

How new moms assess their partners' ability to parent

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New mothers take a close look at their personal relationship with their husband or partner when deciding how much they want him involved in parenting, new research finds.

The study found that mothers limited the father's involvement in child-rearing when they perceived their couple relationship to be less stable. Mothers also limited [fathers](#) who were less confident in their own ability to raise children.

The bottom line is that new mothers are assessing their partners' suitability to be a parent, said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, co-author of the study and professor of human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"New mothers are looking at their partner and thinking, 'Is he going to be here for the long haul? Does he know what he is doing with children?'" Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"This assessment by mothers is really what is most critical in gatekeeping among the couples we studied."

"Maternal gatekeeping" is the term researchers use to describe the behaviors and attitudes of mothers that may support or limit father involvement in child-rearing.

Gate-closing behavior includes actions like criticizing the father's parenting, redoing tasks the father has already completed and taking over

parental decision-making.

Gate-opening behavior includes asking the father's opinion on a parenting issue and arranging activities for the father to do with the child.

"We wanted to find out the characteristics of mothers and their families that may make some mothers more or less likely to act as gatekeepers," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"If we want to increase fathers' involvement in child-rearing, we need to know what may be limiting their participation."

The study appears in a just-released issue of the journal *Parenting: Science and Practice*.

The researchers used data from the New Parents Project, a long-term study co-led by Schoppe-Sullivan that is investigating how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming parents for the first time. In all, 182 couples participated in this study.

All the couples were assessed twice: once during the third trimester of pregnancy and again three months after the baby was born.

Results showed that mothers were more likely to push fathers away from child-rearing at three months if they reported during their third trimester that they had considered divorce or separation and that they didn't think things were going well with their partner.

Mothers also were more likely to "close the gate" on fathers who reported during the third trimester that they didn't feel confident about their parenting skills, such as the ability to do things like soothe a crying baby.

Mothers who were perfectionists or who were more anxious and depressed were also more likely to limit fathers' [child care](#) involvement.

Surprisingly to the researchers, mothers who held more traditional gender attitudes (such as "mothers are instinctively better caretakers than fathers") were not more likely to "close the gate" on fathers than other women. More research is needed to investigate this finding, Schoppe-Sullivan said.

Also somewhat surprising was that mothers who indicated religion was more important to them than it was to others were more likely to encourage fathers' involvement in child-rearing.

The researchers thought that religious views might be linked to gate-closing by mothers because some religions and religious groups have a strong belief in [traditional gender roles](#), Schoppe-Sullivan said.

However, this sample of highly educated, mostly high-income couples might be different from typical religious people, she said. In addition, many religious teachings emphasize the importance of family relationships, which may encourage more father involvement.

The study found that women who were particularly confident about their child care skills when they were pregnant also were more likely to discourage fathers' involvement in child care.

"There's this societal belief that new mothers have a natural instinct to be a parent, even though they don't have any more experience than new fathers," Schoppe-Sullivan said. "So mothers who are particularly confident are in the position of being seen as the expert parent, while fathers are left to be the apprentice."

None of these results should be seen as blaming mothers for shutting out

fathers, Schoppe-Sullivan emphasized.

"Gatekeeping is a dynamic process that includes both partners. Part of this is mothers judging fathers. But if the mother has bad feelings about the father's ability or desire to take care of the child, it may be accurate. It may make sense to put up some barriers."

In some cases, [mothers](#) should have more realistic expectations of fathers, she said. And moms need to differentiate between parenting decisions that are dangerous and those that are simply a matter of choice.

"There are a lot of things in parenting that don't have to be done in one particular way, such as clothing choices. Moms should give dads the latitude to make their own choices."

As a society, we can do more to help new fathers by offering them information and training about parenting and by boosting their self-confidence in their ability to care for children, she said.

"Gatekeeping can be a barrier to gender equality in relationships and we want to find ways to break down those barriers," she said.

More information: *Parenting: Science and Practice*. [DOI: 10.1080/15295192.2015.1053312](#)

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