

Fathers are 'cautionary tales' about health for some adults

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Some adults see their mothers and fathers as still influencing their own health—but in very different ways, according to a new study.

In interviews with 45 [married couples](#), researchers found that [mothers](#) influenced their [adult children](#)'s health in the same way they had through life—by being there when they're needed to help their child get through a health crisis.

But when it comes to dads—well, they're most helpful by showing their adult children what not to do to stay healthy.

"Adults in our study sometimes talked about how they were affected by their fathers having really poor health behaviors, like smoking or heavy drinking," said Alexandra Kissling, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in sociology at The Ohio State University.

"They really wanted to make sure they didn't make the same mistakes."

Kissling conducted the study with Corinne Reczek, professor of sociology at Ohio State. Their results were published online recently in the *Journal of Family Issues* and will appear in a future print edition.

The researchers did in-depth interviews with 90 [adults](#) (comprising 45 married couples) who were between 40 and 60 years old. The sample included 30 gay men, 30 [lesbian women](#) and 30 heterosexual men and women, all who were legally married residents of Massachusetts.

Because few studies have examined [parental influence](#) on the health of adult children, the researchers decided to do in-depth interviews to determine what issues were most important to them, Kissling said.

"This allows the participants to drive the conversation so that they can tell us what is most relevant and important to them," she said.

The researchers asked participants not only how their own parents affected their health, but also about the influence of their in-laws.

Overall, many participants did not perceive parents and in-laws as having an impact on their health, either positively or negatively, Kissling said. Those who didn't see an effect generally said they set boundaries with parents and in-laws and that the marital relationship was the one that really mattered to them in terms of health.

But, depending on the issue, between about one-quarter and slightly more than a third of the participants felt parents and in-laws did have an impact.

The researchers did not find important gender differences in how adult sons or daughters perceived the effects of mothers and fathers on their health.

Generally, adult children felt that mothers were a [positive influence](#) on their health, either by helping them when they were sick or by being counted on to be available if needed.

These results contribute to research on "intensive mothering," which is the idea that mothers are responsible for their children's welfare and consistently support them, Kissling said.

"That level of caring never stops, and mothers are there to help their child even as adults," she said.

Mothers-in-law were also deemed helpful, but their influence comes through the person's spouse.

"In our sample, it was unlikely that a person would call up their mother-in-law and ask for her to take care of them at home after surgery, for example," she said.

"They would call their own mom. But their spouse would find that

helpful, because they could continue to go to work knowing that things would be taken care of at home."

As for fathers and fathers-in-law, the study found that a common response from participants was that dads were "cautionary tales" when it came to health.

For these participants, fathers were seen as negative examples—a finding that aligns with research that suggests men take more health risks and have worse health behaviors compared with women, according to Kissling.

"People discussed fathers' and fathers-in-laws' addiction to alcohol and drugs as negative health examples, which encouraged them to make healthier life choices during their adulthood," she said.

Adults in the study who had to contend with their parents' own health issues said that this negatively affected their health—particularly if they lived with their parents.

In general, gay and lesbian adults in the study had very similar opinions about their parents' influence on their [health](#) as did heterosexual respondents, Kissling said.

More information: Alexandra Kissling et al. Intensive Mothers, Cautionary Tale Fathers: Adult Children's Perceptions of Parental Influence on Health, *Journal of Family Issues* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0192513X19875772](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19875772)

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