

# Family feud: US parents more likely to have conflict with adult children than European parents

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Tolstoy wrote that every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, and a new study in the August 2010 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* finds significant national differences in the degree of conflict between older parents and their adult children.

"Given that family life has its basis in the tension between the desire for autonomy and the need for interdependence, it is not surprising that intergenerational relations—throughout the family life cycle—are among the most ambivalent of social relationships," said Merrill Silverstein, USC professor of gerontology and sociology, and lead author of the study.

Prior research has shown that quality of life for older persons, including both mental health and physical health, depends heavily on how well older parents get along with their adult children.

To identify the social policies that might influence these relationships, Silverstein and co-authors looked at six developed countries with a range of welfare regimes and various family cultures: England, Germany, Israel, Norway, Spain and the United States.

They found that affection and conflict exist simultaneously in all countries examined, but significant differences exist in how the emotions are likely to interact.

"The simultaneous presence of affection and conflict in intergenerational relationships reflects emotional complexities that are intuitively obvious to anyone who is part of a family," Silverstein said.

Among the findings:

- Parents in the United States and Israel were far more likely than parents in England and Germany to have negative feelings toward their adult children, according to the study.
- However, negative emotions in Israel accompanied strong positive emotions more often than elsewhere, indicating emotional intensity and ambivalence.
- While German parents were unlikely to have negative feelings towards their adult children, they lacked positive feelings as well, indicating overall detachment.
- In the United States, "disharmonious" relationships—defined as the presence of strong negative emotions without strong positive emotions—were more than twice as likely than anywhere else studied.
- Older parents with difficulty climbing stairs were more likely to have a disharmonious relationship with their adult children.

A plurality of respondents in every country surveyed had affectionate relationships relatively free of conflict with their adult children. In England, 75 percent of parents had "amicable" relationships with their children, compared to about half in the United States (51 percent) and Germany (49 percent).

"Parents in poorer functional health tended more to have detached and disharmonious relationships with their children, and those who received help from children tended more to have ambivalent relationships with them," Silverstein explained. "Together, the finding suggest that frailty and dependence on children introduce elements of friction and strain into intergenerational relationships."

The study used data from the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG), concentrated in Southern California, and a multinational study of intergenerational relationships funded by the European Commission, OASIS. The final sample, across the six nations, was 2,698.

**More information:** "Older Parent-Child Relationships in Six Developed Nations: Comparisons at the Intersection of Affection and Conflict." Merrill Silverstein, et.al. Journal of Marriage and Family; Published Online: July 9, 2010. [DOI:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00745.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00745.x)

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