

Middle-aged mothers and fathers only as happy as their least happy grown child, research shows

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(Medical Xpress) -- Despite the fact that middle-aged parents are no longer responsible for their grown children, the parents' emotional well-being and life satisfaction remain linked to those children's successes and problems — particularly their least-happy offspring, research from The University of Texas at Austin shows.

The study, led by Karen Fingerman, was published last week in the *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*.

The researchers expected that parents would suffer if their grown children incurred crises such as divorce or unemployment, but that having children who were successful would bring parents' joy and improved emotional well-being. In fact, they assumed that having other successful children would completely mitigate the effects of problem children.

The surprise finding of this study is that mothers and fathers were only as happy as their least happy child, Fingerman said.

"We had expected that a successful child might mitigate the negative impact of having a child who suffers problems. The successful child might give the parent something positive to focus on. But parents still seem to suffer even when one of their grown children does," said Fingerman, a professor in the Department of Human Development and

Family Sciences.

"It could be the case that parents empathize with their children's distress, they are embarrassed that their relationships with these grown children suffer, or that grown children who have problems may place excessive demands on the parents," she said. "Any one or all of these factors may contribute to parental worry and depression."

This is the first research to examine the positive effects of having successful grown children and the aggregate effects of multiple children. Most American parents have more than one child. This study was unique because it looked at how multiple grown children's accomplishments and failures affect the parents' psychological health.

Fingerman and her colleagues collected data from interviews of 633 middle-aged adults regarding each of their grown children (1,251 total children). The study assessed the children's problems, successes, the quality of parents' relationships with each child, and the parents' psychological well-being.

Having many children who were successful increased well-being for parents. However, when it came to children's problems, it only took one child suffering one major life problem to drag down parents' mental health, which manifested as depressive symptoms or increased worry. The more children who suffered problems, the more parents suffered.

Conversely, children who experienced successes in education, marriages and careers were more likely to maintain positive relationships with their parents. Relationship quality was directly tied to parental well-being.

Fingerman speculates that parents are sensitive to positive and negative events in their children's lives because it reflects on their own achievements in parenting.

"[Parents](#) have a distinct investment in grown children reflecting decades of child-rearing," she said.

Fingerman's coauthors include Yen-Pi Cheng of The University of Texas at Austin, Kira Birditt of the University of Michigan and Steven Zarit of Pennsylvania State University.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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