

How a new father views his relationship with his partner

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A new father's views on his changing relationship with his wife or partner may depend in part on how much support he feels from her when he is caring for their baby, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that a first-time father tended to feel closer to the mother both as a co-parent and as a [romantic partner](#) when he believed he had her confidence when he was involved in [child care](#).

"Fathers are more involved than they have ever been in parenting, but moms are still seen in our society as the expert caregivers," said Anna Olsavsky, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"So how mothers react to their partners' parenting matters a lot. It affects how new dads feel about their whole family situation, including his [relationship](#) with his wife or partner."

The study—done with relatively affluent, highly educated dual-earner couples—was published recently online in the journal *Family Process* and

will appear in a future print edition.

This study is one of few to focus on the transition to parenthood from the perspective of [fathers](#), said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, study co-author and professor of psychology at Ohio State.

"It's still rare to examine the father's view on family processes," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

The researchers used data from the New Parents Project, a long-term study co-led by Schoppe-Sullivan that is investigating how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming [parents](#) for the first time. In all, 182 couples, most of whom were married, participated in this study.

The parents were assessed four times: when the mother was in her third trimester of pregnancy and when the baby was 3, 6 and 9 months old.

When the baby was 3 months old, fathers answered questions about what researchers call "maternal gatekeeping," or how much the mother inhibits or welcomes the father's involvement in child care.

Fathers reported how much they felt their partner "opened" or "closed" the gate on them when it came to interacting with the baby.

For example, each dad reported on gate-closing behaviors, such as how often his partner took over baby-related tasks because the mom thought he wasn't doing them properly or how often she gave him irritated looks about his parenting.

Examples of gate opening include encouraging the father to help bathe the baby or mom letting him know she appreciates his contributions to parenting.

When the baby was 6 months old, the fathers were asked about their co-parenting closeness with their

partner. For example, they rated how much they felt they were "growing and maturing together through experiences as parents."

Finally, when the baby was 9 months old, the fathers rated how good they felt about their [romantic relationship](#) with their partner.

Results showed that whether the mother "opened" or "closed" the gate on the father had a significant impact on how he felt about their relationship as a couple.

"If mothers are critical and less supportive of their partners' parenting, it could have ramifications for the whole family dynamic," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"Fathers may not only do less child care, they may have more negative views on their relationship with their wife or partner."

But the flip side was also true: Gate opening had a positive effect on how the new dad viewed the couple's relationship.

"There has been some work suggesting that gate opening may be viewed by fathers negatively as demands for them to be more involved in child rearing, but that's not what we found," Olsavsky said.

"Gate opening was perceived positively by fathers. They felt it improved their relationship as a couple."

The researchers emphasized that it is important for both new parents to support each other. But, because of [societal norms](#), fathers may need extra support.

"There is this underlying assumption that [mothers](#) are the experts when it comes to parenting. And they have more sources of support in society when it comes to how to be a good parent," Olsavsky said.

"But fathers don't generally get that support from society. The only support they often get as parents is from their [partner](#). That's why it is so important."

The researchers noted that this study was done

with couples who were primarily married, white, and middle-class or affluent. All were dual-earner couples. Results may be different in couples with other situations.

More information: Anna L. Olsavsky et al, New Fathers' Perceptions of Dyadic Adjustment: The Roles of Maternal Gatekeeping and Coparenting Closeness, *Family Process* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/famp.12451](#)

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