

‘GATEKEEPING’ in Separation/Divorce

What is Gate keeping?

When parents experience a separation or divorce, they undergo a profound transition in their lives. For most parents who undergo a high conflict separation, they come to this event with a host of negative emotions. Often, people feel angry, scared and/or betrayed. It is not uncommon for one parent to have planned for or have been the catalyst for the separation. Sometimes, both parents desire the end of their relationship.

Usually, there is a lack of trust in the other parent’s capability to parent their child. Consequently, there may be allegations and accusations of poor parenting, concerns about the other parent’s mental health, domestic violence, worries about substance abuse, fears about sexual or physical abuse and an overall sense that the child will be unsafe with the other parent.

According to Fagan and Barnett (Journal of Family Issues, 24, 2003, p. 370) gate keeping is defined as ‘mothers’ preferences and attempts to restrict and exclude fathers from child care and involvement with children.’ Fathers as well as mothers can gate keep. This is often seen in cases of alienation where a father uses allegations of safety concerns toward the mother as justification for preventing access. Gate keeping serves a vehicle for expression of parental anger, fear or distrust of the other parent’s parenting competence.

In this same article Fagan and Barnett discuss two types of gate keeping: positive and negative. Positive gate keeping is where the parent has substantive concerns for the child’s safety. In these situations, the parent with the concerns wants to promote a positive relationship between the other parent and the child. Their central objective is not to deny contact but child safety.

Negative gate keeping involves parental anger towards the other parent. One parent often is resentful of their previous experience in the relationship. Sometimes, the motivation to thwart parent/child contact is ‘payback’ for that parent’s previous treatment of them. Most researchers propose that negative gate keeping is harmful to children and the other parent. Positive gate keeping, however, can have a positive impact for children and the protective parent, such as cases of domestic violence, where there are real concerns about the child and other parent’s safety. Limiting contact may ensure the child is safe.

The role of the therapist, custody assessor or parenting co-ordinator is to determine whether parental behavior is reflective of positive or negative gate keeping. By so doing, the mental health professional must determine whether parental behaviors are based on actual data or not. In assessing this, one must determine whether there are other factors that account for why the parent that is restricting contact is doing so. The main intention of positive gate keeping is protective, with the purpose of monitoring the other parent’s access and to protect the child from harm. With negative gate keeping, there can be multiple intentions, such as strengthening the

one parent's litigation position, the mental health of the parent limiting contact or their distorting of the reality of the situation to justify reduced contact.

Gate keeping must be understood by looking at both parent's actions and beliefs because it is a dynamic process in which both have input. When this occurs, children can enjoy healthy and protective relationships with each parent.