

Is mom's favorite child always the same?

October 15 2013, by Amy Patterson Neubert

(Phys.org) —Similarities in personal values and beliefs between an adult child and an older mother is what keeps that child in favor over the long-term, and that preference can have practical applications for mother's long-term care, according to a Purdue University study.

"Favoritism matters because it affects adult sibling relationships and caregiving patterns and outcomes for mothers, and now we know that who a mother favors is not likely to change," said Jill Sutor, professor of sociology, who has been studying older parent relationships with adult [children](#) for nearly 30 years. "Knowing that favoritism, particularly regarding caregiving, is relatively stable will be helpful for practitioners when designing arrangements that are going to work best for moms."

Approximately three-quarters of the mothers identified that the [child](#) who they favored as their preferred caregiver at the start of the study was the same child they favored seven years later.

"One of the biggest predictors of who remained the favorite was mother's perception of similarity between herself and her child," said Megan Gilligan, an assistant professor in [human development](#) and family studies at Iowa State University and a former Purdue graduate student who is a collaborator on the project. "Mothers were likely to continue to prefer children who they perceived were similar to them in their beliefs and values, as well as to prefer children who had cared for them before."

Their research, co-authored with Karl Pillemer, professor of human development in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University, is

published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. The findings are based on the Within-Family Differences Study in which data were collected seven years apart from the same 406 mothers, ages 65-75. The study is funded by the National Institute on Aging.

Gender similarity also was a consistent factor to show long-term [favoritism](#), which is not surprising because the mother-daughter connection has been shown in previous research to typically be the strongest, closest and most supportive parent-child relationship.

In addition to looking at the similarity of personal values, the researchers also looked at whether a child's financial independence, adult roles as a spouse or parent themselves, consistent employment, and lawful behavior influenced which child remained the favorite. What was surprising is that whether a child was married, divorced or achieved independence, mattered much less than sharing personal values, said Suitor, who is a member of the Center on Aging and the Life Course.

"These mothers are saying that if I can't make my own decisions involving my life than who can best make these decisions for me? Who thinks like I do?" Suitor said. "Who has the same vision in life that I do, has a pretty good sense of what I would do? This is incredibly important with issues related to caregiving, and that is why understanding these family dynamics is so important."

While the importance similarity played in explaining why a mother's favorite child remained the same across the study, it was much harder to identify what drove changes when a child fell out of favor.

"One of the few predictors of changes was when children stopped engaging in deviant behaviors, such as substance abuse, during the seven years, and then their [mothers](#) were more likely to choose them as the children to whom they were most emotionally close," Gilligan said.

Suitor said, "This is an interesting change because if a child engaged in deviant behaviors seven years ago but then stopped they were even more likely to be chosen than were siblings who never engaged in deviant behaviors."

Suitor, Pillemer and Gilligan are planning to extend the Within-Family Differences Study to include interviewing the Baby Boomers about their own [adult children](#).

More information: Continuity and Change in Mothers' Favoritism Toward Offspring in Adulthood, J. Jill Suitor, Megan Gilligan, Karl Pillemer, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2013.

ABSTRACT

The importance of parental favoritism in childhood and adulthood has been well documented; little is known, however, about changes over time in such within-family differentiation. Drawing on theories of life course processes and developmental psychology, the authors used 7-year panel data collected from 406 older mothers about their relationships with 1,514 adult children to explore patterns of favoritism regarding caregiving and emotional closeness. The findings demonstrated continuity in patterns of mothers' favoritism. Mothers tended to prefer the same children across time, particularly regarding preferred caregivers. It was anticipated that children's social-structural characteristics, similarity to their mothers, structural position in the family, and support provision to mothers would predict favored child status across time; however, only similarity and support processes were strong and consistent predictors of change and continuity in patterns of mothers' favoritism.

Provided by Purdue University

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