

Longitudinal Relations between Maternal Gatekeeping and Father Responsibility

Elizabeth A. Cannon*

Abstract

The current study examined relations between child characteristics and father responsibility and maternal gatekeeping (mothers' attempts to either limit or encourage fathers' parenting) and father responsibility across the infant's first year using self-report and observational data from 64 two-parent families. Results showed that child gender and temperament interacted in relation to father responsibility, such that fathers were more involved with difficult boys and less involved with difficult girls. Furthermore, positive and negative dimensions of maternal gatekeeping were related to different types of later father responsibility. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Introduction

Mounting evidence highlights the positive consequences of father involvement in childrearing for children's development (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). However, fathers still lag behind mothers in child care responsibility (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Thus, researchers have continued to investigate factors that may facilitate or hinder father involvement (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Some have suggested that mothers may act as "gatekeepers," controlling fathers' involvement with their children (DeLuccie, 1995). Maternal gatekeeping is typically defined as a collection of beliefs and behaviors that may inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work (Allen & Hawkins,

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1999). My collaborators and I conceptualize gatekeeping as consisting of both *inhibitory* and *facilitative* behaviors engaged in by mothers with the goal of regulating father involvement (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Szewczyk Sokolowski, in press).

Several investigations suggest the existence of maternal gatekeeping and its hypothesized influence on father involvement. For example, Beitel and Parke (1998) found that both maternal and paternal attitudes about paternal roles were related to observed levels of paternal activity. In 1999, Allen and Hawkins identified a subset of mothers they classified as gatekeepers who actually did 5 more hours of family work per week than more collaborative mothers. Most recently, McBride et al. (2005) found that mothers' beliefs about the roles of fathers moderated the association between fathers' role investments and their involvement. Although these studies suggest the existence of gatekeeping, none have assessed the essence of the gatekeeping construct - the behaviors mothers engage in to regulate father involvement. The one published study to date (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., in press) that operationalized maternal gatekeeping behaviorally (and used observations to assess it) did find evidence that gatekeeping curtailed father involvement. However, this study was limited by its focus on concurrent relations between maternal gatekeeping and father involvement rather than longitudinal relations.

Perhaps because of the failure of previous research to assess the behaviors that constitute gatekeeping, the existence of maternal gatekeeping and its potential to influence levels of father involvement have not gone unchallenged. Many researchers assert that a father's involvement is more self-determined than partner-determined (e.g., Nangle, Kelley, Fals-Stewart, & Levant, 2003), or that the gatekeeping notion misplaces blame on mothers for low levels of father involvement (Walker & McGraw, 2000). Others suggest that maternal gatekeeping may be as much a consequence as a cause of fathering behavior (Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Szewczyk Sokolowski, 2008).

In addition to mothers' behaviors, child characteristics may also affect fathering. One such characteristic is child gender. Extant studies have found that fathers spend more time caregiving with sons and are more available to sons than daughters (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002; NICHD, 2000). As well, child temperament has been shown to relate to fathering. Temperament is defined as consisting of biologically-based individual differences in reactivity and self regulation; a child with a difficult temperament has irregular biological functioning, low adaptability to novel stimuli and situations, and high-intensity negative affect (Rothbart & Bates, 1998). Volling and Belsky (1991) found that fathers were less affectionate and responsive with 9-month-olds described as more difficult by mothers.

Some research suggests combinations of children's gender and temperament may be most relevant for understanding fathering behavior. For example, Manlove and Vernon-Feagans (2002) found mothers reported that fathers were more available to temperamentally easy sons than to difficult sons, and McBride, Schoppe, and Rane (2002) found that less sociable female children had less involved fathers than more sociable female children. Thus, temperament, gender, and the interactive effects of temperament and gender warrant investigation as potential influences on fathering behavior.

The present study utilized both observations and parental reports of maternal behavior to examine longitudinal relations between maternal gatekeeping and fathering behavior (responsibility for child care) in families with young infants. Specifically, I addressed three questions: 1) Do children's gender and temperament relate to father responsibility? 2) Do gender and temperament interact in relation to father responsibility? and 3) Is early maternal gatekeeping behavior related to later father responsibility?

In regards to question one, consistent with the extant research (e.g., NICHD, 2000), I predicted that fathers would be more responsible for sons than daughters. As for temperament, I expected that fathers would be less responsible for difficult infants, also

drawing from the prevailing research (e.g., Volling & Belsky, 1991). With respect to question two, I predicted that fathers would be more responsible for less difficult sons and daughters than more difficult sons and daughters, but that fathers would be more responsible for more difficult sons than for more difficult daughters. Finally, considering question three in light of the extant research (e.g., Allen & Hawkins, 1999), I predicted that early inhibitory gatekeeping behavior would be related to low levels of later father responsibility. Though facilitative gatekeeping is less often explored in the literature, I expected that early facilitative gatekeeping would be related to high levels of later father responsibility. Moreover, I predicted these associations would be found even when controlling for mothers' work hours, a robust predictor of father involvement (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

Method

Participants

One hundred and three two-parent families expecting a child were recruited for a longitudinal study of family transitions conducted in a Midwestern city in the United States. Data were collected in the third trimester of pregnancy (Phase 1), when infants were 3.5 months (Phase 2), and when they were 13 months old (Phase 3). At recruitment, expectant parents were married (96%) or cohabiting (4%) for an average of 4.10 years ($SD = 3.06$ years). Sixty-three percent were first-time parents. Expectant parents were mostly European American (83% mothers; 81% fathers). The average age of expectant mothers was 29.09 years ($SD = 4.58$ years), and the average age of expectant fathers was 31.82 years ($SD = 6.90$ years). Expectant parents were typically college-educated and had a family income of \$51,000 to \$60,000 per year; however, education ranged from "some high school" to "Ph.D. or equivalent degree," and income ranged from "less than \$10,000" to "over \$100,000." At Phase 2, 97 families returned to the study. Of the children born to these families, 45 were female and 52 were male and at the time of the Phase 2 assessment, the average age of infants

was 3.69 months ($SD = 10.66$ days). At Phase 3, mothers' work hours ranged from "0-10 hours per week" to "41-50 hours per week." Mothers typically worked 11-20 hours per week.

Sixty-four of the 97 families who participated at Phase 2 participated again at Phase 3 when their infants were approximately 13 months old. First-time parent status, race/ethnicity, age, education level, family income, marital status, months married, and mothers' work hours did not differ significantly between Phases 2 and 3.

Procedure

Parents completed a maternal gatekeeping questionnaire and a home-based assessment at 3.5 months postpartum. During the assessment, parents and their infants participated in a triadic (mother-father-infant) interaction episode in which parents played for 5 minutes together with their infant. When infants were 13 months old, parents completed a questionnaire assessing child care responsibility.

Measures: 3.5-Month Assessment

Parents' reports of gatekeeping. Parents each completed an adapted version of the Parental Regulation Inventory (Van Egeren, 2000). Respondents use a 6-point scale (1 = *never*; 6 = *several times per day*) to describe how frequently the mother responds to the father's parenting behaviors with encouragement (e.g., "tell your partner how happy he makes your child"/"tells you how happy you make your child") or criticism (e.g., "look exasperated and roll your eyes"/"looks exasperated and rolls her eyes"). Summary scores for parents' perceptions of encouragement (9 items; $\alpha = .82$ for mothers and $.88$ for fathers) and criticism (8 items; $\alpha = .83$ for mothers and $.82$ for fathers) were created.

Observed gatekeeping. Two trained coders rated the triadic interaction episode for the following dimensions (adapted from Bayer, 1992): *maternal negative control* (attempts to limit the father's interaction with the infant), and *maternal facilitation* (support for the father's interactions with the infant; 1 = low; 5 = high). Coders overlapped on 28% of the

tapes to determine reliability. Within-one-point agreement was 89% for maternal negative control and 100% for maternal facilitation. Gammas for the two variables were .77 and .86, respectively.

Infant temperament. Parents each completed the 6-month version of the Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (ICQ; Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbury, 1979), a 28-item questionnaire that probes the temperamental characteristics of infants. There are four subscales in total (*fussy-difficult*, *unadaptable*, *dull*, and *unpredictable*); for the purposes of this study, we will focus on the fussy-difficult and unadaptable scales, given that difficult and unadaptable temperament has been shown to be related to lower levels of father involvement and availability (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002; McBride et al., 2002). Alphas for the fussy-difficult and unadaptable scales were .79 and .77 for mothers and .75 and .82 for fathers, respectively. Additionally, infant temperament was assessed by trained observers. Immediately after the home visit at 3.5 months, observers completed a 23-item modified version of the ICQ based on their viewing of the entire series of interactions videotaped in the home as well as their own experiences with the infant during the visit. The primary observer overlapped on 37% of the home visits with other observers. Interrater reliability gammas ranged from .62 to 1.00 on the four scales ($M = .84$), and interrater agreement within one scale point ranged from 71% and 100% ($M = 86%$). The Cronbach's alphas of the observer fussy-difficult and unadaptable scales were .93 and .91, respectively. A composite infant temperament variable (*difficult temperament*) was created by summing fussiness/difficulty and unadaptability reported by each parent and the primary observer, and standardizing and combining these three scales.

Measures: 13-Month Assessment

Father responsibility. Parents completed an adapted version of the Parental Responsibility Scale (McBride & Mills, 1993). Respondents reported the percentage of time

each of 14 child care tasks (e.g., taking the child to the doctor, making babysitting arrangements) was the responsibility of the mother, the father, or both. Alphas for mothers' and fathers' reports across the responsibility categories ranged from .68 to .85. We combined parents' reports for each category and computed summary scores reflecting: 1) sole father responsibility (responsibility of father only); and 2) joint responsibility (responsibility of father and mother together).

Results

Do children's gender and temperament relate to father responsibility?

Means and standard deviations for study variables appear in Table 1. In order to determine if there were significant differences in father responsibility for sons vs. daughters, *t*-tests were conducted comparing boys and girls on sole father responsibility and joint (shared father and mother) responsibility at 13 months. Both tests were non-significant. As for temperament, there were no significant correlations between difficult temperament and either measure of father responsibility (see Table 2).

Do gender and temperament interact in relation to father responsibility?

Difficult temperament, gender, and the interaction between temperament and gender were entered as a block of variables in regression equations predicting sole father responsibility and joint responsibility. The interaction between difficult temperament and gender emerged as a significant individual predictor of sole father responsibility, $\beta = .34, p < .05$. However, this interaction was not significant when predicting joint responsibility. Upon obtaining the significant interaction in the equation predicting sole father responsibility, the interaction was graphed and probed according to procedures detailed by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006). This graph is shown in Figure 1. As indicated, fathers had more sole responsibility with less difficult girls and less sole responsibility with more difficult girls. For

boys, the finding was just the reverse; fathers had less sole responsibility with less difficult boys and more sole responsibility with more difficult boys.

Is early maternal gatekeeping behavior related to later father responsibility?

Associations between mothers' work hours and father responsibility. Since maternal work hours have been shown to be a robust predictor of father responsibility and involvement (see Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), correlations between mothers' work hours at 13 months and father responsibility were examined. As expected, mothers' work hours were significantly and positively related to sole father responsibility. The more mothers worked, the more sole responsibility fathers had; however, mothers' work hours were not related to joint (shared) responsibility. These findings are intuitive, considering that mothers working may require parents to split child care responsibilities but may not necessarily prompt them to share responsibility for different tasks.

Associations between maternal gatekeeping and father responsibility. Numerous significant (or marginally significant) correlations were found between maternal gatekeeping behavior at 3.5 months and father responsibility at 13 months (See Table 2). When mothers were observed to inhibit fathers' parenting at 3.5 months, fathers had more sole responsibility at 13 months ($p < .05$). Yet when mothers were observed to facilitate fathers' parenting at 3.5 months, fathers had less sole responsibility at 13 months ($p < .05$). As for parents' reports of gatekeeping, when parents reported that mothers were highly critical early on, there was less later joint responsibility ($p < .10$), and when parents reported that mothers were highly encouraging early on, there was more later shared responsibility ($p < .05$).

Regression equations predicting father responsibility from maternal gatekeeping while controlling for mothers' work hours. Hierarchical linear regression equations were used to examine the contributions of maternal gatekeeping behavior to the prediction of sole father and joint responsibility, controlling for mothers' work hours (See Table 3). In both equations,

mothers' work hours were entered on the first step, with the four maternal gatekeeping variables (criticism, encouragement, negative control, and facilitation) entered on the second step. The overall equation predicting sole father responsibility was significant; moreover, maternal facilitation was significant as an individual predictor of sole father responsibility. Maternal negative control was a marginally significant individual predictor ($p < .10$) as well in this equation. The overall equation predicting joint responsibility was not significant, but maternal encouragement was marginally significant ($p < .10$) as an individual predictor.

Discussion

This study represents an important step in understanding potential effects of child characteristics on father responsibility as well as the relations between maternal gatekeeping behaviors and fathering over the course of the infant's first year. Strengths of this investigation include quantifying maternal gatekeeping in terms of specific behaviors, using both observations and parents' reports of gatekeeping, and employing a longitudinal design. Overall, results suggest that different aspects of father responsibility (sole vs. joint) may be influenced differently by aspects of children's characteristics and maternal behaviors.

In particular, results showed that although there were no significant relations between child characteristics and father responsibility (a finding not uncommon due to the difficulty in detecting straightforward associations between child gender and temperament and parenting variables; McBride et al., 2002), child gender and temperament did interact in relation to sole father responsibility. Specifically, fathers tended to be more solely responsible for boys if they had a difficult temperament, but less solely responsible for girls if they had a difficult temperament. An earlier study actually found the contrary: that fathers were more available to temperamentally easy sons than to difficult sons (Manlove & Vernon-Feagans, 2002). In our study, fathers had the most responsibility for sons with highly difficult temperaments, perhaps because fathers may feel indispensable in the parenting sphere and more confident

taking on sole responsibility for difficult sons. Such feelings may stem from the existence of adequate cultural scripts for fathering sons (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2006). However, as daughters became more difficult, fathers had less sole responsibility for them, likely due to the paucity of cultural scripts for fathering daughters, especially difficult daughters.

As for the relations between early maternal gatekeeping behaviors and later father responsibility, results revealed that early inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors were related to more sole father and less joint responsibility. On the other hand, early facilitative gatekeeping behaviors were associated with less sole father and more joint responsibility. Many of these relations held after controlling for maternal employment. These results highlight the importance of considering the positive as well as the negative dimensions of maternal gatekeeping, as it is clear that mothers' inhibitory and facilitative behaviors are associated with different forms of father responsibility. Namely, mothers' encouraging behaviors were related to low levels of sole father responsibility and high levels of joint (shared mother and father) responsibility; fathers may feel more comfortable sharing responsibility when they feel supported by mothers, or perhaps these fathers are the ones who require guidance and do not feel comfortable taking on sole responsibility for child care tasks. Conversely, mothers' criticizing behaviors were resonant with high levels of sole father responsibility and low levels of joint responsibility; in such a case, fathers may be more likely to take on child care responsibilities on their own to avoid mothers' criticism. Another interpretation of this latter finding is that fathers who had high levels of sole responsibility at 13 months may have been highly responsible at 3.5 months, and their high level of responsibility may have threatened mothers' identities as primary caregivers of their infants. Thus, maternal gatekeeping behaviors may be as much a reaction to as a modifier of fathering behavior, consistent with one prior study (Cannon et al., 2008).

In sum, these findings challenge some of the prevailing notions about influences of gender and temperament on fathering as well as influences of gatekeeping on fathering.

Further research should extend this work to examine relations among maternal gatekeeping and fathering behavior as children develop and move beyond infancy.

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Appendix

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
<i>Child Temperament</i>			
Difficult Temperament	2.75	0.62	1.60-4.60
<i>Parents' Reports of Maternal Gatekeeping: 3.5 Months</i>			
Maternal Criticism	2.28	0.68	1.25-4.06
Maternal Encouragement	3.75	0.64	2.44-5.39
<i>Observations of Maternal Gatekeeping: 3.5 Months</i>			
Maternal Negative Control	2.05	1.10	1.00-5.00
Maternal Facilitation	2.10	0.83	1.00-5.00
<i>Parental Responsibility Scale: 13 Months</i>			
Sole Father Responsibility	16.45	8.47	3.21-45.29
Joint Responsibility	33.18	16.33	2.68-70.79

Table 2

Intercorrelations Among Mothers' Work Hours, Observed and Reported Maternal Gatekeeping at 3.5 Months, and Paternal Responsibility at 13 Months

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
<i>Demographic Variables</i>								
1. Mothers' Work Hours		-.15	.21 ⁺	.15	.19	-.16	.46**	.00
<i>Child Temperament</i>								
2. Difficult Temperament			-.05	.04	.15	-.10	.05	-.05
<i>Parents' Reports of Maternal Gatekeeping</i>								
3. M Criticism				-.15	.09	-.05	.17	-.24 ⁺
4. M Encouragement					.15	.01	.14	.26*
<i>Observations of Maternal Gatekeeping</i>								
5. M Negative Control						-.23 ⁺	.34**	-.08
6. M Facilitation							-.38**	.05
<i>Parental Responsibility Scale</i>								
7. Sole Father Responsibility								-.11
8. Joint Responsibility								

Note. ⁺ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$; M = Maternal.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Sole Father and Joint Responsibility at 13 Months from Maternal Gatekeeping Behaviors at 3.5 Months

Variables	Sole Father Responsibility			Joint Responsibility		
	β	ΔR^2	F	β	ΔR^2	F
Step 1		.21	14.72**		.00	.00
Mothers' Work Hours	.46**			.00		
Step 2		.16	5.85**		.13	1.45
Maternal Criticism	.04			-.22		
Maternal Encouragement	.11			.24 ⁺		
Maternal Negative Control	.21 ⁺			-.09		
Maternal Facilitation	-.29*			.01		

Note. ⁺ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1. Interaction between child gender and temperament when predicting sole father responsibility.

