

Fathers' early parenting quality affected by mothers

June 11 2018, by Jeff Grabmeier



The best fathers combined masculine traits with the belief they should be nurturing. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

How a new mother reacts to her partner's early interactions with their baby may affect his parenting quality later on, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that [fathers](#) did not perform as well as a parent to their 9-month-old [child](#) if the dads felt their [partner](#) was critical of their [parenting skills](#) six [months](#) earlier.

The study—done with relatively affluent, highly educated dual-earner couples—is the first to show how fathers' parenting quality might be affected by "maternal gatekeeping."

That's the term researchers use to describe the behaviors and attitudes of mothers that may support or limit father involvement in child rearing.

"The behaviors of mothers can shape how fathers interact with their children," said Lauren Altenburger, lead author of the study, who did the work as a doctoral student in human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"Mothers may not even be aware of how their criticisms of the father may end up negatively influencing how dads parent."

The study appears online in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

The results reflect the fact that, in our society, mothers still have the most power and influence when it comes to raising children, said study co-author Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, professor of human sciences at Ohio State.

"Many fathers may be more vulnerable to criticism than mothers are because there is still less support in our society for fathers as active, involved parents," she said.

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,

most of whom were married, participated in this study.

The parents were assessed twice: when their child was 3 months old and when he or she was 9 months old.

Fathers answered questions at both time points to gauge how much they felt their partner "opened" or "closed" the gate to their involvement in [child care](#).

For example, each dad reported how often his partner took over baby-related tasks because the mom thought he wasn't doing them properly and how often she gave him irritated looks about his parenting, which are gate closing. Examples of gate opening include encouraging the father to help bathe the baby or mom letting him know she appreciates his contributions to parenting.

The researchers measured parenting quality by observing the father interacting with his child for three minutes when the infant was 3 months old and five minutes when he or she was 9 months old.

The fathers were rated on a variety of factors, such as how appropriately they responded to the child's gestures and expressions, how engaged they were with the child and how much they smiled and spoke in a warm tone.

Findings showed that the more the fathers reported gate closing by their partner when the child was 3 months old, the worse researchers rated their parenting quality at 9 months old.

"If fathers feel their partners don't have confidence in their parenting, they may withdraw, and become less positive and sensitive with their child," Altenburger said.

One theory is that mothers may close the gate on fathers because dads show evidence of poor parenting. But in this study, poorer parenting at 3 months was not linked to maternal gate closing at 9 months, which would be expected if this theory were correct.

Schoppe-Sullivan noted that this sample of dual-earner couples may be different from other families. "We might see more evidence of protective gatekeeping by mothers in more distressed families," she said.

The researchers said that both mothers and fathers need to be supportive to each other in those early months after their first baby is born.

The transition to parenthood is challenging and both parents often feel vulnerable, Schoppe-Sullivan said, because they are still developing their identities as parents.

But fathers may be especially vulnerable to criticism.

"There still is an assumption in our society that [mothers](#) are the primary caregivers and that they have the power to determine the involvement of others in child care," she said. "Fathers may feel they should withdraw if they don't have their partner's support."

The results suggest moms should think twice before criticizing dads' parenting choices on minor issues such as what their baby will wear on a particular day, Altenburger said.

"It is about giving fathers the space to parent, too. Both parents need to keep communication open and not be so quick to criticize," she said.

More information: Lauren E. Altenburger et al. Associations Between Maternal Gatekeeping and Fathers' Parenting Quality, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-018-1107-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1107-3)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Fathers' early parenting quality affected by mothers (2018, June 11) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-06-fathers-early-parenting-quality-affected.html>

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