

Staying in touch: Contact between adults and their parents

by **Barbara Townsend-Batten**

The red flag is up on the rural route mailbox signaling a letter from a son has come; the telephone rings and it's the daughter who lives "away" with the weekly news about the grandkids; or the sound of a car in the driveway tells mum and dad that the kids have arrived for Sunday dinner. All are means by which adults and their parents maintain these close family relationships.

CST What you should know about this study

This article uses data from the 1995 General Social Survey on the family. Interviews were conducted with more than 10,000 Canadians aged 15 years and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. The study population for this article consists of adults aged 25 to 54 who provided information about the frequency of contact they had with their mother (about 4,900) and father (about 3,700) living in a separate household. This age group was chosen because younger adults are often still living with their parents or may have left the parental home temporarily to attend school, while many adults over age 55 do not have living parents (and those who do might be expected to have different issues with their parents than younger adults). Because the survey was conducted before the widespread use of e-mail and other messaging services available through the Internet, it seems reasonable to assume that rates of frequent contact may now be higher.

Contact: during the past 12 months, adult child has visited, written to or spoken with a parent who lives in a separate household (private household or institution). The survey does not identify who initiated the contact. *Frequent contact* constitutes contact at least once a week, including every day.

Mother: birth mother or mother substitute as defined by the respondent.

Father: birth father or father substitute as defined by the respondent.

Keeping up with family news and events can become more difficult when children grow up, move out of their parents' homes and set up their own households elsewhere. As the distance between family members increases, the amount of visiting tends to fall because personal visits over greater distances require more time, money and motivation.¹ But while growing geographical distance between family members can cause difficulties if aging parents need physical care, phone and mail are available and most adults stay in touch with their parents irrespective of physical need or proximity. However, the frequency of contact between adult children and their parents is often influenced by many other, non-geographic factors.

Using data from the 1995 General Social Survey (GSS) on family and social support, this article examines the factors that contribute to frequent

contact between adult children and their parents. "Frequent contact" covers telephoning, writing letters or visiting at least once a week. The study population is Canadians aged 25 to 54 with at least one parent living in a separate household.

Women are the ones who stay in contact

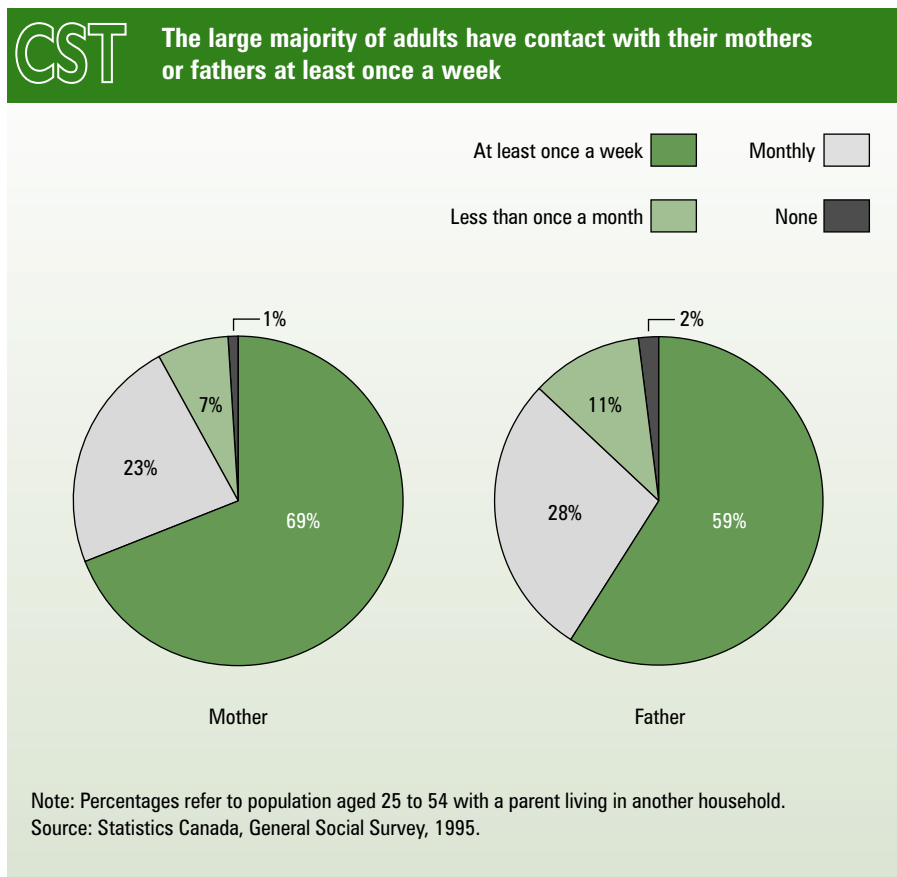
Adults keep in close touch with their families. Almost 7 in 10 adults aged 25 to 54 phone, write or visit their mothers at least once a week; nearly 6 in 10 communicate with their fathers that often. Few have contact less than once a month or not at all (8% for mother and 13% for father).

Daughters are more likely than sons to be in frequent touch with their mother, that is, at least once a week: 74% versus 64%. This is not surprising since women's traditional family role has been to play the main caregiver and kin keeper of the

family² and women generally feel more "responsible" for keeping open the lines of communication. This sense of kinship is common to both generations since both sons' and daughters' contact with mother is more frequent than with father. (Because the higher rate of contact with mothers is consistent across all variables, the rest of this article refers to data for mothers only unless otherwise stated. Data for fathers are presented in tables and charts.)

Because families with young children often require help, support or child minding assistance during the early family formation years, it is surprising to find that the presence of children does not affect the frequency of adults' contact with their mother. Neither does the adults' marital status. On the other hand, their age does have an effect: younger adults aged 25 to 39 have more frequent contact than older adults aged 40 to 54.

For many Canadian families, religious worship plays an important role in keeping the family together across the generations: 71% of adults who report having a religious affiliation were in frequent contact with their mothers, compared with 61% of those who stated they had no religion. As well, adults who go to religious services more than a few times a year are more likely to have frequent contact with their mother than those who do not attend at all (73% versus 67%).



1. For further information see McDaniel, S. 1995. "Emotional support and family contacts of older Canadians." *Aging and Society: A Canadian Reader*. Scarborough: Nelson Canada. p. 326-331.
2. A kin keeper is someone in the extended family who assumes the role of providing personal advice and emotional comfort to other family members. For further information see Rosenthal, C.J. 1995. "The comforter." *Aging and Society: A Canadian Reader*. Scarborough: Nelson Canada. p. 342-351.

This finding echoes results of a previous study which shows that people who regularly attend worship services place greater importance on the family than other adults.³

In addition, the GSS asked respondents, “do you think that you are a better parent than your father/mother

was?” Daughters who answered “no” to this question have more frequent contact with their mother than daughters who answered “yes”; the same holds true for sons and their fathers. The belief that your parent did a “good job” of raising you may indicate a good on-going relationship

between the generations, again reinforcing frequent contact.

On the other hand...

While some factors generate increased contact with a parent, others tend to have a negative effect. Adults 25 to 54 have a markedly lower likelihood of frequent contact with a parent who is living with a spouse other than the adult’s father or mother. This finding may reflect difficulty accepting a parent’s new partner, or the new partner’s difficulty accepting the children. Interestingly, frequent contact with mother was just as high whether she is living alone or with father (71%), while contact with father is considerably lower if he lives by himself (48% versus 65% if he lived with mother). Weekly communication with father is lower still if he is living with a new partner (40%).⁴

The mobility of Canadian society has raised the possibility that family ties may be weakening. Certainly, adults aged 25 to 54 who have moved more than once in the previous 10 years report less frequent contact with mother than those who have moved only once (or not at all), and the effect is more noticeable for contact with father. Possibly the adult child develops new substitute or surrogate “kin networks” among neighbours and friends in their new location, and

CST Religious affiliation and the parents’ current living arrangements have the most effect on adults’ level of contact with parents

	Frequent contact with	
	Mother	Father
	%	
Both sexes	69	59
Daughters	74	61
Sons	64	57
Age of adult		
25-39	71	62
40-54	66	51
Children in the home of the adult		
One or more	70	59
None	67	59
Religious affiliation		
Affiliation	71	60
No religion	61	53
Religious attendance in last 12 months		
Attended at least a few times	73	63
Did not attend services	67	56
Believe they are better parents than their parents were		
Agree	69	48
Disagree	81	65
Current living arrangement of parent		
Living with mother or father of adult	71	65
Living with other partner	61	40
Living alone	71	48
Number of times adult moved in the last 10 years		
None or one time	73	65
Two or more times	66	56
Balance of job, home and family life		
Satisfied	70	61
Dissatisfied	66	53

Note: Percentages refer to population aged 25 to 54 with a parent living in another household.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

3. Clark, W. Autumn 1998. “Religious observance, marriage and family.” *Canadian Social Trends* 46: 2-7.

4. Research on parent–adult–child relations indicates that parental divorce later in the child’s life has a negative impact on several factors including contact; divorce while the children are still young has the most negative effects on father–son ties. Connidis, I.A. 1999. “Anticipating change in family ties and ageing: The implications of demographic trends.” *Cohort Flow and the Consequences of Population Ageing*. (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-569-XCB).

	Frequent contact with	
	Mother	Father
	%	
Very happy childhood		
Agree	72	63
Disagree	54	31
Emotional closeness to parents (before age 15)		
Agree	72	65
Disagree	56	46
Place of birth		
Canada	74	63
Other country	50	42
Language first spoken		
English	70	61
French	74	60
Other	55	49

Note: Percentages refer to population aged 25 to 54 with a parent living in another household.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

becomes less reliant on parents for day-to-day support or conversation.⁵

Another factor that reduces contact is having trouble juggling the demands of present-day life. Adults 25 to 54 who are not satisfied with the balance of their job, home and family life are in touch with their mother less often than those who are satisfied (66% versus 70%). Perhaps overwhelming immediate priorities eat up the time available for a regular weekly call or visit.

A good relationship in childhood lasts into adulthood

The bonding that occurs between child and parent is often the basis for future relationships maintained between adult generations in a family.⁶ Canadians aged 25 to 54 who say they had a very happy childhood are more likely to have frequent contact with their mother than those who do not, at 72% compared with 54%.

Similarly, emotional closeness to the mother during childhood and early adolescence is linked with significantly more frequent contact (72% versus 56%).

Two other aspects of the childhood experience seem to have an effect on contact. Adults born outside Canada have less frequent contact, as do those whose mother tongue is neither English nor French. This finding probably reflects the fact that the parents of some of these adults may live abroad, making weekly communication expensive or difficult.

Summary

Contact between adults and their parents contributes to overall feelings of well-being, inclusiveness, belonging, self worth and security.⁷ Although there are no perfect families and no flawless blueprints for intergenerational contact, most Canadian adults talk to their parents once a week

or more. In general, women are more likely than men to pick up the phone, write a letter or visit. Adults with a religious affiliation tend to have more frequent contact than those without; similarly those who attend religious services report regular weekly contact more frequently than those who do not attend services at all. Not surprisingly, perhaps, frequent contact is also reported more often by adults who feel that their childhood had been very happy and that they had a strong emotional bond with their parents.

5. For further information see Pearlin, L.I. 1982. "Discontinuities in the study of aging." *Aging and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Edited by T.K. Hareven and K.J. Adams. p. 55-74.
6. For further information see Long, M.V. and P. Martin. 2000. "Personality, relationship closeness, and loneliness of oldest old adults and their children." *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 55 (March 2000): 311-319.
7. Rowe, J.W., M.D. and R.L. Kahn, Ph.D. 1998. *Successful Aging*. New York: Dell Publishing.



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