

Why are Parent/Child Relationships Important to an Ag Legacy?

By Caleb Carter, UW Agriculture and Horticulture Educator

Harvest this year has stretched long into the fall and it has gotten Victor thinking during his long hours on the combine. It is at times like this that he begins to contemplate his future, and the future he sees with Ruth, his wife of nearly 50 years. It is getting increasingly difficult for him to see a way off the farm. He is up to his eyeballs in debt after putting his kids through college, and if that wasn't enough, his daughter is getting married this summer. It seems like his kids need more and more all the time, just at a time when he and Ruth are trying to figure out how to survive on less.

It isn't that he doesn't want to support his kids. Victor has worked hard to provide them with opportunities that he never had growing up and he is proud of what they have accomplished. At the same time, it feels like he must work harder and harder all the time just to keep up. Although they have had some brief family conversations about the future of the farm and his oldest son has talked about moving back home, Victor is still unsure about his kids' long term plans or expectations. Being the fourth generation on the farm, Victor also feels an obligation to keep the family farm going.

How can Victor express his feeling to his kids and help them to better understand how they are feeling and the challenges he is facing?



Parent child relationships

Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships between parents and adult children is challenging at any stage in life. This is especially true during times of change. It is important that the generations work together to make relationships satisfying rather than strained.



Relationships between parents and adult children are “ambivalent relationships,” meaning they contain both positive and negative perceptions. These feelings include love, reciprocal help, shared values and solidarity at one end of the emotional continuum, and feelings of isolation, conflict, abuse, neglect and caregiver stress at the other.

Today, increasing life expectancies mean that family members will spend more time in intergenerational roles requiring negotiation and understanding in dealing with change.

Sources of stress

There are many factors that contribute to conflict and stress between family members. Three common sources of stress include differences in values, developmental stages, and expectations.

Differences in values and beliefs can become a source of stress to intergenerational relationships. Family members who report more agreement on how to spend money, raise children, choices in friends and partners, religious beliefs and other values have less stress in their relationships.

Parents and children need to be aware of the different developmental stages that they are in. Parents may be dealing with issues such as aging, poor health, retirement or relocation. Children must accept that their parents may not be able to do as much as they once could and they may even need the child's help.

Children and parents often have very different expectations for the future. Even when children achieve all that their parents had hoped for, the relationship may be disappointing if it lacks affection, warmth, respect, open communication or honesty. Children may also have unmet expectations for their parents. The parent may not provide the level of financial support or the help with grandchildren that is desired, or they may interfere in the child's life. The resulting disappointment can strain the parent-child relationship.



Building Healthy Relationships

Dr. Kathryn Beckham Mims of Albany State University in Georgia, offers some suggestions for building and maintaining healthy relationships between adult children and their parents. These include:

- **Honesty:** Come to terms with your mistakes and misgivings. Holding onto fear, self-doubt, and blame keeps you from understanding others and changing your behavior.
- **Communication:** Listen and try to understand the experiences of the other person, also share your own expectations, feelings, and concerns. This can go a long way toward improving the relationship.
- **Validation of feelings and beliefs:** Recognize that the feelings and beliefs of both adult children and parents are real. Each deserve the right to their own opinions.
- **Respect one another:** Respect breeds respect. This also helps in recognizing individuality.
- **Letting go:** Allow each generation to make decisions and suffer or enjoy the consequences, while learning from each situation.
- **Do not take all the credit/blame:** Both parents and children have unique experiences that contribute to strengths and weaknesses in the relationship.
- **Choose for yourself:** Efforts to build and strengthen your family relationships must be intentional.

Obstacles to communication

Sensitive issues, such as money, death, and family relations are difficult issues not only to bring up, but also to talk about in any depth. It is hard to approach these issues calmly when there are strong feelings about what is important. Most people avoid discussing these subjects because they believe it to be disrespectful and uncomfortable. For example, we don't want to give the impression that family members might die or that we want someone to die.

Relationships between adult children and their parents last longer today because people are living longer. In addition to increased longevity, these relationships are challenged by life transitions such as changes in residence, job, health, marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Building and maintaining healthy intergenerational relationships can give

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individuals and families knowledge, respect and an appreciation for one another. Skills of understanding provide a legacy to future generations that will also need to address the transitions and stresses of life.

Research on rural families

A 15-year Cornell study of how farm families make decisions examined the levels of family satisfaction for 242 senior generation farmers and 239 junior generation farmers. Researchers found neither generation is happy with the level of communication in their two-generation farm family. Skills such as handling arguments, providing constructive criticism, and family problem-solving were ranked low by both generations.



Many researchers assume that operating a farm is like operating any other business. The Cornell study, however, concludes that while “Farms are indeed operated as businesses ... because production is closely related to the life cycle of the family, the farm, in organization and management, is remarkable, if not unique, among businesses in developed economies.” (G. Coleman et al., 1986)

Being intentional

Farm and ranch families face the same trials and difficulties encountered by other families, the difference is that their livelihood, i.e. the farm or ranch, is also tied into it. Not surprisingly then, these stress factors can carry over into the operation. Conversely, the struggles experienced in the business can also overlap into family relationships.

This increases the importance of intentional efforts to address these challenges and maintain good parent/child relationships. This could include holding regular family councils and family business meetings; allowing family members the opportunity to receive updates on the operation, and to share their own thoughts, concerns, expectations, and more.

For more information on holding these meetings refer to the Ag Legacy Newsletter “How are you Communicating with the Next Generation?” available at [AGLEGACY.org > News](https://www.aglegacy.org/news). As well as the online interactive course “Management Succession,” available free of charge at: [AGLEGACY.org > Learning](https://www.aglegacy.org/learning).



Unique Obstacles

A family farm is much more than a business. The farm is a part of the family and the family is a part of the farm. The two are inseparable. For many farm families, losing the farm would be like losing a family member. There is a tradition in agriculture that land is passed on from one generation to the next. Yet, one of the most stressful farm issues is the transfer of the family farm.

The challenges of facing differences in values, developmental stages, and expectations can leave family members feeling hurt, lost, and isolated. As with

Victor in the story above, building and maintaining strong relationships between parents and their adult children takes time and a concerted effort to ensure that all involved feel appreciated, involved, and valued.

A family may find that it is too late if they wait until it is time to transition the farm or ranch to the next generation. This can add even another source of stress and difficulty to an already challenging process.

Portions of this article are taken from an online course entitled *A Lasting Legacy*
- Course 1 by Rodney Sharp, John P. Hewlett, and Jeffrey E. Tranel, 2007.

The course is available free of charge at
AGLEGACY.org > Learning.

Resources:

How do You Cope With Anxiety and Stress in Your Ag Legacy? Ag Legacy Newsletter. | <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/news>.
“DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?” | Ag Legacy Newsletter. | <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/news>.

Colman, G.P., & Capener, H.R. (1986). Farming: Another way of doing business. *New York's food life quarterly*, 16(4), 6-8.

Weigel, D.J., & Weigel, R.R. (1990). Family satisfaction in two-generation farm families: The role of stress and resources. *Family Relations*, 36, 449-455.



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