

Aging improves parent, child relationships, research shows

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The majority of relationships between parents and their adult children improve as parents transition to old age, a Purdue University researcher has found.

Karen Fingerman, an associate professor of developmental and family studies in the College of Consumer and Family Sciences, examined relationships adults 70 and older have with at least one of their adult offspring. The parents in the study also suffered either vision or hearing loss or were seeking help with general health care from one of their children.

"Much has been written about relationships between adult children who are in a care-giving relationship with their older and dependent parents," Fingerman said. "This time when parents are transitioning to old age and still living without major assistance has not been looked at as closely."

Fingerman said the study, which was recently published in the journal *Advances in Life Course Research*, showed that a majority of parents and children mentioned positive changes in their relationship, even as parents experienced declines in health.

"Both parents and children reported significantly less ambivalence than we originally expected," Fingerman said. "Generally, there was a feeling on both sides that this was as good as the relationship had been, and both sides felt appreciated and nurtured."

The study was funded by a combination of grants from the Brookdale Foundation and the National Institute of Aging.

Many of the parents talked about continuity in the relationship and, rather than resentment, expressed appreciation for increased help from children.

One of these, a 72-year-old man, commented on the relationship he has with his adult daughter.

"She has always cared about me," he said. "When I'm sick, she is always there. I don't have to ask. I've been very fortunate."

For the parents, their children's increasing roles in their lives served as proof of maturity and their own successful parenting.

A 72-year-old mother of a 40-year-old man said, "He bought a house. He has a significant other. He is busy. He works. He is very self-sufficient, and I am proud of him."

Fingerman said almost half of participants reported changes in the relationship, often related to tense interactions involving parental health.

"Some children reported pestering their parents more about health issues and being unsure if parents were ignoring them," Fingerman said.

"While we expected that children might feel demanded upon or stressed by their parents' health declines, most of the participants focused on positive changes, such as trying harder to spend time together or talking more or feeling closer and appreciated."

Children were more likely to refer to declines in parental health (nearly half of adult children participating compared to just over a third of parents) than their parents. Both sides talked about increased assistance

from children and the emotions associated with that, Fingerman said.

Fingerman said the research gives hope to parents and their adult children who are trying to adjust to the new demands parental aging can have on relationships.

"We must realize that parents don't go from being middle-aged to old and helpless," Fingerman said. "Parents and children are adjusting relatively well to the fact that parents are just not capable in the ways they once were."

Fingerman's current research, funded by the National Institutes of Health, examines the ways in which adults ages 40-60 help to meet the needs of both their grown children and elderly parents. The study looks at behaviors like offering advice, solving problems and performing needed tasks.

Source: Purdue University

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