

Communication is key when dealing with aging parents

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Headstrong elderly parents and their adult children may be able to find common ground with proper intervention, according to researchers in human development.

Recent findings suggest that both adult children and their aging [parents](#) identify stubbornness in the parents, and that a new approach to conversation may be the answer.

Aging parents may respond to advice or help with daily problems from their grown children by insisting, resisting, or persisting in their ways or opinions—being stubborn. Until now, research has not examined how frequently such behaviors occur and what factors are associated with these behaviors.

Allison Heid, project director, New Jersey Institute for Successful Aging, Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine and recent Penn State Ph.D. recipient, found that middle-aged adults and their parents report instances where parents act in ways that are commonly attributed to stubbornness.

Steven Zarit, Distinguished Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, Penn State, cites a struggle for independence many [older adults](#) face as they try to maintain the life they had and the people they were. The researchers published their results online in *Journals of Gerontology: Psychology Sciences*.

"It's a topic everyone experiences," Zarit said. "It just hasn't been studied."

The goal of the research was not to identify whether individuals are "stubborn," but rather to understand perceptions of older parents and their adult children regarding such [behavior](#).

The researchers demonstrated that individual and relationship-based factors are linked to the perceived expression of stubbornness by parents and that there is discordance in perceptions within families. Findings suggest a need for intervention to increase understanding.

"Finding better ways to have that conversation is really important," Zarit said.

The researchers found that stubborn behaviors are reported to have occurred in the past few months at least once, but usually more often for more than 90 percent of families interviewed.

Three-fourths of children and two-thirds of aging parents in the sample say that at least one of the behaviors—insisting, resisting or persisting—is happening sometimes. The children in these families are not providing caregiving support—high levels of support with daily activities or basic needs—but rather the [family](#) members are providing everyday support to one another.

A second finding, Heid said, is that adult children link perceptions of parent stubbornness with how children see their relationships with their parents, but parents link their perceptions to who they are as people. If parents see themselves as more neurotic or less agreeable, they report more stubbornness.

"This finding indicates that adult children and aging parents may be

seeing these behaviors differently," said Heid.

Researchers also found that adult children perceive their parents as acting in ways commonly attributed to stubbornness more often than parents self-perceive such behaviors. Again, [adult children](#) and aging parents may see these behaviors differently in their relationships, which may impact how they relate to one another or support one another.

For practitioners or interventionists interacting with families, the work shows that stubbornness is a concern for families that likely should be discussed, Heid said.

There are often basic differences within families about day-to-day goals that could impact how families provide care or support. It is likely, Heid says, that these differences are a barrier to providing support within families.

"Helping families learn how to talk about older adults' preferences and about goal differences may be important in helping families best support older adults," she said. "However, this may mean we need to do additional work and research to develop the best strategies to do so."

"For families providing support to an older adult, this work confirms that these behaviors happen, but also that there is room for continued communication to ensure that there are shared goals in care and [support](#)," Heid said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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