

Growing Up, Not Apart

Researcher examines ties between adult children and parents

Relationships between parents and their children are among the longest lasting. While marriages can dissolve and friendships can fade, the ties between a parent and child endure — sometimes despite distance, conflicting demands, and differences of opinions. As parents and their children age, the dynamics of the relationship change, but the bond between the generations matures and grows, and can create what Karen Fingerman, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Child Development and Family Studies, calls a “distant intimacy.”

“There are no social or legal sanctions that make you keep in touch with your parents,” says Fingerman. “I’m interested in how people keep these relationships going, especially when parents and their grown children are separated by distance. I wanted to explore how parents and offspring keep connected, what kinds of problems they face, and what their worries are.”

With nearly half of American adults residing more than 50 miles from their parents, Fingerman sought to discover how geographic distance affected their ability to engage in emotional and functional exchanges with their parents.

In the study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, Fingerman says she expected to find that the greatest challenges facing adult children and their parents who live far away would

be the inability to provide functional support for each other. This might include grandparents providing child care for grandchildren or adult children helping aging parents with tasks around the home.

“Surprisingly, we found that for most adults the greatest challenge was the inability to engage in face-to-face contact with their parents,” she says. “We really thought it would be about the amount of help that children and their parents could provide to each other, but you can compensate for that. You can find someone to watch your kids or do your yard work. You can’t find someone to be your parent or your son or daughter.”

Despite the lack of physical contact, the majority of adult children and parents who live long distances from each other consider their relationship close. According to Fingerman, intimacy between aging parents and grown children is defined by two characteristics: recognition of the other person as an individual with strengths and weaknesses, and a deep concern for the other party’s well being.

“Although parents and offspring who reside at a distance cannot actively participate in one another’s day-to-day lives, they may still experience a sense of intimacy,” she says. “Geographic separation is not a barrier to close relationships.”



Adults who live far from their parents reported talking to them on the phone one to two times per week.

Findings from Fingerman’s study suggest that adults who live far from parents find ways to compensate for the distance. For example, adults talked with their parents on the phone an average of one to two times a week.

Despite being able to keep in touch via the telephone and e-mail, most adults in the study wished they lived closer to their parents and that they could see each other more often.

“It’s interesting that despite all the means there are to keep in touch, people still miss the visual element,” she says. “Many of us do live far from our parents, so that really hit home.” ■

Karen Fingerman is the Berner Hanley University Scholar and an associate professor of developmental and family studies. She has researched the ties between adult children and parents for the past 10 years, including the mother-daughter relationship and the relationship between engaged adults and their prospective in-laws. To contact Fingerman, call (765) 496-6378 or e-mail karenf@purdue.edu.