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# Strengthening Older Adulthood Parent-Child Connections

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## Parent-Child Connections in Mid-Late Adulthood

- **Our ability to interact with and connect to family members is integral, especially for those older individuals in the second half of life.**
- **Parent-child connections are a core family attachment. Parents and children often exchange practical and emotional support throughout the lifespan.**
- **Throughout adulthood, parent-child dynamics and roles shift. Adult children and aging parents have unique experiences and perceptions of their relationships through time.**

Relationships between parents and children are enduring emotional bonds that may be experienced differently from different perspectives and at different points in the lifespan. While the bulk of advice and information on parenting focuses on raising young children, research demonstrates that unique benefits and challenges are experienced within the parent-child relationship throughout middle adulthood and later adulthood.

By focusing on common experiences of parents and children across the adult lifespan, this informational brochure intends to provide context and suggest strategies for fostering positive parent-child dynamics across adulthood and aging. We focus on four different concepts and experiences that impact the parent-child relationship in middle to later life: 1) geographic distance and contact frequency, 2) family characteristics, 3) relationship quality and 4) long-term attachment and enduring ties.



## Geographic Distance and Contact Frequency

Once grown children are launched from the “nest,” the amount of time you have together will decline. As adult children focus on careers and raising their own families, they often have increasingly busy lives, leaving less time to dedicate to their relationships with their aging parents. When miles separate families, face-to-face interactions are more difficult to schedule.

*Geographic distance can pose a challenge to maintaining closeness and intimacy in the parent-adult child relationship, but keeping a strong bond is still possible and rewarding from a distance.*

As adult children reach midlife, they often realize how valuable their relationship with their parents is and seek out that connection more. Likewise, older parents come to appreciate interactions with and support received from their children and tend to increasingly rely on these relationships through time.

Flexibility in how often and what type of communication you will use, as well as willingness to prioritize the relationship, will be key in keeping the connection between parent and child. Engaged families are able to find many ways to maintain frequent contact from a distance as well as make their limited in-person time together high quality and meaningful.

### *Strategies for Connecting Across Distance and Time*

- **Prioritize making time to connect – by phone, text, videochat, letters, etc.**
- **Communicate about important family happenings.**
- **Set a routine or schedule calls to make connecting a priority.**
- **Plan shared events such as family vacations or reunions.**
- **Maintain family traditions or find ways to keep traditions going at a distance.**
- **Keep each other updated and involved with what is happening in each other’s lives, friendships and families.**
- **When possible, take turns initiating the contact so both parent and child are contributing to the relationship.**



## Family Characteristics

Families vary in characteristics based on many factors such as culture, traditions and values. The parent-child relationship is affected by broader family dynamics, but it also is strongly impacted by characteristics such as gender and family structure. The roles and responsibilities that mothers and fathers typically engage in differ.

Differences also are seen in mother and father relationships with daughters and sons. Mothers tend to take on a strong caregiver role for their children, and this typically doesn't end once their children are grown. Because of this, bonds between mothers and their children often are perceived as the closest throughout the lifespan. This is not to say that fathers do not also play an important role, provide advice and have close relationships with their children. They do!

Parents' relationships with their adult sons and daughters also vary, often reporting greater closeness and reliance on their daughters. This may be because daughters are more likely than sons to take on a caretaker role and provide care for their parents in later life.

Family structure affects the parent-child relationship. For example, when parents have multiple children, their overall contact frequency tends to be high but spread out among each of their children. Parents with fewer children may have frequent contact with each child. Parents also report varying levels of closeness with each of their children.

Larger families experience both benefits and challenges to having multiple siblings involved as parents age. For instance, when caregiving for a parent, siblings may experience conflict or increased shared support. The structure of stepfamilies can affect the parent-child bond throughout the lifespan as well. Stepparent bonds tend to be stronger when formed early in the stepchild's childhood.

### *Strategies for Connecting Within Complex Families*

#### Parents:

- **Recognize that each of your children have unique needs. Continue to develop ways to connect with each child independently.**
- **Acknowledge that sibling rivalries may exist among your children and identify ways you can alleviate any such strains in adulthood.**

#### Adult Children:

- **Realize that your mother and father likely have distinct needs and wants from their relationship with you. Seek to connect with them each in unique ways and not solely as a parental unit.**
- **Continue to foster your independent parent-child relationships and a cohesive family unit, including your siblings.**



## Relationship Quality

The parent-child relationship tends to be quite complex. Relationship quality fluctuates during childhood and adolescence. Although these ups and downs continue through adulthood, the quality of the parent-child relationship tends to become increasingly positive through time. During adulthood, the parent-child bond is often a very stable relationship and parent and adult child can rely on it. The attachment formed during childhood continues throughout adulthood, and this strong emotional tie can be protective for everyone's well-being.

The function of the parent-child relationship changes in adulthood as children mature and are better able to relate to their parents on a personal level and as parents learn to accept their adult children as mature, independent adults. As a result, the parent-child relationship becomes more reciprocal, with parents and children providing mutual support to one another.

While parents maintain their desire to help their children in any way possible, now children, too, are likely to take on the role of helping their parents. In addition to exchanging instrumental support such as child care or help with household tasks, parents and adult children become more likely to confide in one another and share mutual emotional support. Being able to accept each other's faults and strengths can be key to maintaining a high-quality parent-child bond through midlife and late life. The increased maturity and reciprocity of the adult parent-child relationship can lead to greater closeness as well as positive implications for well-being and health.

### *Strategies to Foster High-quality Parent-child Bonds*

- **Participate in shared interests together.**
- **Plan special family events.**
- **Be supportive and listen when they share what's going on in their life.**
- **Resolve previous disagreements and seek to make amends.**
- **Develop communication strategies that help you overcome strain and negativity.**
- **Accept the strengths and weaknesses of your shared relationship.**
- **Continue to develop coping strategies for the ups and downs encountered throughout life.**
- **Laugh together and celebrate the fun moments in life.**
- **Be present for advice, emotional support and companionship.**



## Long-term and Enduring Ties

*The parent-child bond is the first attachment we have in life. With attention and care, this early bond can flourish, grow stronger, and endure throughout the entire lifespan.*

Parents' influences on their children have long-term effects, including children's decisions, beliefs, well-being and success. The roles of parenthood changes throughout the lifespan, but it always is a core part of a mother or father's identity. Moreover, as they grow into adults, children increasingly recognize the benefits and relationships with their parents.

As children move into adulthood and may become parents themselves, the intergenerational dynamic of grandchild — parent/child — grandparent can further strengthen the parent-child relationship. During midlife, the intergenerational bonds shared among three generations often increases the closeness of family ties.

As parents approach late life and face declining health, a role reversal can occur, with adult children providing more care and advice to their parents and taking on more of the decision-making within the family. Such role reversals can prove challenging for some parent-child relationships, but it is increasingly becoming a normal part of the family life cycle. Adult children willingly step up to provide care in various forms to their parents as they age, and report feelings of appreciation. They find that caring for their parents in exchange for the care given to them starting in childhood and continuing throughout life is rewarding.

### Strategies for Positive Lifelong Connections

- Reminisce about the past and share favorite memories.
- Tell family history as a way to stay connected across generations.
- Remember and honor special days together.
- Express affection and show appreciation for one another.
- Acknowledge the passage of time and the changes in each of you as you grow older.
- **Parents:** Accept that your child is independent and mature and wants to provide you support.
- **Children:** Accept that your parent has strengths as well as faults and stay open to receiving their advice. Consider their wanting to continue to parent you throughout adulthood as a loving act.



## Your Own Reflections



### **Parents:**

How do you feel about the level of communication you have with each of your children?

How have your relationships with each of your children changed with time?



Think back to a favorite memory you share with each of your children. Why do you think this is your favorite and most memorable?



### **Children:**

How do you feel about the level of communication you have with each of your parents?

How have your relationships with each of your parents changed with time?

Think back to a favorite memory you share with each of your parents. Why do you think this is your favorite and most memorable?

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## Resources

National Council on Family Relationships: [www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report/focus/family-focus-aging](http://www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report/focus/family-focus-aging)

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# Parent-Child Letter Writing Challenge

In adulthood, parents and children often want to stay connected and foster closeness in their relationship but don't always have the tools to do so. Sometimes in life we get busy and struggle to keep in touch. In other instances, we may have trouble finding the words to say or know what topics to bring up to help us connect. What better motivation than a letter writing challenge to get you started?

The letter writing challenge below provides explicit prompts for writing a weekly letter to your parent/child for a series of six weeks. We challenge you to write a hand-written letter/card addressing each of these prompts. Everyone loves receiving mail, and think how appreciative your child or parent will be to get mail from you for six weeks straight. Feel free to share this challenge with them and participate together or make this a surprise for them. If letter writing is not feasible for you, writing emails or sending text messages are wonderful alternatives.

**Week 1: Five Things I Love About You.** Write and explain five different things you love about your parent or adult child. This prompt will help you share all the things you love about the person and encourage you to think about the benefits of sharing these.

**Week 2: Remember When...** Write a letter that focuses on an old memory you have shared together. Be sure to explain why this was memorable and what that memory means to you. If you want, you can cover multiple memories, but the goal is to rekindle old memories and spark reminiscence.

**Week 3: Plan a Future Trip.** Write about what you would plan for a future trip together, whether a vacation or just a visit to see each other. This prompt can spark you to take action and plan your next trip together.

**Week 4: Send a Recipe** that reminds you of your parent or child. Think of your parent or adult child. You may be reminded of one of the person's favorite meals or a meal that person made for you. Send a recipe that reminds you of the parent or child, whether new or old, and even ask that person to send one back to you.

**Week 5: What is one thing you'd like to tell your parent or child?** Maybe it's a wish you have for that person, advice you'd like to give or a memory or lesson you'd like to share. The sky is the limit. What would you like to tell your parent or child?

**Week 6: Life Lessons.** What have you learned from your parent or child? Write a letter about the lessons you have learned from your parent or child. Tell the person why these lessons have been impactful in your life.

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