

Parents' mental health more likely to suffer when a grown child struggles

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Even into adulthood, problem children continue to give their parents heartache, and it doesn't matter if other children in the family grow up to be successful, according to a new study of middle-aged parents.

"What this study finds is that the [children](#) may have their own lives and moved on, but their ups and downs are still deeply affecting their parents," psychology professor Karen Fingerman, PhD, said Thursday at the 118th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. Fingerman, of Purdue University, presented her findings at a symposium focusing on social relationships and well-being.

For this study, 633 middle-aged parents in the Philadelphia area rated each of their grown children's achievements in relationships, family life, education and career. They were asked to rate each child's successes compared to other adults the same age. Most parents had more than one child so there were reports of 1,251 grown children included in the study.

Parents also answered questions about their own psychological well-being, what kind of relationship they had with their children, and whether each of their children had experienced specific physical, emotional, lifestyle and behavioral problems. Lifestyle and behavioral problems included: trouble with the law, drinking or drug problems, [divorce](#) and serious relationships problems. They also considered if each child's problems were deemed involuntary, such as a health issue, and controlled for them within the study.

The research found 68 percent of parents had at least one grown child suffering at least one problem in the last two years. Close to 49 percent of parents said at least one of their children was highly successful. The majority of parents, 60 percent, said they had a mix of successful and less successful children, while 17 percent had no children suffering from problems and 15 percent had no children they rated as being above average on life achievements.

The researchers then looked at how children's successes and failures affected parents' well-being. Parents who had more than one highly successful child reported better well-being. However, having even one problematic child had a negative impact on their mental health, even if the other children were successful. Simply having at least one successful child was not associated with better well-being. The findings suggest [parents](#) react more strongly to their children's failures than their successes, according to Fingerman

"Having two children suffering problems may be more demanding than having only one child who suffers problems," she said. "By the same token, having a successful child did not buffer the effects of problem-ridden children."

Provided by American Psychological Association

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