

An empirical study on maternal gatekeeping and paternal involvement from the perspective of coparenting

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Abstract: Against the social background of family transformation and the restructuring of gender divisions, deep paternal involvement in parenting has become an important issue in modern family development. Drawing on family sociology and the coparenting framework, this study took 204 pairs of parents of primary school students as research subjects to examine the impact of maternal gatekeeping on paternal involvement. The results showed that mothers in contemporary Chinese families mainly adopted positive gatekeeping behaviors, and paternal involvement presented a structural imbalance characterized by high affective involvement but low instrumental involvement. Maternal opening behavior significantly promoted the initiation and maintenance of paternal involvement, while maternal closing behavior had an inhibiting effect. The effect of maternal gatekeeping was independent of demographic variables and acted as a core family interaction mechanism affecting paternal involvement. This study confirms that maternal gatekeeping is a stable predictor of paternal involvement, providing empirical evidence for understanding coparenting in Chinese families.

Keywords: coparenting; maternal gatekeeping; paternal involvement

1 Introduction

Family constitutes the core developmental environment for children's growth, and coparenting is the key to the development of family education. *The Family Education Promotion Law* explicitly stipulates that parents should undertake shared parenting responsibilities. Nevertheless, widespread deficits in co-parenting practice and prevalent maternal dilemmas persist, while there is a lack of local research support for policy implementation [1]. The *2025 White Paper* indicates that mothers serve as primary childcare providers in 47.5% of families, and the overload of motherhood restricts the quality of family education [2]. Maternal gatekeeping behavior directly influences father's parental involvement, and existing research blindly follows Western theories, failing to clarify the differential relationship between bidirectional gatekeeping and parental involvement. Focusing on families with primary school students, this study explores the linkage between maternal gatekeeping and paternal involvement, offering empirical support for improved family coparenting.

1.1 Research status and shortcomings of father's participation in parenting

Parental investment involves four core dimensions, which require mutual recognition from both parents, and passive participation has little effect [3]. Previous studies have confirmed that parenting can comprehensively promote children's physical and mental development, reduce problematic behaviors in young children, and protect the psychological resilience of left-behind adolescents. In the Chinese family context, paternal involvement is generally lower than maternal

involvement. Specifically, fathers tend to engage more in emotional companionship but less in routine daily childcare. Traditional gender role beliefs, family characteristics, father's personal income, and educational attainment can all affect the level of parental involvement.

1.2 The influence of maternal gatekeeping behaviors on paternal parenting involvement

Drawing on the family system crossover hypothesis and gender role theory, maternal gatekeeping behaviors can be categorized into two dimensions: gate-opening and gate-closing. Previous empirical studies have shown that gate-opening positively promotes paternal involvement, while gate-closing has a suppressive effect. A sample of 597 households also confirmed a significant correlation between two types of gatekeeping behaviors and paternal involvement in parenting. The traditional gender division of labor has established the dominant position of mothers in family upbringing, and the current research concerning the relational mechanisms linking gate-opening and gate-closing behaviors to paternal parenting involvement remains underdeveloped. Accordingly, this study advances two hypotheses: gate-opening behaviors positively predict paternal parenting involvement, whereas gate-closing behaviors exert negative predictive effects on it. In addition, the present work enriches research on their correlational relationship within a coparenting framework.

2 Research methods

2.1 Participants

Using cluster sampling combined with online questionnaires, 216 households were surveyed, 432 questionnaires were distributed, and 408 valid questionnaires were collected from 204 households, with a response rate of 94.4%. The average age of children is 9.86 years old, with 62.3% being boys and 65.7% being only children. Father's average age is 36.13 years old, with 46.6% having a bachelor's degree or above. The average age of the mothers is 35.32 years old, with 52.0% having a bachelor's degree or above.

2.2 Research tools and programs

The four-dimensional, 26-item Father Education Questionnaire revised by Yin Xiayun and the two-dimensional 11 question Mother Gatekeeping Questionnaire adapted by Zou Shengqi were both scored with 7 points, and the reliability and fitting indicators of the two scales met the standard. Using SPSS 24.0, PROCESS, and R language for statistical and regression analysis, Harman test showed that the first factor explained 38.58% of the variance, and there was no significant common method bias.

3 Results and analysis

3.1 Overall situation and demographic differences

Descriptive statistics show that the total score of father's involvement in parenting is (5.29 ± 0.92) points, with dimension scores in the order of encouragement and praise, support and planning, discipline and restraint, and daily care; The mother scored 4.84 ± 1.37 points for gate-opening behavior and 2.35 ± 1.56 points for gate-closing behavior, indicating a greater tendency toward active gate-opening. Demographic differences showed greater parenting involvement among younger only-child fathers, with child gender showing no significant influence. Younger parental age, higher education, and higher socioeconomic status correlated positively with paternal engagement, while demographic gaps in maternal bidirectional gatekeeping narrowed.

3.2 Variable correlation and regression analysis

Partial correlation analysis shows that the maternal gate-opening behaviors were significantly and positively correlated with various dimensions of paternal parenting involvement, while gate-closing behaviors only exhibited a weak negative correlation with supportive planning as well as encouragement and praise. The two-way gatekeeping is independent of each other. Hierarchical regression shows that after controlling for demographic variables, maternal gate-

opening positively predicted all paternal parenting dimensions, whereas gate-closing only negatively predicted the dimensions of supportive planning and encouragement-praise. These regression findings were consistent with the results of correlation analysis.

4 Discussion

Firstly, the maternal gatekeeping behaviors were dominated by gate-opening, and a few mothers exhibited parenting control tendencies. Contemporary fathers have a moderate-to-high level of parenting, with a preference for emotional companionship and insufficient participation in practical household and parenting tasks. Moreover, there is no gender difference in parenting investment, which breaks down traditional parenting stereotypes [4].

Secondly, maternal gatekeeping was influenced by multiple factors: the parenting pressure of dual-earner families, evolving maternal parenting beliefs, the guidance of family education policies, as well as the combined effects of children's age and family socioeconomic status, and gatekeeping behaviors showed no significant association with child gender. Again, parental involvement in parenting was influenced by a combination of child characteristics, paternal individual traits, maternal gatekeeping, and social support, with maternal gatekeeping being the most central and stable predictor [5].

Finally, maternal gatekeeping had a differentiated predictive effect: gate-opening positively predicted comprehensive paternal parenting involvement, whereas gate-closing only suppressed paternal emotional parenting behaviors. The predictive effect of demographic variables was weakened, and internal family interactions could effectively improve the quality of collaborative parenting in families.

5 Conclusion and prospect

This study drew three conclusions: the overall level of paternal involvement in primary school families is above average, with an imbalance between sufficient emotional involvement and insufficient care for practical household and childcare tasks. Mothers tended to actively engage in gatekeeping behaviors. Maternal gate-opening positively predicted all dimensions of paternal parenting involvement, while gate-closing only negatively affected dimensions of supportive planning, encouragement-praise. The predictive effect of demographic variables on paternal involvement in parenting was weaker than that of maternal gatekeeping behavior. This study adopted a cross-sectional survey and could only prove the correlation between variables. The sample was limited to primary school students' nuclear families, and the generalizability of the conclusions was limited. In the future, longitudinal research can be adopted to broaden the sample coverage, including multiple family types and variables, so as to improve the mechanism of action research.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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