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Treat your children, and your parents, well

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY

Middle-aged parents who wonder how their grown children will treat them in old age should look at how they're treating their own elderly parents, according to a multi-generation study released Sunday.

"Apparently, we have to demonstrate the desired behavior. We can't be estranged from our parents and then expect our kids to be nice to us later," says Daphna Gans, a gerontologist at the RAND Corp. She did the study at the University of Southern California with sociologist Merrill Silverstein.

Their report at the Gerontological Society of America meeting in San Francisco followed 237 mothers and their 379 offspring over 15 years. At the start, mothers were mostly in their 50s and had living parents as well as young-adult children. Later, mothers were in their mid-60s to late 70s. Those who reported getting the most emotional support and practical help from their grown children:

- Had provided similar care or help to their own parents.
- Had formed strong emotional bonds with their children, as reported earlier by the offspring.

ROLE REVERSAL: USA TODAY's series on caring for aging parents

Also, those who said their parents gave them financial help or major gifts — cars, furniture — as young adults tended to live closer and keep in frequent contact with their parents later. Those who expected an inheritance also stayed in better contact.

But just living in the same city was no guarantee that a child would be supportive, Gans says. And whether middle-aged mothers thought people should take some responsibility for elderly parents didn't affect how their children behaved later.

"It's what you do, not what you say," she says.

The importance of close ties with children as they grow up rings true, says Sandi Johnson, executive director of the North Shore Senior Center in Northfield, Ill. "We see a lot of members who had wonderful relationships with their own parents and speak positively about how their kids treat them."

The reverse happens with elder abuse, Johnson says. "A lot of the grown kids involved in abuse feel they had

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miserable childhoods."

Sometimes adult children with loving parents fall into drug or alcohol abuse, "and then all bets are off as to how their kids will treat them later," says psychologist Priscilla Marotta of Plantation, Fla.

And good care for elderly parents is much more likely than in the past to mean placement in a group home, because fewer households have stay-at-home adults, Marotta says.

The study rings true, says Denise Brown, who runs a website (caregiving.com) with 11 online support groups for family caregivers.

"Very often someone will say: 'My mother was so good to me when I was growing up. I feel blessed that I'm able to help her now.' "

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