Journal of Child Custody, 10:1–16, 2013
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN: 1537-9418 print/1537-940X online
DOI: 10.1080/15379418.2013.778693

Bench Book for Assessing Parental Gatekeeping in Parenting Disputes: Understanding the Dynamics of Gate Closing and Opening for the Best Interests of Children

WILLIAM G. AUSTIN

Independent Practice, Lakewood and Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and Wilmington and Raleigh, North Carolina

LINDA FIELDSTONE

Family Court Services, 11th Judicial Circuit, Miami-Dade County, Florida

MARSHA KLINE PRUETT

Smith College School for Social Work, Northampton, Massachusetts

This Bench Book summarizes theory, research, and a forensic assessment model of parental gatekeeping relevant for understanding and resolving child custody disputes. This concise format is geared primarily as a resource for judges, though it may be equally valuable to evaluators, parenting coordinators, and others. Gatekeeping encompasses a common statutory factor of support for the other-parent–child relationship. The gatekeeping model includes a continuum ranging from facilitative to restrictive gatekeeping. Behavioral examples are presented. Implications of a gatekeeping analysis for crafting parenting plans are described, including in relocation cases and when there has been a history of intimate partner violence.

KEYWORDS gatekeeping, parental conflict, Best Interests of the Child

Address correspondence to William G. Austin, P.O. Box 3939, Evergreen, CO 80437. E-mail: wgaustinphd2@yahoo.com

A common statutory best interest factor to consider in custody disputes is the extent to which each parent can support the other parent's relationship with their child. In many states, the best interests of the child analysis also include the encouragement of both parents' continuing involvement in the life of the child following parental separation and divorce. Some state statutes make this policy explicit in a legislative declaration. For example, Florida statute F.S. § 61.13(2)(c)(1) states: "It is the public policy of this state that each minor child has frequent and continuing contact with both parents after the parents separate or the marriage of the parties is dissolved and to encourage the parents to share the rights and responsibilities, and joys, of childrearing." This Bench Book provides a concise format for understanding and assessing gatekeeping, which concerns parental attitudes and behaviors related to the best interest factor and legislative declaration. (For a fuller discussion, see Austin, Pruett, Kirkpatrick, Flens, & Gould, 2013.) It is geared toward grounding child custody dispute assessments and the development of parenting plans in specific behaviors and attitudes that are relevant to the parents' future potential to co-parent. The information will assist judges, custody evaluators, family law professionals, and mental health professionals with assessment, conflict resolution, and decision-making processes for parental/caregiver disputes involving co-parenting and timesharing issues.

The contents of this Bench Book provide a:

- definition of parental gatekeeping in the context of separation and divorce and the allocation of parenting responsibilities;
- gatekeeping continuum chart that ranges from proactive, positive facilitative gatekeeping to very restrictive, negative gatekeeping;
- conceptual distinction between justified protective gatekeeping and unjustified restrictive gatekeeping;
- description of areas in which judges can apply the gatekeeping concept to inform their parenting time and access decisions; and
- description of protective gatekeeping as it pertains to a parent's concerns about the other's parenting competence or safety for himself or herself and the child (e.g., due to intimate partner violence [IPV] or domestic violence).

DEFINING PARENTAL GATEKEEPING IN THE CONTEXT OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE AND ALLOCATION OF PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

What is Gatekeeping?

Parental gatekeeping refers to how parents' attitudes and actions affect the involvement and quality of the relationship between the other parent and child. Scholars have proposed a gatekeeping continuum that varies in degrees

of facilitative to restrictive on the issue of supporting the other-parent–child relationship (Austin, 2005a, 2005b, 2011; Austin et al., 2013; Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007; Trinder, 2008).

Why Gatekeeping Is Important: The Research

The concept of gatekeeping gives judges a uniform way to apply the best interest of the child standard when parents disagree. Research outcomes have verified the importance of both parents to children's adjustment and development, except in cases that pose an imminent threat to a child's physical and/or psychological safety. Research on divorce and maternal gatekeeping demonstrates that:

- Children show best long-term adjustment to parental separation or divorce when 1) they have quality relationships with both parents (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001, 2004; Flouri, 2005); and 2) parents have a positive co-parenting relationship (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Camara & Resnick, 1989; Flouri; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Whiteside & Becker, 2000).
- Children's healthy development may be compromised when parenting is generally inadequate for the child's developmental needs and/or one or both parenting styles are rigid and harsh without warmth or sensitivity to the child (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2012; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008).
- Exposure to conflict often results in poor adjustment of children, unless they are shielded from the conflict by at least one parent's compensatory parenting and/or parents' ability to keep the child from being the focus of, or a participant in, the conflict (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Hetherington, 1999a).
- When mothers are more satisfied with fathers' parenting, fathers tend to be more positively involved with their children (Beitel & Parke, 1998; Shoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, & Mangelsdorf, 2008).
- Mothers are more satisfied with fathers' involvement with their child when there is low couple conflict (Sobolewski & King, 2005).
- When mothers have negative attitudes toward fathers, father involvement tends to be less (Herzog, Umaña-Taylor, Madden-Dedrich, & Leonard, 2007; Kulik & Tsoref, 2010).
- Mothers' attitudes toward fathers' parenting after divorce are related to how they feel about the fathers' treatment of them during the marriage (Pruett et al., 2007).

Development of gatekeeping behaviors

During an intact parental relationship, some form of gatekeeping may serve a productive purpose, defining the roles with the child according to parental

availability and expertise. Parental responsibility may also be influenced by cultural background, religion, and general attitudes regarding gender differentiation and parental involvement. Well thought out and communicated delineation of parental responsibility can occur in the couple relationship, or be more implicit in nature, seemingly developing from the patterns assumed by the parents, especially if the parents were never a couple before the child was born. Responsibilities may be reassessed throughout the years according to the developmental needs of the children and to changes in the availability of the parents, or they may be prompted by life cycle events.

Gatekeeping conflict after separation is related to renegotiating the sharing of parental responsibilities as parents begin residing in separate households. Redefining relationships often proves quite challenging during times of transition. Necessary changes may pose threats to the parental identities that were assumed when the parents were together. Power struggles can occur when one parent has difficulty letting go of parental responsibilities and access at the same time that the other parent is attempting to broaden his or her role with the child.

Continuum in gatekeeping behaviors

In a legal dispute, analysis of the gatekeeping issue addresses how facilitative or restrictive the parent is likely to be in the role of a co-parent or in regard to a shared parenting plan. Past behaviors are the best predictors of future behaviors, so in shared parenting litigation the court will need to examine co-parenting attitudes and behaviors of each parent before and after the separation. The court will want to know if restrictive gatekeeping behaviors are tied to the divorce and litigation or if they are likely to be enduring. The Gatekeeping Continuum, presented in Table 1 below, addresses how inclusive each parent is toward the other in attitudes and behaviors.

TABLE 1 Gatekeeping Continuum © William G. Austin, Linda Fieldstone, & Marsha Kline Pruett

Ranges in attitudes/behavior from Facilitative Gatekeeping (FG) to Restrictive Gatekeeping (RG)		
Very Facilitative→Cooperative→Disengaged→Restrictive→Very Restrictive		
Proactive Toward Other Parent	→	Severely Alienating Behaviors
Inclusive of Other Parent	→	Marginalizes Other Parent
Boosts Image of Other Parent	→	Derogates Other Parent
Ongoing Efforts at Communication	→	Refuses to Communicate
Flexible Timesharing	→	Rigid Adherence to Parenting Time Schedule
Ensures Child's Opportunity to Develop Relationship with Other Parent	→	Blocks All Attempts for Engagement/ Closeness with Other Parent

TYPOLOGY IN GATEKEEPING

Facilitative gatekeeping (FG) is frequently described in a state's list of best interest factors. As noted above, in the Florida statute [§ 6.13(3)(a)], for example, it is the first best interest factor and focuses on parents' ability to support each other's child rearing role: "The demonstrated capacity and disposition of each parent to facilitate and encourage a close and continuing parent–child relationship, to honor the time-sharing schedule, and to be reasonable when changes are required." FG occurs when a parent acts to support continuing involvement and maintenance of a meaningful relationship with the child. Facilitating behaviors are proactive, inclusive, and demonstrate for the child that the parent values the other parent's contributions.

Restrictive gatekeeping (RG) refers to actions by a parent that are intended to interfere with the other parent's involvement with the child and would predictably negatively affect the quality of their relationship. While either parent can and does engage in gatekeeping, research and the content of many legal disputes focus on the mother's role as gatekeeper, since they are more often assuming the larger amount of hands-on childrearing. Maternal RG has been estimated to occur in one out of five intact families (Allen & Hawkins, 1999); however, RG is much more common between divorced parents (Fagan & Barnett, 2003), with bilateral RG characterizing high-conflict divorces.

Protective gatekeeping (PG) is a form of RG that arises when a parent acts to limit the other parent's involvement or is critical of the other parent's parenting skills because of concern about possible harm to the child. PG is defined in terms of the reasons a parent wants to limit access or involvement by the other parent. A history of substantial IPV; harsh parenting, substance or alcohol abuse; or a major mental disorder are common reasons for one parent to want to limit the other's access. The judge, of course, will require evidence to validate the parent's allegations. Orders for psychological or parenting time evaluations, substance abuse testing, or risk assessment for domestic violence may be necessary to provide the judge with corroborating information. Parents, usually mothers for example, also act protectively over concerns about the other parent's parenting experience and level of parenting skills. Mothers may assert that overnights for a very young child are premature and this would reflect a motivation to protect the child's well-being and sense of emotional security.

When the evidence supports the restricting parent's position, or corroborates allegations of harm, then it is a case of Justified RG. In such situations, telephonic access may be denied unless supervised on speaker, neutral settings for transfers of the child may occur, parental communication about the child may be restricted to electronic means or completely eliminated, and the other parent's time with the child may be limited to supervised visitation.

Sometimes the personal unresolved issues of a parent may result in RG, rather than concerns that are truly related to the child. When the evidence is not supportive of the gatekeeping behaviors, then it represents Unjustified RG. Applying the concept of Justified RG or Unjustified RG is essential in cases where a risk of harm is raised, such as in abusive relationships, relocation, or allegations of parental alienating behaviors are in question. A central part of child custody or parenting time evaluations is to assess whether RG and a parent's concerns about risk of harm are justified.

In custody disputes when there is a legislative declaration and best interest statutory factor to be supportive of the other-parent–child relationship, this "friendly parent doctrine" creates an inherent dialectical tension when there has been a history of IPV in the marriage. Courts should be extremely cautious about expecting victims of domestic violence to be "friendly" toward the ex-partner, especially when there have been ongoing or more severe forms of IPV (Austin, Drozd, & Dale, 2012; Austin & Drozd, 2012; Dore, 2004; Zorza, 1992). Table 2 illustrates differences between Justified RG and Unjustified RG.

The majority of separated parents are generally cooperative, often increasingly disengaged from each other and communicating on a limited basis (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Judges are unlikely to see facilitative gatekeepers in court, though sometimes one parent may be cooperative in co-parenting while trying to deal with a restrictive gatekeeper. In pre-decree actions, judges may see parents who are deadlocked with legitimate perspectives on timesharing (e.g., overnights), and there may be an issue of risk of harm (e.g., IPV) that must be addressed before ordering the timesharing plan. In post-decree and modification actions, judges are more likely to see

TABLE 2 Justified Versus Unjustified RG © William G. Austin, Linda Fieldstone, & Marsha Kline Pruett

Justified RG – *Limits to parental access may protect children*	Unjustified RG – *Limits to parental access reinforce inappropriate behavior of restrictive gatekeeping parent*
Corroborated history of IPV	Parental belief in the greater importance of his/her role, most common among mothers
Harsh discipline of child/child abuse	Parent's questioning the competence of other parent without adequate foundation
Parent's substance/alcohol abuse	Parent feels child's presence is essential to coping with divorce/separation, causing reluctance to share child
Parent's major mental health disorder/not taking prescribed medication	Parent's misperceiving that he or she is being marginalized and his or her value as a parent is not recognized, most common among fathers
Parent's continuous inappropriate parenting and co-parenting behaviors that negatively impact the child	Parent's anger and wish to punish other parent

the subset of parents who continue to experience enduring conflict or whose conflict resurfaces during a major transition (e.g., threatened move away). Each parent's track record on gatekeeping can be examined; RG is often the reason for the litigation.

Custody/Parental Responsibility Evaluation and Parenting Plan Recommendation

When the issue of gatekeeping is not resolved or when there are questions concerning the safety of the child and an investigative or evaluative process is ordered, judges can ask that the reports delineate gate-opening and gate-closing behaviors of each parent.

GATEKEEPING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

Judges need to be able to distinguish between gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors because unjustified RG attitudes are so commonplace with litigating parents. Parental cooperation and father involvement are related to such attitudes, along with corresponding behaviors. Facilitative gatekeepers encourage child–parent communication and contact. Behaviors are positive, constructive, and child-centered. However, the intense emotionality associated with separation and divorce litigation tends to evoke rigid thinking about the other parent as a person and as a parent that is often temporary and usually negative. Research shows that if parents can compartmentalize their negative feelings from co-parenting behaviors, then children transition more easily (Whiteside, 1998). If fathers can stay involved with the children in ways that facilitate FG behaviors, and/or FG behaviors encourage fathers to stay involved with their children, then the children are likely to show positive adjustment (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003), even if mothers hold RG attitudes.

Gate-Closing and Gate-Opening Behaviors

A gatekeeping analysis will be more helpful in any legal context (e.g., litigation, evaluation, mediation, parenting coordination) if specific gatekeeping behaviors are identified and documented. Negativity in attitudes and beliefs about the other parent and his or her parenting is most relevant when it carries over into behaviors that cause conflict or separate the child from that parent. As with other issues either in litigation, mediation, or parenting coordination contexts, gatekeeping allegations need to be investigated and corroborated. The "gatekeeping debate" often will mainly consist of "he-said/she-said" data on restrictiveness. The checklist in Table 3 helps identify gate-opening and gate-closing behaviors:

TABLE 3 Indentifying Gate-Opening and Gate-Closing Behaviors © William G. Austin, Linda Fieldstone, & Marsha Kline Pruett

Examples of Gate-Opening Behaviors (FG)	Examples of Gate-Closing Behaviors (RG)
Reinforcement of Child's Relationship With Both Parents	
☐ Having photographs of the other parent in view of or easily accessible to the child	☐ Not permitting child to have photographs of other parent
☐ Praising gifts and cards given to child by other parent; having child send birthday and Mother's/Father's Day card to other parent; having joint birthday parties for child	☐ Denigrating or withholding gifts or cards from other parent; not allowing other parent to child's birthday party
☐ Telling child that there are no secrets between parents	☐ Asking child to keep secrets from the other parent
☐ Ensuring child knows that parents communicate about important matters jointly; refraining from using child as messenger or detective	☐ Using child as a conduit or messenger between parents; asking child for personal information about other parent
Parental Communication/Access to Information	
☐ Providing timely child-related information, without other parent asking for it	☐ Withholding information about the child
☐ Ensuring parent and parent's contact information is on all forms so all records are available to both parents	☐ Not placing other parent's name as parent on school/doctor forms
Parent's Interactions With Child/Child's Exposure to Conflict	
☐ Praising the other parent to the child	☐ Derogating the other parent to or in front of the child
☐ Protecting child from disagreements and parental discord; minimizing parental contact at transfer times; hiding adult information; demonstrating healthy resolution of disagreements	☐ Exposing the child to conflict and nonverbal tension; parental discord at transfer times; phone conversations in front of child; leaving adult information out and easily accessible to child
☐ Protecting child from monetary issues between parents	☐ Discussing child support issues with child; blaming financial difficulties and lack of purchases for child on other parent
☐ Allowing and actively supporting communication between other parent and child	☐ Making communication difficult between other parent and child
☐ Allowing privacy during calls, texts and emails between other parent and child	☐ Holding all conversations between other parent and child by speaker, if allowed at all; reading and censoring written communications between other parent and child
☐ Encouraging child to initiate calls to other parent	☐ Telling child not to call other parent
☐ Scheduling daily time for electronic communication between parent and child, including Skype time	☐ Making sure child is unavailable at call times; not giving child messages that other parent has called.
Timesharing and Child's Activities	
☐ Following the timesharing schedule; trying not to interfere with other parent's time; cooperating on needed changes as situations arise	☐ Not following the parenting time schedule; continuous misinterpretations of parenting plan; frequent requests for changes unrelated to job schedule

(*Continued*)

TABLE 3 Continued

Timesharing and Child's Activities	
☐ Being prompt at transfer times	☐ Being chronically late; providing no notice if delayed or unavailable; not showing on designated days without notice
☐ Being flexible so that the child maintains meaningful contact with other parent; ensuring that child attends life cycle events with each parent	☐ Being inflexible on needed changes to the scheduled times and days; restricting child from attending any event with other parent unless it is that parent's designated time
☐ Offering other parent first option to care for the child when designated parent is unavailable; allowing access to babysitters when needed	☐ Not honoring the right of first refusal if in the parenting plan; not informing who child will be with if not with either parent
☐ Encouraging development of own interests and participation of activities during parent's own parenting time	☐ Denying child's participation in extracurricular activities unless during other parent's time
☐ Sharing child's activities and functions; giving other parent notice of events; participating jointly	☐ Impeding other parent's participation; not giving notice to other parent of events; Not attending child's event if other parent is present
☐ Keeping other parent's time available for child	☐ Unilaterally scheduling activities during other parent's parenting time
☐ Modeling appropriate decorum when attending child-related activities; greeting and having child greet other parent at functions	☐ Putting child in the middle if both parents are at same function; keeping child from other parent

Temporary or enduring RG?

It is important for judges to try to distinguish restrictive behaviors that are separation and divorce litigation related or induced as opposed to signs that the RG will be enduring. After two years, about 80% of parents will be cooperative and postseparation conflict will have mostly dissipated (Hetherington, 1999a). On the other hand, enduring RG will likely fuel re-litigation. Gatekeeping is not an all-or-nothing prospect. There are nuances in gatekeeping behaviors. A parent may be restrictive in one area of co-parenting and cooperative in other areas. Table 4 compares litigation-related RG behaviors to more enduring gate-closing behaviors.

TABLE 4 Distinguishing Temporary From Enduring RG © William G. Austin, Linda Fieldstone, & Marsha Kline Pruett

Separation/divorce litigation related	Enduring gate closing
Mild to moderate resistance to following orders, and only those related to current litigation process	Indiscriminate and ongoing difficulty in following court orders
Progress in parental communication over time	Parental communication still fraught with conflict or is nonexistent
Progress in joint decision making	Automatic resistance to preferences of or requests from other parent
Progress in ability to compromise	No willingness to compromise

TABLE 5 Indentifying Gatekeeping Behaviors That Affect Social Capital © William G. Austin, Linda Fieldstone, & Marsha Kline Pruett

Facilitative Gatekeeping (FG)	Restrictive Gatekeeping (RG)
☐ Regular access to extended family members of both parents	☐ Impeding access to other parent's family members
☐ Siblings on same timesharing schedule for large part/most of the time	☐ Sibling splitting on recurrent and consistent basis
☐ Expertise of other parent highlighted in child's life	☐ Employment of others to effectuate child- related tasks rather than other parent
☐ Child's activities are planned to maximize ongoing involvement in peer, sports, religious, or neighborhood activities	☐ Continuity in child's activities are often compromised by parenting schedules and behaviors
☐ Both parents support other important relationships and adults in child's life, at school, and in community	☐ Child's access and involvement with other important adults is negated, restricted, or actively prohibited to punish or control the other parent
☐ Positive role modeling regarding parenting, co-parenting, discipline, and respect for importance of each parent's developing relationship with the child	☐ Continuing residual domestic violence behaviors (harassment, intrusiveness), harsh parenting, substance abuse, and alienating behaviors by a parent

Social capital: explaining the gatekeeping effect

The general concept of social capital has been used to explain the "gatekeeping effect" (Austin, 2012; Austin et al., 2013). Social capital is defined as the psychological, emotional, and social contributions that are provided to the child by parents, siblings, extended family, peers, and other important relationships, and also by organizations, groups, and communities. Parents are the main source of social capital for the child. When parents are competent and committed, they both offer the child rich social capital. When the child is exposed to harsh parenting, intense or unresolved parent conflict, substance abuse, or domestic violence (e.g., "negative social capital"), then maladjustment is more likely (Hetherington, 1999b).

Gatekeeping theory generally proposes that RG places the child at risk for adjustment problems and lower developmental outcomes, while FG will produce better outcomes and healthier development. See Table 5 below to indentify behaviors that result in RG which can be addressed through court orders that minimize those occurrences.

APPLYING GATEKEEPING TO CHILD-RELATED ISSUES IN LITIGATION

Gatekeeping in Relocation Cases

Potential harm to the nonmoving parent–child relationship, and therefore to the child, is always the central issue in a relocation dispute. FG by the moving

parent will be the key to managing the risk of harm to the child's relationship with the parent left behind. The residential parent in a long distance parenting arrangement needs to be proactive in promoting contact between the other parent and the child. Without this type of active cooperation, the quality in the parent-child relationship will greatly diminish. It could be argued that FG should be a necessary condition for judicial approval of a relocation request. FG is an essential risk management component in the implementation of a long distance plan. How gatekeeping analysis is applied to relocation cases has been discussed in the literature (Austin, 2008, 2012). Judges usually are not going to approve a proposed relocation when there has been Unjustified RG, but the fact pattern and/or legal context may result in a child relocating with the parent even though there is an unfavorable pattern of gatekeeping. In such cases, the parenting plan should be highly structured and very specific on all aspects (e.g., parenting time schedule, electronic contact, exchanges, travel, and so forth). Table 6 provides precautions that may minimize risks in relocation cases with either unjustified or justified RG.

Gatekeeping and Estrangement/Alienation

Behaviors by parents that could reasonably be expected to negatively affect the other-parent–child relationship and involvement represent gate-closing behaviors that typify RG. When such RG is unjustified and results in a child resisting or refusing to have contact with the other parent, the child may be showing signs of disaffection or—at its most extreme—alienation.

A behavioral pattern of alienation occupies the extreme, restrictive end of the gatekeeping continuum. The child is aligned with one parent and rejecting of the other parent in rigid ways, to uncompromising degrees. Cases

TABLE 6 Components of Parenting Plans That Minimize Risks in Relocation Cases © William G. Austin, Linda Fieldstone, & Marsha Kline Pruett

For relocation cases with unjustified RG	For relocation cases with justified RG
Order child's address, school, activities, and all records to be available for both parents	Protect identity of moving parent/child's exact location, school, activities (e.g., severe domestic violence
Transfers midway or facilitated by moving parent	Neutral locations for transfers; may be midway; supervised transitions may apply
Ongoing communication between parents and between parent and child by phone, text, webcam, email, chat	Ongoing exchange of parental information through electronic means (Our Family Wizard or other Web-based data source); electronic communication between parent and child
Designation in parenting plan of vehicle and responsibility for costs of child's travel	Order regarding vehicle and payment of travel expenses for child
Substantial time set for child with nonmoving parent on a regular basis	Age and extent of child's wishes for contact should be specified and considered

of substantial to severe estrangement or alienation may involve disturbed psychological dynamics between the rejected parent and the child and/or the child and a parent who is blocking access to the other parent. Alienation also involves parent–child boundary problems such as enmeshment; the parent may treat the child as a partner (parentification) or is inappropriately protective (infantilizing). As a result, the child is likely to have significant adjustment problems.

In these situations, the child may not benefit from the other parent's psychosocial resources or social capital. These types of parent behaviors require immediate and sustained intervention. It is important to identify specific gate-closing actions that require placement with mandated gate-opening behaviors.

Such cases are exceedingly complex and authorities do not agree on potential intervention strategies, ranging from judges ordering treatment options for child and parents, addressing possible need for reunification between parent and child, changing the conditions of the parenting time arrangement, or even changing the child's residential parent (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012). Limiting time with the parent exerting unjustified RG may be a consideration, especially when all else fails.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE RG AND MOVE TOWARD FG

Optimally, as families complete their court processes, they are left with strategies that will reduce RG and encourage FG. Often with some support, parents can learn to implement these strategies. It is crucial for judiciary and family law professionals to approach cases with the concept of gatekeeping in mind if these issues are to be adequately addressed throughout the court process.

Judicial orders that leave no room for misinterpretation and include well-constructed parenting plans with detailed timesharing arrangements foster greater compliance. Judges can refer parents to resources that can address gatekeeping issues and reinforce changes toward more facilitative behaviors. Orders for services should include specific questions or reasons for the referral.

Professional Resources to Assist Parents With Gatekeeping Issues

Mediation

Gatekeeping can be used as an educational component to help a mediator to facilitate settlement. Mediators can create movement on parents' positions by connecting hindering behaviors to poor outcomes for children. Identification of RG serves to define obstacles in mediation. A PG perspective can help a parent better understand why the other parent is trying to limit his or her parenting time. Mediators may include items in agreements between the parties that limit RG.

Co-parenting education and counseling

Co-parenting counselors and educators can use gatekeeping research (see Austin et al., 2013) to inform parents of the benefits of sharing their children. Framing co-parenting in terms of gatekeeping and social capital can provide concrete reference points from which parents can assess their own co-parenting quality. Parents can be taught the importance of—and how to compartmentalize—negative feelings toward the other parent while co-parenting and can learn to become detached partners involved in the business of parenting and co-parenting.

If both parents are exerting RG, then co-parenting counseling may begin to address the issues. However, when RG is an issue with one parent, individual counseling may be a more appropriate referral; extended co-parenting or joint counseling can be ordered once RG issues are addressed first with the offending parent. Judges can also consider referring the children and parents for family counseling when RG is an issue; older children also may require individual counseling to address their personal issues confidentially. Both therapists can work together to achieve optimal results for the children. The gatekeeping perspective can be useful for professionals who are assisting with repairing ruptured parent–child relationships or even trying to achieve reunification.

Parenting coordination

Parenting Coordinators (PCs) can use a gatekeeping perspective to help parents identify behaviors that are helpful or detrimental to their children and coach parents to find conflict reduction solutions when there is an impasse. PCs can help parents implement their parenting plans, but cannot substantively modify parenting time to punish a restrictive gatekeeper. PCs can refer the parents and children for needed and appropriate services and can contact appropriate authorities, such as the child welfare department, if the gatekeeping behaviors of a parent are harmful to the child.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING GATEKEEPING TO KEEP IN MIND

Judges, family law and mental health professionals, parenting coordinators, and parent educators may find it beneficial to keep the following in mind:

- The greater the conflict experienced by the parents, the greater the need for specificity when writing judicial orders and legal documents.
- Gatekeeping can be facilitative or restrictive (for protective or inhibitory reasons); inhibitory, gate-closing parenting behaviors create a risk of harm to the other parent–child relationship.

- It is important to identify specific gatekeeping behaviors and how these may have direct effects on the parent–child relationship. A danger exists in using the gatekeeping analysis solely for purposes of labeling a parent as a restrictive gatekeeper, without specifying behaviors that demonstrate the label.
- Each parent has social capital to offer his or her child; that social capital supports child healthy development through resources and social support. It is positive in the majority of cases, though not in situations of abuse, family violence, extremely harsh parenting, or estrangement and/or alienation.
- It is important to distinguish between negative-restrictive *attitudes* about the other parent and inhibitory-restrictive *behaviors*. The distinguishing question is: Can the parents compartmentalize their feelings and behave in ways that support the other parent to the child?
- It will be helpful to distinguish time-limited RG and separation and divorce litigation-related RG from an enduring, chronic problem.
- Restrictive behaviors representing justified RG can be distinguished from unjustified RG by determining if safety concerns are at issue.
- Understanding RG situations leads to better decisions about parental access and parenting plan considerations regarding shared parenting and decision making.
- Gatekeeping analysis may be central to relocation disputes; FG is essential in crafting a viable long distance parenting arrangement.
- Any behaviors aimed at disaffection of one parent and parent-alienating behaviors as an extreme form of RG require immediate and sustained intervention.
- Limiting time with the parent exerting RG may be a consideration, but as its impact on the child is poorly understood, such decisions are best saved until all else fails.

REFERENCES

Allen, S. M., & Hawkins, A. J. (1999). Maternal gatekeeping: Mother's beliefs and behavior that inhibit greater father involvement in family work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *61*, 199–212.

Amato, P. R., & Sobolewski, J. M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult children's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review*, *66*, 900–921.

Amato, P. R., & Sobolewski, J. M. (2004). The effects of divorce on fathers and children. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (pp. 341–367). New York, NY: Wiley.

Austin, W. G. (2005a, February). Considering the process of support for the other parent and gatekeeping in parenting evaluations. *Colorado IDC News: The Newsletter of the State of Colorado Interdisciplinary Committee*, *7*(1), 10–13. Available at www.child-custody-services.com

Austin, W. G. (2005b). The child and family investigator's evaluation for the relocation case. In R. M. Smith (Ed.), *The role of the child and family investigator and the child's legal representative in Colorado* (pp. C9-1–C9-28). Denver: Colorado Bar Association.

Austin, W. G. (2008). Relocation, research, and forensic evaluation: Part II: Research support for the relocation risk assessment model. *Family Court Review*, *46*(2), 347–365.

Austin, W. G. (2011). Parental gatekeeping in custody disputes. *American Journal of Family Law*, *25*(4), 148–153.

Austin, W. G. (2012). Relocation, research, and child custody disputes. In K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd (Eds.) *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court* (pp. 540–559). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Austin, W. G., & Drozd, L. M. (2012). Intimate partner violence and child custody evaluation, Part I: Theoretical framework, forensic model, and assessment issues. *Journal of Child Custody*, *9*(4), 250–309.

Austin, W. G., Drozd, L. M., & Dale, M. S. (2012, June 7). *Intimate partner violence, relocation, gatekeeping, and child custody evaluation*. Workshop presented at Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, 49th Annual Conference. Chicago, IL.

Austin, W. G., Pruett, M. K., Kirkpatrick, H. D., Flens, J. R., & Gould, J. W. (in press, exp. July 2013). Parental gatekeeping and child custody/child access evaluations: Part I: Conceptual framework, research, and application. *Family Court Review*, *51*(3).

Beitel, A. H., & Parke, R. D. (1998). Paternal involvement in infancy: The role of maternal and paternal attitudes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *12*(2), 268–288.

Buchanan, C. M., Maccoby, E. E., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). Caught between parents: Adolescents' experience in divorced homes. *Child Development*, *62*, 1008–1029.

Camara, K. A., & Resnick, G. (1989). Styles of conflict resolution and cooperation between divorced parents: Effects on child behavior and adjustment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *59*, 560–575.

Dore, M. K. (2004). The "friendly parent" concept: A flawed factor for child custody. *Loyola Journal of Public Interest Law*, *6*, 41–56.

Fagan, J., & Barnett, M. (2003). The relationship between maternal gatekeeping, paternal competence, mothers' attitudes about the father role, and father involvement. *Journal of Family Issues*, *24*, 1020–1043.

Flouri, E. (2005). *Fathering & child outcomes*. West Sussex, England: John Wiley.

Herzog, M. J., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Madden-Derdrich, D. A., & Leonard, S. A. (2007). Adolescent mothers' perceptions of fathers' parental involvement: Satisfaction and desire for involvement. *Family Relations*, *56*(3), 244–257.

Hetherington, E. M. (1999a). Should we stay together for the sake of the children? In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective* (pp. 93–116). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hetherington, E. M. (1999b). Social capital and the development of youth from nondivorced, divorced, and remarried families. In W. A. Collins & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Relationships as developmental contexts: The Minnesota symposium on child psychology*, Vol. 30 (pp. 177–210). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Kelly, J. B., & Emery, R. (2003). Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations*, *52*, 352–362.

Kulik, L., & Tsoref, H. (2010). The entrance to the maternal garden: Environmental and personal variables that explain gatekeeping. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *19*(3), 263–277.

Maccoby, E. E., & Mnookin, R. H. (1992). *Dividing the child: Social & legal dilemmas of custody*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Oppenheim, D., & Koren-Karie, N. (2012). Parents' insightfulness: The importance of keeping the inner world of the child in mind for parenting plan evaluations. In K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd (Eds.), *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court* (pp. 25–46). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pruett, M. K., Arthur, L. A., & Ebling, R. (2007). The hand that rocks the cradle: Maternal gatekeeping after divorce. *Pace Law Review*, *27*(4), 709–739.

Pruett, M. K., Williams, T. Y., Insabella, G., & Little, T. D. (2003). Family and legal indicators of child adjustment to divorce among families with young children. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *17*, 169–180.

Saini, M., Johnston, J. R., Fidler, B. J., & Bala, N. (2012). Empirical studies of alienation. In K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd (Eds.), *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court* (pp. 399–441). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sandler, I., Miles, J., Cookston, J., & Braver, S. (2008). Effects of father and mother parenting on children's mental health in high- and low-conflict divorces. *Family Court Review*, *46*(2), 282–296.

Shoppe-Sullivan, S. J., Brown, G. L., Cannon, E. A., & Mangelsdorf, S. C. (2008). Maternal gatekeeping, coparenting quality, and fathering behavior in families with infants. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *22*(3), 389–398.

Sobolewski, J. M., & King, V. (2005). The importance of the coparental relationship for nonresident fathers' ties to children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*, 1196–1212.

Trinder, L. (2008). Maternal gate closing and gate opening in postdivorce families. *Journal of Family Issues*, *29*(10), 1298–1324.

Whiteside, M. F. (1998). The parental alliance following divorce: An overview. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *24*(1), 3–24.

Whiteside, M. F., & Becker, B. F. (2000). Parental factors and the young child's post-divorce adjustment: A meta-analysis with implications for parenting arrangements. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *14*(1), 5–26.

Zorza, J. (1992). "Friendly parent" provisions in custody determinations. *Clearinghouse Review*, *26*, 921–925.