care for the children after separation, parents’ concerns regarding the children’s needs for safety and wellbeing, and the degree that a parent accepts and supports the contribution of the other parent for the children (Austin et al., 2013b; Austin et al., 2013a; Pruett et al., 2007).

Gatekeeping can be assessed on a continuum that varies in degrees from facilitative to restrictive on the issue of supporting the other parent-child relationship (Austin et al., 2013a;

Pruett et al, 2007) and can also be assessed based on adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes, which are distinctly different dimensions regarding whether the behaviors and attitudes protect or hinder the child's safety and overall wellbeing. Focusing on adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping emphasizes that not all facilitative gatekeeping supports and protects the child's safety and wellbeing, and not all restrictive gatekeeping should be considered maladaptive. Ganong et al. (2016) identified certain safety concerns, such as domestic violence and substance abuse, when a parent's restricting behaviors to limit the child's time with the other parent may be assessed as protective and not maladaptive. Conversely, the results suggest that not limiting the child's time with the other parent may also be considered maladaptive, especially when non-interference can fail to protect the child from the risk of harm.

### ***Strategies for Assessing Adaptive and Maladaptive Gatekeeping***

The case study of Rob and Anne, presented at the beginning of this paper, provides an example to explore adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes. Anne's concerns about Rob's previous drug abuse can be viewed within a restrictive-protective gatekeeping lens due to her concerns regarding Emily's safety and wellbeing while in Rob's care. Her concern for the child's ongoing safety may explain Anne's request to continue receiving Rob's drug test results. Viewed as a restrictive-protective gatekeeping strategy, this hypothesis suggests that Anne is attempting to manage boundaries and regulate Rob's access and involvement with Emily. Despite Anne's intention to protect the child, Rob may view Anne's monitoring as a reflection of Anne not encouraging his relationship with Emily, and as an attempt to interfere with his relationships by discouraging, or being critical, of his involvement with Emily. Rob may view Anne's restricting behaviors as evidence that she is upset about his affair and her continued hurt feelings regarding the family's breakdown.

These contrary hypotheses can be a starting place for a mental health professional (e.g., mediators, parenting coordinators, therapists, etc.) working with a family to best understand both positions and interests of the parties. Connecting intentions, attitudes, and actions of the parents may assist in uncovering fears and concerns each party shares to help them come up with mutually satisfying parenting plans to address the child's overall feelings of safety and wellbeing.

Both parents can be encouraged to move towards more positive feelings about the involvement of the other parent and to build a facilitative-supportive gatekeeping approach that supports the other parent. Consequently, both parents can participate in childrearing responsibilities. Both parents can be encouraged to increase the level of the other parent's participation and involvement with the child by equally supporting the child's safety and wellbeing, but must do so in a manner that protects the child from risk of future harm.

### ***Future Directions***

Gatekeeping is part of a larger analysis of the coparenting process, but it provides a unique contribution to understanding coparental dynamics (Puhlman, 2013). Although both mothers and fathers can express facilitative and restrictive gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes, the family systems theory suggests that reciprocity is a major factor in understanding family functioning (Cox & Paley, 1997). Accordingly, further research should explore gender differences in meanings assigned to both fathers and mothers and the potential impact of these differences for the children involved (Puhlman, 2013).

The new conceptual model of considering adaptive and maladaptive gatekeeping is the first step in making better connections between gatekeeping behaviors and attitudes, the perceived and actual impact of gatekeeping on children's outcomes of safety, and a child's

wellbeing and the quality of his or her relationship with both parents. Future studies should consider how children themselves experience parental gatekeeping and the impact of gatekeeping based on these experiences. Under a family systems approach, gatekeeping should not be considered in isolation, but should be part of a comprehensive assessment of the multiple factors that can influence parent-child relationships, can impact a child's safety, can impact a child's wellbeing, and foster positive relationships with both parents.

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