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# Mom as Gateway

## *Module*

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# Introduction to Gateway Module

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 module 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 module 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.

This module serves as an ideal companion piece to *24/7 Dad™ A.M. or P.M.*, so that mothers can 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 these sessions concurrently with the fathers' participation in *24/7 Dad™* (e.g., as fathers start the program, mothers start these sessions). Ideally, mothers and fathers can be brought together when mothers have completed these three sessions to discuss what they have learned and how they will act on it together. This module can also be used with other fathering programs.

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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.

## Research References

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

# 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

**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 today's lesson 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.

**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.

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.
8. Mention that different situations call for different amounts of gatekeeping, then read the following scenario and question. Record their answers on the flip chart:

**There is a metal detector when you enter a courthouse, and a search is conducted, but when you enter the grocery store, there is not. What is the reason for the difference?**

**Note to Facilitator:** Here are some answers you might expect or encourage. Offer all or some of these answers if the mothers do not come up with them on their own.

- Individuals enter a courthouse in stressful situations, often for important proceedings and decisions that they might feel angry about or inconvenienced. As a result, more bad things have happened in court houses (fights, shootings) than in grocery stores.
- Most people who enter a grocery store are law-abiding citizens, while many people who enter a courthouse have broken the law.
- The outcome of a journey to a court can seriously impact one's life, while visiting a grocery store has a relatively minor impact.
- Individuals in positions of authority over people's lives (who might therefore need protection) often work within a courthouse (e.g., judges), while a grocery store is populated by the general public.
- Individuals might feel threatened by the people or proceedings of a courthouse, while there is no personal threat in a grocery store.
- Government offices and buildings naturally have more security than grocery stores, which do not have the same official status.
- Courthouses tend to have much more power over the individual and the general public than do grocery stores, and they evoke stronger responses.

ACTIVITY 1.2 Gatekeeping Closer to Home  
TIME 30 minutes  
MATERIALS Flip charts, magic markers

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**GOAL:** To help mothers to understand how gatekeeping applies to childcare.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Explain that gatekeeping is not always an assigned position designed to protect people against those who would purposefully or inadvertently threaten or hurt them. The courts and public buildings are not the only places gatekeeping occurs. Sometimes people engage in gatekeeping because they believe it is part of their job (as a parent, for example) to look out for a child whom they feel or know can't make protective choices for themselves. Gatekeeping thus applies to childcare and the fact that one important role of parenthood is to supervise others' access to your child. One objective of a parent is to allow "in" people who are good influences in the child's life and keep "out" people who might be harmful.
2. Have the mothers get into pairs based on having children of a similar age (if possible), discuss briefly the following questions, and tell each pair to record their answers on blank pieces of paper or notepads.
  - a. **As the gatekeeper, to whom do you allow the most access to your child?**
  - b. **List all the people who are important in your child's life who are allowed free access. What makes them safe and trustworthy?**
  - c. **Who are you concerned about granting access to your child?**
  - d. **What worries you about their involvement?**
3. Have the mothers reassemble into the larger group.
4. Divide the flip chart paper into two columns. Label one column **IN** and the other **OUT**. Ask the mothers to share their answers. Write the answers to the first two questions in the **IN** column and the answers to the last two questions in the **OUT** column. After the mothers share responses, be sure to mention that "OUT" means "at a distance" and not necessarily "out completely" as in "out of the child's life completely."
5. Now ask the following questions of the larger group.
  - a. **How would it feel to be the one refused or restricted entrance to the child's activities and life?**
  - b. **How would you feel if you believed you were left out unfairly?**

— Take a 10-Minute Break —

**ACTIVITY 1.3** Gatekeeping Activities — Protective vs. Offensive**TIME** 45 minutes**MATERIALS** Flip chart, magic markers, paper for mothers to write on, pencils or pens for the mothers**GOAL:** To increase mothers' awareness of when and how they use gatekeeping as a weapon.**PROCEDURES:**

1. Explain that in times of conflict, in the face of potential or actual separation or divorce, parents often feel very angry at each other, hurt with each other or less connected. It takes more effort to work together for the child's sake.
2. Brainstorm with the group what it means to cooperate in ways that are supportive of sharing parenting responsibilities during and after the break-up process. Have everyone give at least one example of how she encouraged the father's active participation in the child's life, especially when the father was reluctant to be involved.

Mention that as mothers ("keepers of the child") with the power of being the residential (custodial) parent on their side, they might use gatekeeping on purpose or unwittingly as a weapon to exclude the child's father from the child's life. Sometimes you might want to "pay back" the guy for letting your child down, or hurt him in some way or for being a lousy parent or partner/spouse in the past. Sometimes you don't even realize when you take your revenge, and sometimes you realize it but find it hard to stop.

3. Write **GATEKEEPING AS A WEAPON** on the flip chart. Ask the moms to brainstorm ways in which gatekeeping can be used as a weapon against dads. Write their responses on the flip chart and ask them to identify the ones they have used a) ever and b) most commonly. Be creative in how you designate them as ever and most commonly (e.g., use different colored markers).

**Note to Facilitator:** Some examples might include: ruining the other parent's desire to see the child on an unscheduled day by making other plans for the child; cutting short the scheduled amount of time the father has with the child by not having the child ready when the father arrives; not telling the father about important events in the child's life, such as a meeting with the teacher at school or a doctor's appointment; and not helping the father care for the needs of the child (examples: sending along the preferred or necessary food, a favorite stuffed animal or other toy or snow pants on a cold, snowy day).

4. Tell the group one way you become more aware of when and how you "gatekeep" restrictively is to think about specific gatekeeping situations in which you think you acted in a "reasonable" way as distinguished from situations in which you were perhaps a bit "unfair." Have each mother write down at least one time she was unfair and any

conditions that would help her feel safer or calmer about doing it differently next time. Ask the mothers to only list situations over which they have some control.

Discuss their responses as a group. Make sure each example includes conditions that would help mothers feel calmer and safer while co-parenting.

**Note to Facilitator:** Mothers might insist they haven't been unfair and that the father deserved to be kept away from the child. Agree with them that, in situations where safety is at stake, they must be very careful. But sometimes, there is a way to let the other parent in a little, for the child's sake. If a mother is stuck on the negative, have other mothers give her examples of how she could do it for the situation she chose. Maintain that unless the mothers learn something about their own behavior, the fathers will undoubtedly not change either.

ACTIVITY 1.4      Closing  
TIME                10 minutes  
MATERIALS        Flip chart and magic markers

**GOAL:**            To reinforce alternatives to restrictive gatekeeping.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Ask the mothers the following questions and write their answers on the flip chart for review at the start of the next session.
  - a. **What are some ways you can try to become a fairer gatekeeper?**
  - b. **What behaviors or conditions would you have to ask for to feel more comfortable being a less restrictive gatekeeper?**
2. Thank each member for attending the group and remind the group of the time and date of the next session.

# Session 2: Power & Control in Relationships between Men & Women

## 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 name tags and a magic marker set out for mothers as they walk into the room.
3. Tape the flip chart paper with the answers from the closing activity in the last session (Activity 1.4) so mothers can easily see them.
4. Tape four (4) blank pieces of flip chart paper around the room. Put a marker in front of each one. Write **HIS** at the top of two of the sheets and **HERS** at the top of the other two. Choose two categories that reflect power struggles between mothers and fathers that the group has discussed up to this point (e.g., money and time with the child). Write each category underneath **HIS** and **HERS** so that during Activity 2.3 mothers can identify whether they or the fathers have more power in each category. An alternative is to allow the mothers to select the categories during Activity 2.3.
5. Provide refreshments, if possible.

ACTIVITY 2.1 Check-in From Last Week

TIME 10 minutes

MATERIALS Blank flip chart paper, flip chart paper with answers to last session's closing activity, magic marker, name tags

**GOAL:** To welcome the mothers and lead into this session's topic.

## PROCEDURES:

1. Welcome everyone to this session. Ask whether anyone noticed her own or someone else's gatekeeping behaviors differently during the week as a result of the discussion during the last session. Invite the mothers to share their examples.
2. Have the mothers silently review their responses to the closing activity from last week.

ACTIVITY 2.2 Mothers as Gatekeepers  
 TIME 40 minutes  
 MATERIALS Doonesbury cartoon handout

**GOAL:** To help mothers to understand the various ways power and control play out in relationships between parents.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Tell the group that today's lesson will help them to understand the various ways in which power and control play out in relationships between parents. Mention that research has shown that women have more chances to enact power through gatekeeping where children are concerned, because they generally spend more time with them and are more often the primary residential parent.
2. Pass around a copy of the Doonesbury cartoon (located in the Appendix) as an illustration of the fundamental idea of gatekeeping. Ask one of the mothers to volunteer to read it. After she reads it, ask the group the following questions.
  - a. **Is the cartoon funny? If so, why? If not, why not?**
  - b. **In what ways can each of you identify with the cartoon? Specifically, what things does your child's father do "wrong" or not as well as you?**

**Note to Facilitator:** The cartoon illustrates gatekeeping through a scene in which the father offers to "help" the mother bathe their child. She first refuses by stating that asking to "help" essentially indicates that the father thinks that caring for the child is the mother's job, which she resents. Then the father re-phrases his question to word it as his request to co-parent. The mother again refuses his offer as she cites his carelessness or lack of competence in this particular aspect of parenting (allowing water to get all over the floor). In other words, she doesn't like the way he will do it. This is a common example of gatekeeping behavior in which the mother perceives the father as doing the task wrong or less skilled than she can, and therefore monopolizes the caretaking role.

3. Mention that today the mothers will play a game called "Yes, but..." so they can experience how easily "Yes, but..." can shut down communication. They will also learn to replace "Yes, but..." with "Yes, and..." It is an effective lesson to help them notice the ease with which they shoot down some of the father's ideas and beliefs. This activity is also useful when one or both parents don't listen with an open mind.
4. Have the mothers form pairs. Explain that each pair should make a grocery-shopping list. One partner suggests to the other to add an item to the list. The other responds with, "Yes, but..." and finishes her sentence with an explanation of why the item isn't acceptable. The partner who suggested the item then responds with, "Yes, but..." and argues her point. Continue this activity (the back and forth with "Yes, but...") for 1 minute. Then, have the pairs do the same thing with only one change—each sentence must begin with "Yes, and..."

After the pairs finish the activity, have each pair answer the following questions.

- a. **What did you feel when you were told “Yes, but...” And how did you feel when you heard “Yes, and ...?”**
  - b. **Did you get a longer list during “Yes, but...” or “Yes, and...?” Why?**
  - c. **When is “Yes, but...” useful or appropriate?**
  - d. **Why do we use “Yes, but...” so often?**
  - e. **How can this lesson be applied to your communication with your child’s father?**
5. Reassemble the larger group and have each mother share one example on how she will change a “Yes, but...” into a “Yes, and...” where the father is concerned.

— Take a 5-Minute Break —

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| ACTIVITY 2.3 | Problems that Stir Up Gatekeeping   |
| TIME         | 45 minutes  |
| MATERIALS    | Problems that Stir Up Gatekeeping Script (if needed), 4 blank sheets of flip chart paper taped on the wall (2 marked with HIS and 2 with HERS), magic markers |

**GOAL:** To increase the mothers' awareness of ways they can solve problems with the father in a mutually beneficial manner.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Mention that we will now discuss times when both parents try to gain the upper hand in their relationship with the other parent. This situation causes a power struggle that prevents parents from effectively communicating with each other to solve problems in a mutually beneficial manner. Trying to “win” a discussion makes it impossible to listen clearly or to say what you need in a tone the other person can hear without getting defensive. Instead of an emphasis on parental cooperation, the focus shifts to blame or punishment of the other parent, or to prove your point. Some parents think the children are the only or best way to get the other parent to do what they want or to feel bad for what he or she previously did. Tell the mothers that the primary reason to improve their communication with the father is to increase their child's well-being.
2. Ask participants to move between the four (4) pieces of flip chart paper around the room and write examples of instances where they thought they had more or less power than did the father within each of the two categories.

**Note to Facilitator:** Some examples might include money (such as child support), parenting schedules (with visits, time, or overnights in the father's home), “rights” as a parent, encouraging the child to take sides in an argument, saying bad things to the child about the other parent or the parent's new partner. You can choose to have the mothers select the categories.

3. Read the list aloud. Have the group decide on an example from the flip chart papers in which the mothers felt they had power, an example that applies to most or many of them.

Role play that example with two volunteers in which one parent plays the mother and the other the father. Have them demonstrate a gatekeeping interaction in which the mother acts on her power as she cuts the father out or down in some way. Then ask the other mothers to give examples of how the first parent could have acted to lessen gatekeeping and respond more supportively to the father.

**Note to facilitator:** This is the point in the activity when you can use the Problems that Stir Up Gatekeeping Script found in the Appendix if the mothers can't come up with a scenario. If time permits, have two other mothers volunteer to role play an example where they did not have power, and how they might respond in a way designed to elicit cooperative behavior on the part of the father.

Ask the mothers to share what they learned from the activity.

**ACTIVITY 2.4** Models for Relationships

**TIME** 20 minutes

**MATERIALS** Flip chart, magic markers, Relationship Styles handout, blank pieces of paper, pens or pencils

**GOAL:** To increase mothers' awareness of how relationship styles affect the way decisions are managed between two people.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Mention that relationship styles affect the way decisions are made and power is managed between two people.
2. Give each of the mothers the Relationship Styles handout.
3. To illustrate this point, draw stick figures on the easel to illustrate each of the following types of relationship.

**Note to Facilitator:**

**Relationship Styles**

**Two Unicyles** – Mention statements that reflect this category.



- a. Illustrates most unsatisfying aspects of partnerships.
- b. Difficult to balance.
- c. We ride next to each other but must count on ourselves for balance.
- d. We often go in different directions.
- e. Weakness: Partners are never in tandem (literally or figuratively).

**Bicycle Built for Two** – Mention statements that reflect this category.



- a. Paints a common picture of a traditional partnership.
- b. Both enjoy the ride but someone gets to steer.
- c. Weakness: Backseat partner does half the work but has no real say in the final destination. This style builds resentment if one partner isn't and wants to go in a different direction from the one taken. Sometimes the final destination isn't what one partner hoped it would be.

**Long Distance Bicycle Ride** – Mention statements that reflect this category.



- a. Illustrates how some relationships evolve over time.
- b. Independent partners ride together voluntarily for mutual benefit.
- c. Partners start out at the same pace, but do not always stay at the same pace.
- d. Weakness: It requires great compromise for both to finish at approximately the same time. Many events along the way can get the partners lost from each other.

**Bicycle Marathon** – Mention statements that reflect this category.

- a. Independent partners begin the ride together voluntarily.
- b. Partners move out of sync over time.
- c. Weakness: Partners are ultimately in competition. The commitment is to the end, not the ride. One fear that arises is that “My partner might abandon me if I fall behind.” A common irritation that arises is “He is along for the ride but not keeping up with my speed and pace; he is not doing his share.”

**Mountain Climb** – Mention statements that reflect this category.

- a. Illustrates a higher stakes, mutual activity.
- b. Independent partners are tied together voluntarily for mutual safety.
- c. Partners take turns in the lead, allowing each other to rest, and maximize the strengths of each other.
- d. Strength: Benefits of true partnership. There is no place for competition: “We climb as a team and reach the summit together or not at all.” It requires a real commitment: “Because we are tied together, each of us can only move up if the other moves up. If I stumble, he is necessarily hindered and vice versa. The more we help each other, the more progress we both make.”

4. Have the group respond to the following questions.

- a. **Which of these models best describes the co-parenting relationship with your child’s father before separating?**
- b. **And now?**

5. Ask the mothers to take out a piece of paper and list one thing they could do to take their relationship with the father to a more effective style. Ask them to list one way their child will benefit. Ask for volunteers to share their examples so all can learn from them.

6. As a wrap-up, entertain questions that remain from the session.

## Session 3: Minimize Excessive Gatekeeping

### 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 name tags and a magic marker set out for mothers as they walk into the room.
3. Make copies for each mother of the following handouts for Activity 3.2: Conflict Management, Communicating Well, Growing Up is Hard Work, Qualities of a Successful Co-parent, What I Can Do to Support Co-parenting. (All of the handouts are located in the Appendix.)
4. Have folders for each mother.
5. Make copies of the "Test Yourself as a Gatekeeper" questionnaire for use during Procedures 3a and 3b in Activity 3.4. Please note; however, that this assessment can be done in either a written or verbal format. Although we recommend the written format, if you do this verbally, you should write the responses on a flip chart to provide a copy to the mothers and keep one for your records.
6. Provide refreshments, if possible

ACTIVITY 3.1 Check-in From Last Week

TIME 10 minutes

MATERIALS None needed

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**GOAL:** To welcome the mothers and lead into this session's topic.

### PROCEDURES:

1. Ask the group whether they have any questions, issues, or examples of what they noticed or did differently since the last session.

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| ACTIVITY 3.2 | Develop New Skills in Co-parenting  |
| TIME         | 40 minutes (Includes a 10-minute break)   |
| MATERIALS    | Handouts on Conflict Management, Communicating Well, Growing Up is Hard Work, and Qualities of a Successful Co-parent |

**GOAL:** To increase the mothers' awareness of how to manage and resolve conflict.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Mini-lecture. Distribute and go over handouts regarding conflict management, communicating well, growing up is hard work, and qualities of a successful co-parent.

**Note to Facilitator:** Read through each handout, asking the group at the end of each one what they found useful about the information. Ask whether there is anything they don't understand. Be brief as the handouts are a teaching tool for them to have at home to refer to further.

2. To begin work on positive gatekeeping skills, pass out the "What I Can Do to Support Co-parenting" handout and have the mothers complete the following statements.
  - a. **On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very low and 5 being very high, I rate how I cooperate with my child's father a \_\_\_\_.**
  - b. **One thing I can do to improve communication with my child's father to create a supportive environment for our child is \_\_\_\_\_.**
  - c. **Three things I can say or do to encourage support and cooperation from him are: \_\_\_\_\_.**

**Note to Facilitator:** If you know that any of the mothers struggles to read or write, or just as an alternative approach to this activity, have a few parents volunteer to stand up and do the activity orally before you divide them up as described below.

3. Break the mothers into groups of three (3) and ask them to share their responses to the statements in Procedure #2, and then ask the following questions.
  - a. **Did any of your answers surprise you? In what way?**
  - b. **What is your biggest piece of work left to do to reduce your gatekeeping and to open up the gate for your child's father to become or remain involved? In other words, what do you have to do to become more of a "gateway."**

— Take a 10-minute Break —

**ACTIVITY 3.3** Try New Gatekeeping Skills

TIME 50 minutes

MATERIALS None needed

**GOAL:** To increase the mothers' empathy toward the fathers.**PROCEDURES:**

1. Have the mothers form pairs. One person will role-play the father and the other person will role-play the mother.
2. Ask the mothers to create a dialogue/role-play about a day when the father wants to see his child on an unscheduled day and mom really wanted to do something different with the child. Tell the pairs to create a situation that creates conflict and power struggles between the parents. Tell the mothers to take a moment (e.g., a minute or two) before they begin to imagine some of the issues that will arise for each parent.

**Note to Facilitator:** If any of the pairs have difficulty with this activity, suggest the following scenario to be played out for the father and the mother.

- a. **The Father: He has unexpected free time, has an idea for a fun activity, and wants the mother to see his desire is genuine to be with their child as much as possible.**
- b. **The Mother: She is irritated by a last minute request from the father to be with their child because it means she must change something minor she had planned for the day. This request requires that she let the child do something with the father that she isn't crazy about and that she wouldn't do herself, which evokes some jealousy. The day will cost money the mother would rather have put toward the child's interests (e.g., sports or music).**
3. Give the pairs 15 minutes to role-play and then bring everyone back together and ask the larger group the following question.
  - a. **How did you speak to each other in a way that created conflict and power struggles?**
4. Now have them form the same pairs for another 15 more minutes. Tell them to switch roles and discuss the same situation in a way that promotes accommodation and reduces obstacles in response to the request presented during the previous role-play.
5. Bring the group back together and ask the larger group the following questions.
  - a. **How did you speak to each other in a way that facilitated compromise and accommodation?**
  - b. **How did the two dialogues feel different?**
  - c. **How did each work out?**

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|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| ACTIVITY 3.4 | Final Wrap-up   |
| TIME         | 20 minutes  |
| MATERIALS    | “Test Yourself as a Gatekeeper” questionnaire, empty folders, flip chart (if ask gatekeeper questions verbally) or blank pieces of paper, pens or pencils |

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**GOAL:** To assess what the mothers have learned and to reach closure.

**PROCEDURES:**

1. Pass out the “Test Yourself as a Gatekeeper” questionnaire to the mothers and ask them to complete it or (optional) ask the questions verbally and record answers on the flip chart.
2. Discuss the results with the group.

**Note to Facilitator:** The answers to statements 1, 2, 5, and 6 should be “Somewhat True” or “True.” The answers to statements 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 should be “Somewhat False” or “False.” Have the mothers evaluate their responses to see whether they fall more on one side or the other. The more responses that fall in the desired direction, the more they think in terms that foster less restrictive gatekeeping. Have them think back on the three sessions to see whether they would have answered differently before the sessions as opposed to now.

3. Ask each mother the following questions.

- a. What was most helpful about the sessions?
- b. What was least helpful?

**Note to Facilitator:** You can ask the mothers to write their responses on blank pieces of paper so the evaluations will be in writing. If you choose not to have mothers write their responses and instead to provide them verbally, you should record their responses on the flip chart. This is a very important exercise because it will provide feedback to help you improve your work with future groups of mothers.



## Activity 2.3 Problems that Stir Up Gatekeeping Script

*Doorbell rings.*

**Mother:** (*opens door*) Oh, hi, Dan. What are you doing here?

**Father:** I'm here to pick up Sarah and Charlie. You said 2:00, right?

**Mother:** Oh, is it 2:00 already? I haven't gotten their things together yet, and Charlie has a doctor's appointment at three...

**Father:** Where is it? I'll just take him. Is he sick?

**Mother:** Yes, he's had a sore throat for days. Don't worry about it, it's a new doctor, about twenty minutes away from here. I've already filled out all the paperwork and talked to the doctor on the phone, so it doesn't make sense for you to take him. Why don't I just take Charlie and make sure he doesn't need me to pick up any medicines or anything? I'll call you later and you can come and get him then if he's not sick.

**Father:** It's really not a big deal. I have time and I can pick up anything he might need. I can wait while you get their things.

**Mother:** Charlie might be sick, Dan, and you and I both know you're not going to be able to take care of him and be with Sarah. You haven't cared for them when they're sick, you always left that to me. And you're busy. I promise I'll call you after his appointment and let you know if it's okay to come and get him.

## Relationship Styles



**Two Unicycles** – Mention statements that reflect this category:

- Illustrates most unsatisfying aspects of partnerships
- Difficult to balance
- We ride next to each other but must count on ourselves for balance
- We often go in different directions
- Weakness: Partners are never in tandem (literally or figuratively)



**Bicycle built for two** – Mention statements that reflect this category:

- Paints a common picture of a traditional partnership
- Both enjoy the ride but someone gets to steer
- Weakness: Backseat partner does half the work but has no real say in the final destination. This builds resentment if he/she wasn't steering and wanted to go in a different direction from the one taken. Sometimes the final destination isn't what was hoped it would be.



**Long Distance Bicycle Ride** – Mention statements that reflect this category:

- Illustrates how some relationships evolve over time
- Independent partners ride together voluntarily for mutual benefit.
- Partners start out paced with each other, but do not always stay at the same pace.
- Weakness: It requires great compromise for both to finish at approximately the same time. Many events along the way can get the partners lost from each other.



**Bicycle Marathon** – Mention statements that reflect this category:

- Independent partners begin the ride together voluntarily.
- Partners move out of sync over time.
- Weakness: Partners are ultimately in competition. The commitment is to the end, not the ride. One fear that arises is that “My partner may abandon me, if I fall behind”. A common irritation that arises is “He is along for the ride but not keeping up with my speed and pace; he is not doing his share.”



**Mountain climbing** – Mention statements that reflect this category:

- Illustrates a higher stakes, mutual activity
- Independent partners are tied together voluntarily for mutual safety.
- Partners take turns in the lead, allowing each other to rest, and maximizing the strengths of each.
- Strength: Benefits of true partnership. There is no place for competition. “We climb as a team and reach the summit together or not at all.” It requires a real commitment. “Since we are tied together, each of us can only move up only if the other moves up; if I stumble, he is necessarily hindered and vice versa. The more we help each other, the more progress we both make.”

# Conflict Management

## Problem-Solving Strategies

- Define the conflict as a mutual problem.
- Pursue goals held in common.
- Find creative agreements that are satisfactory to both parties or present a mutually acceptable compromise.
- Have an accurate personal understanding of one's own needs and show them correctly.
- Make sure that contacts are on the basis of equal power.
- Use open, honest, and accurate communication of one's own needs, goals, position, etc.
- Express hostility to get rid of one's feelings that may interfere with future cooperation.
- Emphasize exploring both similarities and differences in positions.

## Win-Lose Strategies

- Define the conflict as a win-lose situation.
- Pursue one's own goals.
- Force the other party into submission.
- Have an accurate personal understanding of one's own needs, but publicly disguise them.
- Try to arrange contacts where one's own power is greater.
- Use misleading communication of one's own needs, goals, and feelings.
- Hostility is expressed to subdue the other.
- Emphasize only differences in positions and the superiority of one's own.

# Communicating Well

## DO

- Begin statements with “I” and focus on **yourself** rather than the other person.  
**Example: “I feel angry when you are late to pick up our child” instead of “You are always late to pick up Johnny.”**
- State your feelings, using “emotion” words.  
**Example: “I feel angry when you are late to pick up Maria.”**
- Ask questions to clarify what the other is saying.  
**Example: “Do you mean when I am 10 minutes late, or are you talking about when I am very late that I don’t call to notify you?”**
- Paraphrase (summarize) the other person’s thoughts, to make sure you’re both on the same page.  
**Example: “It sounds like what you’re saying is that you feel like I take advantage of you when I am late, and that makes you angry and frustrated.”**
- Use body language to help you communicate well.  
**Example: eye contact, an open stance, unclenched hands**

## DON’T

- Interrupt the other person when she/he is talking.
- Ignore the other person when he/she is talking.
- Blame the other person.  
**Example: “It’s your fault that Juan is grouchy tonight! If you had just shown up on time!”**
- Insult the other person or call her/him names.  
**Example: “You never come on time. You’re such an irresponsible person!”**
- Over generalize.  
**Example: “You never come home on time. I always do.”**

# Growing Up Is Hard Work

## Stages of Development

| CHILD'S JOB  | PARENT'S JOB   |
|--|--|
| <b>Infancy and Babyhood (0 - 2 years)</b>                              |  |
| 1. To learn to trust.  | 1. To give warm, consistent, and appropriate attention to the child's needs.                                 |
| 2. To explore the world around them.                                   | 2. To provide an interesting environment and to encourage the child to explore.                              |
| <b>Toddlerhood and Preschool (2 - 4 years)</b>                         |  |
| 1. To use fantasy and play to better understand the world around them. | 1. To encourage and support fantasy and play.  |
| 2. To express feelings in healthy ways.                                | 2. To model and support healthy expressions of feelings.   |
| 3. To learn self-control.  | 3. To provide comfort and distraction and to model self-control.   |
| 4. To become more independent.   | 4. To encourage independence.  |
| <b>Early School Age (5 - 7 years)</b>                                  |  |
| 1. To learn to be comfortable with being male or female.               | 1. To be comfortable with the child as male or female and accept a wide variety of behaviors for either sex. |
| 2. To learn to play with others.                                       | 2. To provide opportunities for play with others.  |
| 3. To learn how their behavior affects others.                         | 3. To model concern for how behavior affects others and to explain how the child's behavior affects others.  |
| 4. To learn to understand how others feel.                             | 4. To model sensitivity to how others feel and to express feelings in healthy ways.                          |
| 5. To develop a sense of themselves as separate and important people.  | 5. To show the child that she/he is valued as a separate and important person.                               |
| <b>Middle School Age (8 - 12 years)</b>                                |  |
| 1. To learn to be close to and to trust children of the same sex.      | 1. To model intimacy with people of your own sex.  |
| 2. To understand their own values.                                     | 2. To model understanding of our values and to accept the child's values.                                    |
| 3. To accept themselves and others.                                    | 3. To model acceptance of ourselves and others, and to accept the child for who he/she is.                   |
| 4. To feel good about their abilities.                                 | 4. To model confidence in our own abilities and to show the child that her/his abilities are valued.         |

## Growing Up Is Hard Work— Continued

| CHILD'S JOB   | PARENT'S JOB  |
|---|---|
| <b>Adolescence (13 - 18 years)</b>  |   |
| 1. To develop a healthy self image.   | 1. To model a healthy self image and to positively reinforce the child for who she/he is.       |
| 2. To gain a healthy identity within a group of peers.                      | 2. To encourage the child to interact in healthy ways with peers. To model healthy friendships. |
| 3. To become more independent of the family.                                | 3. To encourage independence from the family in appropriate areas.                              |
| 4. To take on more adult-like roles and responsibilities within the family. | 4. To encourage and reward adult-like roles and responsibilities within the family.             |

## Qualities of a Successful Co-parent:

- Communicates and negotiates with ex-spouse or ex-partner about the child(ren).
- Respects former spouse or partner as a parent despite relationship disappointments and personal differences.
- Is able to put past disagreements and conflicts aside and concentrate on the child(ren).
- Shares control with the co-parent and respects his/her own style of parenting.
- Can tolerate differences in child rearing practices and values without seeing them as harmful to the child and distinguishes between important and unimportant differences.
- Values what the other parent has to offer the child(ren).

## Advantages of Co-parenting:

1. Parents are equals so that the father is less likely to feel like an outsider or money-machine. This can also reduce hostility and resentment.
2. Both parents feel good themselves because they know they are working together for their child.
3. On-going contact between your child and both of his/her parents.
4. There is less chance that you will have to go back to court.
5. Fathers (or the non-residential parent) are given the opportunity to show their commitment to parenting.
6. Both parents have more time to pursue personal goals and activities.

## Difficulties of Co-parenting:

1. More contact with your ex-spouse or ex-partner can trigger jealousy, hostility, and resentment. If you and your ex-spouse or ex-partner fight constantly, your child will always be exposed to it. Animosity between parents is linked to long-term emotional problems for children.
2. More opportunities for the child to play one parent against the other.
3. If you want to relocate, you may have a custody problem.
4. In cases where there is real or threatened physical abuse, contact between ex-spouses or ex-partners can be dangerous.

# What I Can Do to Support Co-parenting

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Very Low            Low                   Moderate            High                  Very High

On the above scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very low and 5 being very high, I rate how I cooperate with my child's father as a \_\_\_\_\_.

One thing I can do to improve communication with my child's father to create a supportive environment for our child is

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Three things I can say or do or ask of my ex- to encourage support are:

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# Test Yourself as a Gatekeeper

**Circle the answer that best describes how you feel.**

1. It is part of my job as a parent to positively influence my child's relationship with his/her father.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
2. It is my job to help my ex-spouse/partner be the best parent that he can be to our child.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
3. My ex-spouse/partner tries to be a good parent but doesn't know enough about parenting to be the kind of parent my child needs.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
4. My ex-spouse/partner does a pretty good job being involved with our child, but he does not truly understand who our child is and what he/she needs.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
5. My child benefits from the time he/she spends with my ex-spouse/partner.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
6. It helps my child's self-esteem to have a good relationship with his/her father.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
7. Our child would be better off seeing less of his/her father and more of another father figure.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True
  
8. My own parenting is more central to my child's sense of self than is my ex-spouse's/partner's parenting.  
 False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True

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9. My child's father is loving, but he often needs me to tell him what to do or how to do it so he doesn't offend or disappoint our child.

False      Somewhat False      Neutral      Somewhat True      True

Adapted from a gatekeeping questionnaire designed for The Collaborative Divorce Project by Marsha Kline Pruett, Ph.D., M.S.L. and Kyle D. Pruett, M.D.