

# Family Fundamentals

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

## Strain common between parents, adult children

**We are in our 50s and our only child is in her 30s. There's a lot of tension in our relationship, and recently she seems to be avoiding almost all contact with us. Is there anything we can do to develop a closer relationship with her?**

It's not unusual for adult children and their parents to experience tension, irritation and aggravation with each other. Sometimes it's caused by issues that parents or adult children might have with the other's choices and circumstances related to finances, lifestyle, education, job or health. Sometimes it's more related to the dynamics of the relationship — issues related to frequency of contact, personality differences or past relationship issues, for example. Sometimes it's a combination of both.

A 2009 study in the journal *Psychology and Aging* provides some insight into the issue. Researchers interviewed 474 parents and their adult children. Interestingly, parents reported more intense tensions than the adult children did, especially regarding issues related to the child's lifestyle or behavior, such as finances or housekeeping habits. Parents reported more tension with adult daughters than sons; both daughters and sons reported more tension with mothers than with fathers. Researchers found that the most problematic tensions involved relationship issues, including basic personality differences and parents providing unsolicited advice.

In another study, published later in 2009, the same researchers examined strategies family members used to deal with such tensions. The most constructive route, they found, was for both adult children and parents to try to accommodate the other's wishes when a problem presents itself, addressing the problems and trying to



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find solutions, and trying to accept or at least understand the other's perspective. Avoiding the issue appeared to undermine the quality of the relationship, as did yelling or arguing about it.

To help bridge the gap that has formed between you and your daughter, you can try a number of strategies. One good source of guidance is Psych Central, [psychcentral.com](http://psychcentral.com), an independent website run by mental health professionals since 1995. If you search for "better relationship with adult child," you'll find numerous articles with advice, including:

- Take the initiative to address the tension in your relationship, but understand you can't do it all. Your daughter will have to meet you halfway.
- Accept the fact that you have made mistakes as a parent. No parent is perfect. Feeling defensive or guilty now won't help. Admit it and move on.
- When you do communicate with your daughter, focus on listening instead of talking. Have an open mind and be willing to change your own reactions and responses. Validate her feelings.
- Agree to disagree. Set aside any feelings of rejection or anger. Your daughter is her own person. Accept her and the differences you have with her.
- Keep trying. Don't assume one conversation will solve all of the issues.

June 2016

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**Dear Subscriber:** This column was reviewed by Kathy Green, educator with Ohio State University Extension, the outreach arm of the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

*Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@osu.edu).*

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