

Still irritating after all these years: Study of adult children and parents

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The majority of parents and adult children experience some tension and aggravation with one another, a new study says.

But [parents](#) generally are more bothered by the tensions---and the older the child, the greater the bother.

"The parent-child relationship is one of the longest lasting social ties human beings establish," said Kira Birditt, lead author of the study and a researcher at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR). "This tie is often highly positive and supportive but it also commonly includes feelings of irritation, tension and ambivalence."

The study will be featured in an upcoming issue of the journal

Psychology and Aging.

For the study, supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, Birditt and colleagues at Purdue and Pennsylvania State universities analyzed data on 474 parents and adult children who were at least 22 years old. The adult children lived within 50 miles of their parents. [African Americans](#) made up one-third of the sample and the rest were European Americans.

The researchers asked about tensions related to a variety of topics, including personality differences, past relationship problems, children's finances, housekeeping habits, lifestyles, and how often they contacted each other.

Parents and adult children in the same families had different perceptions of tension intensity, with parents generally reporting more intense tensions than children did particularly regarding issues having to do with the children's lifestyle or behavior (finances, housekeeping). According to Birditt, tensions may be more upsetting to parents than to children because parents have more invested in the relationship. Parents are also concerned with launching their children into successful [adulthood](#).

Both mothers and fathers reported more tension in their relationships with daughters than with sons. Daughters generally have closer relationships with parents that involve more contact which may provide more opportunities for tensions in the parent-daughter tie.

Both adult sons and adult daughters reported more tension with their mothers than with their fathers, particularly about personality differences and unsolicited advice. "It may be that children feel their mothers make more demands for closeness," Birditt said, "or that they are generally more intrusive than fathers."

Birditt found it surprising that parental perceptions of tension increased with the adult children's age, particularly about topics having to do with how they interact (e.g., personality differences). "Middle-aged children may be less invested in the parent-child tie than young adult children because they're more likely to have formed their own families and experience multiple role demands," Birditt said. And as parents age and come to want or need more from their relationship with adult children, adult children may pull away, creating greater relationship tensions.

Although most parents and adult children experience at least a little tension, Birditt found that some topics were more harmful than others to parent-child relationships.

"Relationship problems like basic personality differences and parents providing unsolicited advice tend to cause more problems," Birditt said. "It may be that these kinds of tensions are longer-term, and reflect deep-seated conflicts that you just can't escape, whereas conflicts about lifestyles, education or finances can sort of be put off to the side if you make an effort."

In related, unpublished research, Birditt analyzed the strategies parents and adult children used to cope with relationship tensions. The good news is that both parents and children were most likely to deal with problems constructively by trying to accommodate each other's wishes when problems came up, working to find solutions to problems, and trying to accept and understand the other's point of view.

The more intense the tension level, though, the less likely parents and children were to use constructive strategies and the more likely they were to try avoiding the issues or use destructive strategies such as yelling or arguing. And according to Birditt, that is bad news. Avoidance and destructive strategies are associated with poorer quality relationships overall.

"The old adage, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all,' isn't good advice for parents and adult children," she said.

"Avoidance doesn't work as a strategy for dealing with conflicts. It appears to make things worse."

Source: University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

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