

# Adult children get less support in separated families, finds study

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A recent study finds that families with separated parents provide less financial and emotional support to their adult children.

"We wanted to see if the ways [parents](#) support their grown children—financially, emotionally, etc.—is different in families where the parents are still a couple versus in families where the parents are separated," says Anna Manzoni, corresponding author of the study and an associate professor of sociology at North Carolina State University. "We also wanted to see whether the way [adult children](#) support their parents differs.

"Given the extent to which many [young adults](#) rely on support from their parents, the findings are significant. And given the [aging population](#), it's also important to examine the extent to which adult children are supporting their parents."

For their study, the researchers looked at several kinds of intergenerational support: emotional, material and instrumental. Instrumental support includes things like helping out around the house, babysitting and eldercare. Material support includes things like [financial support](#) and gifts. Emotional support includes things like personal advice.

The researchers drew on data from 4,340 German adults who participated in a long-term project called the German Family Panel. The data stems from in-depth surveys conducted every other year between 2009 and 2016. The youngest panel participants included in the study turned 18 in 2009, and none of the adult children surveyed were living with their parents.

The panel surveys explored the extent to which parents and children gave and received emotional, material and instrumental support to each other. The researchers used statistical techniques to identify differences in these types of intergenerational support between "separated families" and families where the parents were still together.

"We found that, in families where there was parental separation, there was substantially less support from fathers and mothers to their adult children, whether you're talking about emotional, material or instrumental support," Manzoni says. "In practical terms, this often places children in these families at a disadvantage, because they have access to fewer resources."

Similarly, adult children in families with parental separation provided less support for their parents, with one exception. Children in families with parental separation provided as much material support for their mothers as children in families without parental separation.

Two other factors also played a role in the extent to which parental separation affected intergenerational support. The amount of support between father and child—in both directions—was affected by when the parents separated. Specifically, if the parental separation occurred after the child reached adulthood, the difference in intergenerational support was less pronounced.

For separated mothers, education made a significant difference. The more educated separated mothers were, the better able they were to provide material support to their children.

"There's a lot of research showing that [children](#) in separated families are at a disadvantage, being more likely to perform worse in school, experience mental health challenges, and so on. This study shows that they are also at a disadvantage as adults, in terms of the support that parents can provide. That doesn't mean that people should stay in bad relationships—they definitely should not—but it helps us understand a significant social challenge. Really, it underscores the need to provide additional [support](#) for separated families."

The study, "Parental Separation and Intergenerational Support," is

published in the *Journal of Family Research*.

**More information:** Anna Manzoni et al, Parental separation and intergenerational support, *Journal of Family Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.20377/jfr-809](https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-809)

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