

# ADULT - PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

It is widely accepted – and often convenient to assume – that most adults and their parents enjoy mutually caring relationships and are happy to provide each other with child care and aged care services. But is this the case?  
**DAVID DE VAUS reports.**



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

**DO LIFE CYCLE TRANSITIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

For some time now government policies have emphasised the central role of families in providing care for needy members. Most recently the Commonwealth Government's (1995) *An Agenda for Families* emphasised the caregiving role of families: 'They provide care like no government or any other agency ever can. They are the most important providers of education, health, welfare and personal development . . . The most important job of families is to care: to care for children, for spouses and partners, for siblings, parents, grandparents, grandchildren, for family members who are sick or who have a disability, and for family members who are aged or infirm.'

Without the care provided by families many government policies such as deinstitutionalisation and early release from hospital would not have been possible, and government services would be stretched beyond their limits. Without the child care provided by grandparents there would be a severe shortage of formal child care places, and without adults caring for elderly and disabled family members the strain on the Home and Community Care scheme would be severe.

Governments have recognised that if families are to carry out their caring roles they need practical support to do so. The importance of this support role is stressed in *Creating the Links* (IYF 1994:49) which notes that: 'Caring based on choice is a recognition of intergenerational love, as well as obligation, but sharing the responsibilities of care . . . not only makes caring more viable, but is a proper recognition that caring is a social responsibility.'

A great deal of family care is provided outside of the nuclear family, with extended family ties being an important source of care for young children and for parents as they grow older. Despite the importance of intergenerational care, we know remarkably little about the sorts of relationships that underlie people's willingness and capacity to provide effective and quality care. It is convenient to assume that most adults and their parents get on well and that they are happy to provide each other with child care and aged care services. But we do not really know that this is the case.

Our knowledge of these adult-parent relationships is both limited and inconsistent. Research between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s – based mainly on survey questionnaires in response to claims that the extended family was dead – presents a generally positive, optimistic picture. Adults and their parents mixed with one another, helped one another out, said the relationship was important and agreed on a wide range of values. Women were identified as

being central to these extended family relationships, with daughters reporting more contact than sons and with mothers more than fathers. People reported feeling closer to their mothers than to their fathers and this was especially true of mother-daughter relationships. Women were described as the kin-keepers and there was the widespread assumption that extended families, and women in particular, were able and willing to provide the type of care that contemporary policies assume.

Other research, however, presents a bleaker view of relationships between adults and their parents, which has direct implications for the capacity and willingness of extended family members to provide effective and quality care.

For example, Goldfarb (1965: 44–45) accuses the optimists of trying to perpetuate a myth of intimacy: 'Often family closeness appears to be comprised of interlacing pain-filled personal relationships in which manipulative manoeuvring is called, and mistaken for, affection, and in which guilt, a crushing sense of obligation, and a compulsive need for social compliance, joined with the fear and inability to act with rational independence, combine to constitute a reciprocal bondage called "love".'

According to Rosow (1967:25): 'relations to children are by far the most emotionally charged area of life [for the elderly], one fraught with anxiety, subject to distortion and denial and about which respondents constantly try to reassure themselves.'

Feminist descriptions of mother-daughter relationships in adulthood also have been strongly critical of the conventional picture of intimacy; some describe the anguish and distress arising from difficulties in separating; others emphasise the hostility, ambivalence and tension between mothers and daughters (Dinnerstein 1976; Rich 1976; Arcana 1979).

We should bear in mind, however, that these more pessimistic views rely on limited samples, focusing on clinical cases, on the very elderly, or on women only.

It is widely accepted that adolescents and their parents can have troubled relationships as they learn to let go of one another. The lack of research on how these relationships resolve after adolescents reach adulthood reflects the assumption that somehow these relationships sort themselves out, and that mutually caring relationships emerge.

The purpose of this article is to explore how relationships between adults and their parents change over the life cycle. Do relationships that are troubled in young adulthood improve so that they form the basis for positive intergenerational care? How do life stage transitions affect these relationships? Can we reasonably anticipate

that as adults become 'more adult' as they leave home, marry and have children, that relationships will become more adult, equal and supportive?

### Life Cycle Transition Effects

There is a popular idea that adults pass through reasonably predictable life stages. Best-selling books such as *Passages* (Sheehy 1977) and *Season's of a Man's Life* (Levinson 1978) map out stages through which they say adults will predictably pass. Theories about 'the mid-life crisis' and 'the empty-nest syndrome' reflect the same idea – that people pass through a standard set of stages and generally experience these in a relatively uniform way. So long as we know the age group of people and their stage of life we can have a fair idea of how they feel and how they will be getting on with those around them – or so the theory goes.

Family sociologists have adopted a similar approach when they have argued that adult-parent relationships are transformed when adults move through life cycle transitions such as leaving home, getting married, and having children. Similarly, these relationships are thought to change as parents become marginalised by retirement and widowhood.

However, the evidence for life cycle effects on these relationships is rather thin. Indeed, there is some disagreement as to what these changes are and why they occur. One view is that relationships become closer and more equal as children take on adult roles. As children establish their own households, marry, and become parents themselves they have more in common with their parents, and these shared experiences produce greater intimacy and understanding. As daughters become mothers and understand what their mothers went through they appreciate their mothers more. As sons develop careers they turn to their fathers for career advice and can better understand the pressures their fathers faced in the past, and perhaps understand their lack of family involvement. This process is variously called 'role convergence' (Adams 1968) or the development of a 'role colleague' relationship (Fischer 1981; 1986).

Others argue that as children leave home and become financially independent, adult-parent relationships will improve as parents develop new interests and find they have greater freedom to 'do their own thing'. As parents develop a life of their own and can then let go of their adult children, it is argued, relationships will improve and become more equal and relaxed (Bengston and Black 1973; Aquilino and Supple 1991). Lillian Rubin's

book, *Women of a Certain Age* (1979) provides examples of this process.

One popular way of looking at adult–parent relationships is to see them as involving changes in the balance of power. Changes in the parents’ lives such as retirement, the death of a spouse and declining health are also widely assumed to affect adult–parent relationships by making parents more dependent on their children. As elderly parents have less money, fewer friends and poorer health they begin to rely on their children more but have little to offer their children in return. This gives children the upper hand. Indeed, in the study reported in this article, one daughter said: ‘When I was young she always threatened to put me in a home if I was naughty. Now I’ve put her in one.’

Blau (1973:44) for example, argues that with retirement and widowhood old people ‘have no other economic or social resources and must depend on their adult children for economic support and companionship. Added to this is the rolelessness of retirement and widowhood . . . There are [no] rights or obligations upon the individual or upon others.’

According to Matthews (1979:129), as the widowed mother gets older she is less able to use the techniques to maintain an equal power balance in the relationship because she has fewer (social) resources that would enable her to maintain a balance. Accordingly: ‘As the old mother’s power resources diminish, she will become, at least overtly, more compliant and respectful of her offspring as her motivational investment in the relationship increases.’

There is a related argument that as parents grow older the parent–child role reverses – that is, over time the relationship changes from one where parents look after and manage children to one where children look after and manage their parents. In this view, relationships go through a series of predictable phases. For example, Marsden and Abrams (1987) suggest six typical stages in mother–daughter relationships. Initially the daughter is dependent on her mother (mother as carer), followed by the daughter becoming independent (companion), followed by the daughter having her own children and her mother helping her out (ally, joint carer). If the mother works while she has young children her mother helps care for the grandchildren (liberator, substitute carer). When the grandchildren have become independent mother and daughter develop a companionate relationship, followed by a final stage where the elderly mother becomes dependent on her daughter. (See also Steinmetz 1988; Rossi and Rossi 1990.)

Some experts on the elderly argue that old people withdraw from wider community relationships and that this can put more pressure on family bonds as these become the main remaining social ties

for the elderly. This argument, labelled ‘disengagement theory’, was first put by Cumming and Henry (1961) who argued that the process of withdrawal was an inevitable part of growing old.

their mothers. In such circumstances the taking on of adult roles by children can promote tension and misunderstanding rather than promoting closeness and understanding (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Harris 1969; Finch 1987; Rosow 1967).

Furthermore, there is little evidence that changes such as leaving home, marriage, parenthood,

Theories that relationships pass through predictable and uniform changes throughout the life cycle, while neat and appealing, ignore the complexity of human interaction. Relationships have histories, and these histories mediate the effect of any stage in the life cycle.



Picture: Don White



Picture: Howard Binstith

While these views are plausible, and no doubt operate in some cases, there are reasons for doubting that adult–parent relationships will change in any fundamental way as adults and their parents pass through different points in the adult life cycle.

Taking on adult roles can drive adults and their parents apart rather than draw them together. Running their own households, raising children and making a living all take time and impose new responsibilities. Adult children can simply run out of time and energy to spend much time with their parents – especially if there are two careers and two sets of parents to attend to. In addition, role expectations change over the generations: for example, new career opportunities and the availability of contraceptives enabling smaller families mean that the experience of motherhood for younger mothers is quite unlike the experience of

widowhood and retirement significantly affect the character of relationships, and some scholars argue that little change in the quality and character of relationships occurs over the adult life cycle.

Although life cycle transitions can affect the amount of contact and helping between adults and parents, the levels of closeness are remarkably stable over the life course. Even where changes do occur they are often more apparent than real. Goldfarb (1965: 45) argues that: ‘There is not really a “child–parent reversal” that takes place when an adult or aged person

. . . looks to a child as to a parent. It is rather that a lifelong manifestation [of] a dependent . . . person has emerged with greater clarity at this time than it has at others . . . Manifestation of . . . a dependent relationship is merely more transparent at some times than at others, often . . . because such relationships are less elaborately disguised or are displayed in socially less . . . acceptable forms.'

One study tracking a group of people from when they were 30-year-olds until they were 70-year-olds concluded that: 'The personality and way of life of many aging mothers are . . . foreshadowed in their early adulthood . . . old age merely continues for them what earlier years . . . have launched' (Maas and Kuypers 1975).

In their survey of family bonds, Rossi and Rossi (1990:458) noted that despite some changes in contact and help over the life course there was 'a remarkable robustness of many measures rooted in early family life'. They stated: 'The cohesiveness of . . . the early family and the

## Adults and Their Parents Study

This article examines the extent to which the character and quality of adult-parent relationships changed as adults and their parents passed through various adult life cycle transitions. It draws on a larger study of adult-parent relationships (de Vaus 1994).

One hundred adults provided information about their relationships with their mothers and fathers, and, in all, detailed information was collected about 180 adult-parent relationships of which 94 were with older mothers and 86 with older fathers. The adults ranged in age from 25 to 54 years (average age of 36 years) and the parents ranged in age from 55 to 88 years (average age of 67 years).

The sample was not randomly selected – it was a Melbourne-based volunteer snowball sample with multiple stating points. Nor was it representative of the wider population. Two out of three respondents were women and the sample was more middle class and highly educated than the general population. Half the adult children had at least some tertiary education, and 45 per cent held or had held professional or managerial jobs, while only 10 per cent had blue collar jobs.

The same was not true of their parents of whom only 12 per cent had any tertiary education and 17 per cent held or had held professional jobs. Most adults children were married (77 per cent) and three-quarters were parents themselves, with their children ranging from under one to 33 years of age.

Although most adults had siblings (with the average number being two), 17 per cent were only children. Of the parents, 65 per cent were married and 23 per cent of mothers were widowed. The bulk of adults lived relatively close to their parents; about 40 per cent lived within ten kilometres of their parents, and three-quarters lived within 30 kilometres.

parents lived too far away to be interviewed. Moreover, some respondents wanted to ensure that their parents did not find out that they had been discussing their relationships with a stranger (it is also possible that in less happy relationships parents too would have been reluctant to be interviewed). Finally, interviewing parents would have trebled the number of interviews, and the lack of time and funds precluded the careful examination of so many relationships. In any case, parents and their children can have quite different perceptions: sometimes an adult who was profoundly unhappy with the relationship believed that the parent would see it as a very good one. In these instances adding the parent's perspective does not necessarily provide a truer or more objective picture. Just as a marriage is in reality two marriages – the wife's and the husband's – so adults and their parents experience their relationship differently.

This article then reports on child-parent relationships as experienced by adult children.

## Types of Relationships

Any understanding of adult-parent bonds must move away from simplistic models that fail to differentiate between different sorts of relationships. As in any other sort of relationship, the ties that adults develop with their parents vary widely and these differences have very different implications for the nature of exchange and caring between the generations (Millward 1994).

Before looking at changes in relationships as people pass through life cycle transitions it is helpful to distinguish between four main types of relationships that emerged in the interviews.

Relationships fell into two broad categories: those where parents held on to their grown children and those where they had let go. Among parents who held on there were two distinct types: *parent-centred* parents and *child-centred* parents. Among those who had let go there were also two distinct types: *remote* parents and *attached* parents.

### Parent-centred relationships

Parent-centred relationships, which made up one-quarter of the cases in the study, were the unhappiest, most distressing and most troubled. They were unbalanced, revolving around the parent's life while the adult child's life was marginal. Conversations were mainly about the parent's activities, interests and opinions while those of the adult child were largely ignored. Parents expected help from their children but rarely gave any in return. As a result of this imbalance their children felt unloved, disapproved of and rejected.

These parents were also very possessive. When they were not the centre of their child's attention they felt rejected.

quality of the emotional bond between parent and child earlier on . . . show continuing and direct effects.'

The information reported in this article was obtained from adults, not their parents. This needs some explanation. A few

Picture: Rhonda Milner



Picture: Rhonda Milner



Picture: Andrew Chapman

They resented other people and activities in their grown child's life that intruded on the time their children spent with them. As a result these parents got on poorly with their child's partner and friends and also with their grandchildren, since grandchildren were seen as competitors. These parents did not like their grown daughters working and they resented their involvement in community activities.

Parent-centred parents were demanding. They expected their grown children to be attentive, to help out, to be on call, to visit frequently and to talk regularly on the telephone. If they did not receive this attention they felt neglected and rejected by their children. These parents acted as though they were needy and helpless and were experts at using guilt to extract the desired level of attention. But they were only able to achieve this at the cost of destroying the quality of the relationship.

Parent-centred parents also demanded conformity. They expected their adult children to do things the same way they did and to share the same views and opinions. These parents interpreted 'deviance' and individuality as rejection, criticism and betrayal, and responded with hostility and rejection. They constantly criticised their adult children who felt that love and acceptance were entirely conditional on fitting in with parental expectations.

Adults with parent-centred parents found it extremely difficult to let go of their parents. They felt rejected and unloved because their parents showed so little interest in them and because any signs of independence of individuality were always criticised. Ironically, such feelings tied these adults to their parents as they continued to try to win love and approval by meeting their parent's demands. But since love and approval was always conditional, these adults continued to feel marginalised, unloved and rejected.

In these relationships both the adult and the parent were looking for things from each other that neither seemed able to give. Both ended up feeling rejected by the other but could not manage without the other. The parents held on as did the adult children, but because neither got from the other what they sought the relationships became tense, entangled, enmeshed and distressing. These adult children could not get away but hated what they had.

### **Child-centred relationships**

Child-centred relationships, comprising 15 per cent of the sample, reflected the opposite imbalance to parent-centred relationships: they revolved around the adult child's life while the parent's life remained in the background.

These parents felt that they could not afford to let go of their children – they had made their children their life and letting go incurred the risk of losing their children,

and thus their life, altogether. These parents needed to be needed and to believe that their children could not manage without them. They worried about their children, tried to be incorporated into their lives and tried to parent them actively, in the same way they had when the children were young.

Child-centred parents tried to be indispensable, and would do anything to help. They were intensely interested in, and wanted to be involved in, their children's day-to-day lives. They were generous to a fault – the fault being that they wanted to do everything for their children rather than let their children manage for themselves and live their own lives.

Child-centred parents lacked confidence in their grown children's capacity to manage on their own so they frequently criticised, interfered and tried to take over. They undermined their children's independence and treated them as young children who had not grown up. These parents worried a great deal about their children and viewed them as needy, vulnerable and unable to make sensible decisions.

The grown children of these parents felt suffocated and as though they were being watched and judged all the time. They lacked privacy and a sense of a separate independent coping self.

While adults with child-centred parents felt loved, they were deeply unhappy about the relationship and resented their parent's lack of confidence in them. As a result of their parent's attempts to hold on, these adults frequently became involved in protracted struggles with their parents – pushing them away and acting so as to prove how well they could manage on their own.

### **Remote parents**

If remote parents, which made up 28 per cent of the sample, had ever been attached to their children in the first place they had certainly let go by the time the children had grown up. These parents treated their grown children as competent adults and left them to get on with their lives – not trying to do their children's managing for them, and not interfering or criticising. The only thing they expected of their children was for their children to leave them alone, their only demand was that their children should be undemanding.

These relationships had the autonomy and independence that was so lacking in parent-centred and child-centred relationships, but they were empty. Adult children found it difficult to describe their remote parents and did not know them very well, describing them as strangers – grey, background figures who were marginal to the whole family. Visits were awkward and stilted since everyone found it difficult to know what to talk about.

While many adults sought independence from their parents they did not seek the distance and detachment of remote relationships. The remote parent's lack of interest in their children was hurtful and made adults withdraw from their parents. While these remote relationships avoided the enmeshment and over-involvement of parents who held on, adult children were deeply unhappy with them and felt that there was no relationship worth mentioning. They were looking for far more than autonomy and independence in their relationship with their parents, and while they did not want their parents to hold on neither did they want them to let go to the extent that remote parents did.

### **Attached parents**

Adult children described the three types of relationships outlined above as most unsatisfactory. What were they looking for in relationships with their parents? Only one-third of the relationships in the study were described by adults as working well. These are called 'attached relationships'.

Their most striking feature of attached relationships was that they combined independence and involvement. Parents let go but remained engaged with their grown children. They avoided the depen-



**It has to be asked what sorts of relationships underlie people's willingness and capacity to provide effective and quality care?**

dence of parent-centred and child-centred relationships without becoming distant. Attached parents let go of their grown children but remained involved and interested without taking over or becoming preoccupied. They allowed their children

to be independent but at the same time showed that they cared; they remained supportive without being demanding. These relationships were balanced. There was give and take and mutual interest and involvement in each other's lives. Rather than focusing just on the parent's life or just on the child's life, conversations ranged over many issues. Parents were interested in their children's lives but also talked about their own life and interests. Parents helped their children but were

## Life Cycle Transitions

To what extent do life cycle transitions affect the character of adult-parent relationships when relationships are conceived of in this broader way? We know that life cycle stage can affect things like the amount of contact, but does it change the quality and character of the relationships?

In this study the changes in relationships in relation to five life cycle transitions were examined: leaving home, getting married, having children, parental retirement, and widowhood. The interviews revealed little evidence that these life cycle stages had much effect. Theories that relationships pass through predictable and uniform changes throughout the life cycle, while neat and appealing, ignore the complexity of human interaction. Relationships have histories, and these histories mediate the effect of any stage in the life cycle.

Even where changes in adult-parent relationships did occur when people passed from one life cycle stage to another, the changes were rarely dramatic. Relationships were marked far more by continuity than by change and, as far as could be gleaned from people's accounts of growing up, the basic character of relationships in adulthood was much the same as in childhood and adolescence.

Nor was the type of relationship that adults had with parents linked with age – of either parent or child. There was no evidence that as people grew older or passed through life stage transitions that the parent-child relationship changed from one type to another (for example, from child-centred to parent-centred). The average age of parents in parent-centred relationships (66.4 years), child-centred relationships (66.4 years), remote relationships (63.2 years), and attached relationships (65.7 years) was virtually identical. Grouping parents into four age groups (younger than 60, in their 60s, and 80 years or older) revealed no difference in the types of relationships they had.

The same was true of the children – younger adult children were virtually indistinguishable from older adult children as far as their types of relationships were concerned.

Rather than providing the impetus for a new relationship, new life cycle transitions simply provide a new theatre in which the old lines of the old relationship are replayed. Rather than life cycle transitions transforming adult-parent relationships, the opposite occurs: the character of the relationships affects the way the life cycle transitions are experienced.

For example, people with parent-centred relationships experienced the transitions of leaving home, marriage, parenthood, and parental retirement and death very differently from those with attached relationships. Parent-centred parents resisted their children leaving home, they almost always got on poorly with their children-in-law, they showed relatively little interest in their grandchildren and seemed to resent the way in which grandchildren diverted attention from themselves. On retirement and widowhood these parents became even more demanding on their children.

In contrast, attached parents responded to these transitions with much greater equanimity. Although they felt the loss of their children leaving home, they did not resist it; they welcomed and were supportive of their children's decision to marry, and almost always got on well with their new children-in-law. Attached parents enjoyed their grandchildren and developed warm relationships with them. Retirement provided more time to enjoy the relationship with their children but did not add new demands, and attached parents adapted to widowhood without placing undue long term stresses on their children.

In other words, the way in which adults experienced various life cycle transitions was predictable in that the longstanding themes of the relationship were manifested at these times of transition. It must be stressed that these transitions did not produce relationships that worked in a particular way but that the type of relationship mediated the experience of the life cycle transition.

There is not the space here to demonstrate this point in detail for each life cycle transition (see de Vaus 1994, Ch.6), but a brief outline of what happened when adult children became parents themselves will serve to illustrate.

### Becoming a Parent: Effect on Adult-Parent Relationship

Perhaps more than anything else, becoming a parent marks the transition to adulthood. It provides the potential for parents and their grown children to become 'role colleagues' and the opportunity to redefine the relationship.

Some adults found that having children meant that their parents treated them more as an adult.

*'I think it helped establish me as an adult in her eyes. As my son got older and I got more able to cope with him, and better at it, I started to feel better about me, and I think she started to see me more as an adult too. You know, it's okay leaving home and getting married, but when you have children you really feel adult . . . You are really doing it, aren't you? You are really big.'*



Picture: Don White



Picture: Rhonda Milner

also able to accept help in return. There was acceptance of each other's right to their own views and ways of doing things, and a respect for each other's capacities to manage and make their own decisions. These adults and their parents related to one another as equal, independent adults who respected and cared for one another.

Some daughters said that they became closer to their mothers.

*'My mother and I got a hell of a lot closer since we came back from living interstate with the children.'*

*'When I became pregnant I felt closer to my mother. I've grown gradually close to my mother. When I was younger I was more indifferent to her.'*

But does the relationship change? In the types of cases above, the relationship was already an attached relationship. Having children simply built on that relationship rather than creating it.

In remote and parent-centred relationships the arrival of children helped some relationships work a little more smoothly, at least on the surface, by shielding the relationship from longstanding pressures. Children helped ease stilted visits by giving many adults and their parents something to talk about. The presence of children also helped adult children and their parents to avoid matters that would cause a fight, and to shift the focus away from the adult child.

*'With my mother almost any topic of conversation is charged. I try to manage the relationship. I mostly keep the lid on it and make it formal and distant. It's extraordinary how good one becomes at having conversations about nothing or about the children.'*

However, many of these adults found that children did very little to improve their relationship with their parents. Rather than drawing them closer it reinforced well-established patterns in the relationship. Parent-centred and remote parents showed little enthusiasm towards their grandchildren and this rekindled the feelings of rejection already present in these adults. This was evident from before the grandchildren were born.

*'When we told her that Beth was pregnant the response was "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. I didn't know you were doing anything like that!" And we had been married two years! She couldn't have cared two hoots. And when she was born there was no great warmth accompanying that birth.'*

The distance these remote and parent-centred parents kept from their grandchildren strengthened these feelings of rejection.

*'I started to see more of her when I first became pregnant. I hoped that by having a grandchild they would have warmer feelings towards the child and maybe it would float back to me. But it didn't work. She was distant to my kids. There wasn't much involvement or warmth or closeness there. She didn't enjoy them. She had to draw attention to herself.'*

*'I hoped for big things from my mother with the baby. You know how when you're going to have a baby your mother is meant to show an interest and maybe even knit a pair of booties. My mum showed no interest. She only knitted the booties after I asked her a few times. She showed no interest and when I brought the baby home I was pleading for help but got none.'*

As well as being somewhat distant from the grandchildren, parent-centred parents were frequently critical of the way they were being raised and this provoked further tension between the parents, their children and the grandchildren.

*'I'm bringing up my children the way I want to bring my children up and I was brought up in a completely different way—that's a source of never-ending conflict. My father believes you should do everything you're told, absolutely. They don't approve of anything we do with the children.'*

These critical, parent-centred parents frequently also got on poorly with their grandchildren and this added further stress to already strained relationships. These parents were very reluctant to help look after their grandchildren. In three-quarters of parent-centred relationships the relationship with the grandchildren was poor or neutral.

*'The children hate seeing their grandmother. She's pretty overpowering. She'll tell them she doesn't like that dress, don't wear that colour, it doesn't suit you, you should let your hair grow longer or shorter or whatever, your friend doesn't look up to your standard.'*

Child-centred parents were very different – 60 per cent were enthusiastic grandparents and got on well with their grandchildren, often doting on them and always keen to help care for them. Some overdid this and became intrusive.

*'She tells us how to look after the children and starts to take over from me and my wife in managing the children. Instead of leaving it to the pair of us to worry about the problem she jumps in and wants to worry about it too. She starts to take over. You find that she's really starting to go crook at the kids before you even say anything to them.'*

## Graduate Diploma in Adolescent Health

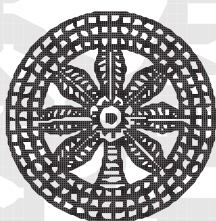
In 1996, the Centre for Adolescent Health, through the Department of Paediatrics, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne, will offer three streams within the Graduate Diploma in Adolescent Health:

- Health Studies
- Youth Drug Studies (in conjunction with the Australian Drug Foundation and Quit)
- Early Psychosis (in conjunction with the Centre for Young People's Mental Health)

In addition to gaining specialist skills and knowledge, the Graduate Diploma also provides a forum for networking.

If you have not been involved with tertiary studies for some time, or are not a graduate, a Bridging Course will be offered in September 1995 that will ensure priority entry.

**For further information, contact:  
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*And that really gets me uptight – it just makes you not want to go there.'*

Nevertheless, grandchildren sometimes took the focus off the adult children, although in other cases they served as another way in which parents could become involved in their grown children's lives.

Remote parents avoided interfering with the grandchildren and were not critical of the way they were being reared, so to this extent grandchildren were not a great source of tension. However, these parents appeared indifferent towards their grandchildren and, as with parent-centred parents, this strengthened the adult children's longstanding feelings of rejection and neglect.

*'When I had my third baby my mother didn't even come and visit me in hospital. I really resented that. I was really upset. Everyone else's mothers race in to see the baby the day after they're born. And here's mine ringing up asking if I minded if she doesn't come in!'*

*'They treat my children the same way I must have been treated. What would be lovely would be for them to walk in the door and pick up the children and kiss them. It would be lovely if they would praise the kids. I want them to enthuse and say "Oh what a good drawing", and ask "What's that?", and really expand on it, rather than just saying "That's good." I could probably do with some of it myself too.'*

Attached parents had the warmest relationships with their grandchildren. They were happy to help out with child-minding but did not impose themselves and avoided interfering or criticising the way their grandchildren were being brought up.

Important as grandchildren were, they did not somehow magically transform troubled relationships into equal, intimate ones. Instead they provided another domain in which the long-term patterns of the relationship were repeated.

## Conclusion

Caring in families takes place within the context of the longstanding family relationships. The quality and effectiveness of that care will depend in large measure on the quality of the relationships within the family. In the case of adults and their parents it

is a mistake to assume that all such relationships are able to sustain the demands of caring. Certainly the experience of caring will depend on the relationship that adults and their parents bring to the caring situation.

The resilience of particular forms of relationships over the life course should alert both adults and their parents to the fact that difficulties will not automatically be resolved as they grow older. The vast majority of people accept that adults and parents should provide care in times of

Relationships are marked far more by continuity than by change and, as far as can be gleaned from people's accounts of growing up, the basic character of relationships in adulthood is much the same as in childhood and adolescence.



Picture: Howard Birmstihl

need and are prepared to accept these obligations. But because of the varying nature of their relationships not all adults and their parents are equally able to provide that support for any sustained period of time. Decisions about care need to be taken with a clear-sighted recognition that this is the case.

Policies that ignore this and assume that parents and adults can and will provide family care are in danger of either leaving people without effective care or exposing some carers to demands with which they cannot cope. In such situations a great deal of outside support may be needed if effective care is to be delivered.

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