

Is divorce bad for the parents?

The elderly are cared for by their adult children regardless of their marital status. In a unique study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, researchers found British adult children help their elderly parents according to current need (i.e. health) rather than past behaviour. This contrasts with other countries such as the US, where parents with a history of divorce see less of their children and receive less help from them.

So in the UK a parent that is living alone is more likely to receive help from children than parents with partners. Children also give more help as the parent ages. For every extra year of the parent's age, he/she is 9% more likely to receive help from children not living at the same address. And parents with health problems are 75% more likely than those without health problems to be helped by their children. Curiously, divorced parents get more help from children than if they are widowed, but both groups receive more help than if they still have a partner. And it helps to have more children. Parents with more children receive more support; however, step children give step parents less support.

The research was carried out by a team from the Institute of Gerontology at King's College London. They analysed data from an annual survey of over five thousand British households (British Household Panel Survey) from 1991 to 2003. They compared this information with a survey of over 3500 people at around retirement age (55-69 years) in 1988, and an Italian family survey.

The researchers led by Dr Karen Glaser found that children now help their elderly parents more than in the past. In 1988, 34% of parents aged 61-69 received regular or frequent help from their children; by 2001/2 this had risen to 43%. Almost two-thirds of older parents (aged 70 or over in 2001/2) received help from their children. Typically help included one or more of the following:

- Lifts in a car (44% of parents)
- Help with the shopping (32%)
- Decorating, gardening or house repairs (25%)
- Providing or cooking meals (17%)
- Dealing with personal affairs (letters, bills) (16%)
- Washing, ironing or cleaning (11%)

“Our research dispels the myth that modern Britain is becoming less caring,” says Dr Karen Glaser. “While families experience more divorce and separation, many children continue to care for parents according to their needs.”

Comparing the UK with Italy, the researchers found the family oriented Italians care more for elderly parents regardless of need, whereas the pragmatic British gave support depending on the health situation of the elderly.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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