

Children of divorce less likely to care for elderly parents

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For better or worse, baby boomers approach retirement with more complex marital histories than previous generations. Temple University researcher Adam Davey, Ph.D. has found the impact of these events — divorces, widowhood, and remarriage — can predict the degree to which an adult child will care for an aging parent.

A divorce may have happened more than 30 years ago, but the changes it caused can have a long-lasting effect for the child into adulthood, Davey said. The findings appear in the September issue of *Advances in Life Course Research*.

More specifically, divorce predicted an adult child would be less involved with day-to-day assistance later in life for an aging parent. These activities include the child helping the parent with chores in the home.

“It’s not the divorce itself that affects the quality of the parent-child relationship, but it’s what happens afterward such as geographical separation,” said Davey, a gerontologist who studies trends in the baby boomer generation and other aging issues.

Davey analyzed data, collected between 1987 and 1994, from 2,087 parents aged 50 and older who reported on their 7,019 adult children in the National Survey of Family and Households.

“Marital transitions affect families in a number of ways,” Davey said.

“They can interrupt the relationship of support between a parent and child, and the evidence suggests that the continuity of support by parents and to parents matters.”

The study also found marital disruptions earlier in a child’s life can be less detrimental to the relationship than those that occurred in adulthood. This also means that children in the same family can be affected differently by the same event, Davey said.

The results suggest that both the type of transition and when in a child’s life it occurs are important. A father’s remarriage early in a child’s life makes it more likely that his children will provide help in later life, but the same transition when the child is an adult reduces the chances of that child helping the father.

There is also evidence that the more a child’s life was spent with a divorced mother, the higher the chances that the child will provide assistance when the mother is older, Davey said.

One surprising finding was that both mothers and fathers are only half as likely to get support from a non-biological child. This has important implications for those who reach old age anticipating help from stepchildren.

“Society does not yet have a clear set of expectations for stepchildren’s responsibility,” Davey said.

Despite the findings, this does not mean these potential effects damage the parent-child relationship as a whole, Davey said.

While marital transitions don’t seem to cause irreparable damage to the support that children provide to parents in later life, they do disrupt the needs and resources of both generations. Each child in the family can

experience the same event differently in ways that can still be seen when the parents reach old age, he said.

“Given how common marital transitions have become, and how complex families have become as a result, it’s surprising that the effects aren’t even more pronounced.” Davey added.

Source: Temple University

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