

Playing favorites: Parents still involved after children are grown

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Middle-aged parents are more involved in their grown children's lives than ever, according to new research from Purdue University.

"We found that middle-aged parents help each of their grown children with many types of support at least every few weeks," said Karen Fingerman, the Berner-Hanley Professor in Gerontology, Developmental and Family Studies. "This is a dramatic increase from 20 years ago, when young adults received much less support from their parents."

Not all grown children get the same support, and which children parents help most may surprise some people, Fingerman said. Most people expect parents to help their youngest child or one that is struggling, but the family studies expert found that parents also are more eager to help the child they consider most successful.

"No matter which adult child receives the most support, today's parents are helping each child with significant forms of support every few weeks," Fingerman said. "We've heard a lot about helicopter parents this decade, and often the comments are negative. Parents are giving a considerable amount of help to grown children, and they play a critical role in helping young adults make the transition from adolescence to [adulthood](#)."

"It's a complicated world today. An 18-year-old just can't strike out on their own to make it like they did 100 years ago. We're beyond the time

when the average young person could start a career by working with their hands, and then start a little business that would support them and their family. Today's trajectory to success requires a lot of skill and training, which comes at a cost in terms of money, time and emotional investment. Parents help with all of that."

Fingerman also said it can be more difficult for young adults to find life partners today, and many of them are postponing marriage until they are older. As a result, these adult-children still benefit from parental emotional and social support.

Fingerman and her team evaluated how more than 600 parents, ages 40-60, reported they supported their individual children and for what reasons. The forms of support included financial, helping with tasks, giving advice, emotional support, listening and participating in social activities. The study will be published in this month's *Journal of [Marriage and Family](#)*.

Children who had health or financial problems, injuries, or were victims of crime were considered needy and received a great deal of support to help address those needs. Parents also provided considerable support to grown children they deemed successful in their own relationships and careers. It was these children that parents enjoyed helping the most.

Parents are motivated to help their successful young-adult children because their achievements are a reflection on the parent. After 18 years, a parent has put a lot of time and energy into raising a child. When the child is successful, the parent feels like all that effort paid off. And the parent feels successful, too, in their role as a parent, Fingerman said.

"Another possibility is that these middle-aged parents expect the successful child will help them during old age," Fingerman said. "I don't think people are deliberately that strategic, but it is a reality that the

adult-children who are better achieving will help their elderly parents more. It's certainly a good investment for the parents, but it's also a good investment to rescue your children who are having problems.

"While parents may want to spend more time with the successful child, they may be more likely to give financial assistance and practical support to a child who is having problems."

The study also found that parents are not getting much in return from their children, but that is likely to change as the parents age. These middle-aged parents are healthy and financially stable so they are not in a position of need. The small amount of support that parents did receive from their children came from those successful offspring.

"It is expected that parents are going to give more toward their children," Fingerman said. "I suspect they find it rewarding or they find it very stressful if they don't intervene. And it doesn't matter how old the child is, parents have invested a lot and it's very distressing for [parents](#) to see a child not do well."

Source: Purdue University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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