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## Helicopter Parents and Landing Pad Kids: Intense Parental Support of Grown Children

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### Abstract

Popular media describe adverse effects of helicopter parents who provide intense support to grown children, but few studies have examined implications of such intense support. Grown children ( $N = 592$ ,  $M$  age = 23.82 years, 53% female, 35% members of racial/ethnic minority groups) and their parents ( $n = 399$ ,  $M$  age = 50.67 years, 52% female; 34% members of racial/ethnic minority groups) reported on the support they exchanged with one another. Intense support involved parents' providing several types of support (e.g., financial, advice, emotional) many times a week. Parents and grown children who engaged in such frequent support viewed it as nonnormative (i.e., too much support), but grown children who received intense support reported better psychological adjustment and life satisfaction than grown children who did not receive intense support. Parents who perceived their grown children as needing too much support reported poorer life satisfaction. The discussion focuses on generational differences in the implications of intense parental involvement during young adulthood.

### Keywords

family; family relations; intergenerational relationships; parent; social support; young adulthood

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Popular media outlets are rampant with stories of helicopter parents who smother overly dependent grown children (Belkin, 2010; Briggs, 2008; Gibbs, 2009). For example, a recent feature story in *Atlantic Magazine* attributed young adults' psychological problems (i.e., aimlessness and depression) to their parents' overattentiveness and involvement (Gottlieb, 2011), suggesting intense parental support is aberrant and detrimental, yet studies examining such intense parental support are scant. Research suggests parents in the 21st century

provide more financial support to grown children than parents did in the 20th century (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Schoeni & Ross, 2005), but many additional questions remain unanswered; specifically, it remains unclear whether intense parental involvement is viewed as normative today and whether frequent support is detrimental or beneficial to the parents and grown children involved. In this article, we examine these questions.

## Young Adulthood In The 21st Century

Throughout the final third of the 20th century, extending through the early 21st century, substantial shifts have taken place in the experience of early adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Fifty years ago, adulthood came swiftly to most people. By the time they reached their early 20s, the vast majority of women and most men had completed schooling, left home, entered the labor force, and begun families of their own (Furstenberg, 2010). By and large, parents were relatively free of obligations to their young adult grown children. Today, circumstances have changed dramatically, and age 18 no longer represents emancipation in any real sense.

Indeed, children in late adolescence and young adulthood may benefit from parental involvement. Research addressing support of grown children in the 1990s revealed that parents were likely to provide a wide range of support to grown children of any age who were in positions associated with dependency, such as being in school, being unmarried, and residing in their parents' household (Aquilino, 2006; Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008; Veevers & Mitchell, 1998). Today, individuals in their late teens and early 20s are somewhat less likely to be living on their own and much less likely to have completed education, begun full-time employment, or entered a partnership than in the past (Schoeni & Ross, 2005; White, 1994). As such, young adults in particular may evaluate intense support favorably, and grown children who receive such support may garner advantages.

### Evaluations of Intense Support

Relationships between adults and parents are governed by norms about appropriate behavior (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). Societal shifts in the timing of events in young adulthood during the past half-century may be accompanied by altered expectations for family behavior. Recent prolonged transitions to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Furstenberg, 2010) are consistent with a need for parental support, yet it is not clear whether parents and offspring view such support as normal.

Theoretical work suggests grown children may view intense parental support as normative, even if their parents do not. In a classic article, Trivers (1974) argued that offspring seek to maximize parental support for their own reproductive success. By contrast, parents must invest in multiple progeny, rather than investing all their resources in one offspring. Thus, any given child may desire more support than parents are able to provide because of competing demands from other progeny. This premise may extend to grown children.

Young adults also may view the experiences of their generation as normative because they did not experience prior patterns. For example, data collected in 1980 revealed that grown

children expected more financial support than their mothers intended to provide, even at that time (Goldscheider, Thornton, & Yang, 2001). Thus, we predicted that grown children would evaluate intense parental involvement as normative.

By contrast, parents may view the support they provide as nonnormative. Although young adults may adapt quickly, norms governing expectations of behavior often lag behind rapid social transitions (Riley & Riley, 1994). For example, theorists have noted that parents often feel conflicted over changing norms for independence and dependence of grown children (Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Middle-aged parents today grew up in a period when norms for parental involvement were considerably lower than parental involvement in the 21st century (Furstenberg, 2010). Thus, we predicted that parents might view intense parental support as nonnormative, even if they engage in that support.

### **Intense Parental Support, Adjustment, and Well-Being**

Parental support and evaluations of support may have implications for both parents' and grown children's well-being. Research has linked parental well-being to relationships with grown children (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010; Ward, 2008). Likewise, grown children's ties to parents are associated with their own well-being (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992). Consequently, intense support may be associated with each party's well-being.

**Grown children receiving intense support and well-being**—Intense parental support may be beneficial to grown children in many circumstances. When individuals have received support they desire, they typically manifest better well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Cohen, 2004; Uchino, 2009). For grown children who view support they receive as appropriate, intense parental involvement may confer benefits and advantages.

By contrast, perceptions that support is imposed may be detrimental (Smith & Goodnow, 1999). Frequent parental support may be associated with diminished efficacy and initiative if grown children who receive such support feel less competent than other adults. They may be overly dependent or suffer from little confidence in their own abilities.

Likewise, intense support may arise *because* grown children have incurred social, financial, or emotional problems (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Pillemer & Suitor, 1991). Thus, the association may be bidirectional: Grown children who are faring poorly in young adulthood may elicit greater support, and this support, in turn, may undermine adjustment.

Nonetheless, parents also give support to grown children for a variety of positive reasons: to foster their successes, because they get along well with those children, or because they expect those children to give support to them in the future (Fingerman et al., 2009; Pillemer & Suitor, 2006; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Gairrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). Indeed, grown children may interpret intense parental support favorably and view it as an investment in themselves. Studies have not examined the implications of receiving a wide range of support, but data from the 1980s revealed that grown children who felt emotionally

supported by their parents (e.g., loved and cared for) reported better well-being (Umberson, 1992). Thus, on the whole, we hypothesized that grown children who received intense support would report comparable or better well-being than grown children who did not receive such support, particularly if they viewed that support favorably.

**Parents providing intense support and well-being**—Parental well-being also may be associated with providing intense support to grown children. A variety of studies have documented associations between parents' relationship qualities with their grown children and their own well-being (Fingerman et al., 2008; Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2011; Lowenstein, 2007; Pudrovska, 2009; Ward, 2008). Provision of support may play a key role in these associations.

Several studies have suggested that parents incur emotional costs from supporting their grown children. Parental well-being is sensitive to parents' perceptions of how their grown children turned out (Fingerman Cheng, et al., 2011; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994) and to their grown children's suffering (Knoester, 2003). These associations may, in part, reflect beliefs about normal behaviors; parents experience distress when they view their grown children as failing to reach normative roles of adulthood (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Suito, Sechrist, & Pillemer, 2007). Moreover, providing support to grown children in need may accrue detriments by sapping time, material, and emotional resources. For example, a qualitative study of Israeli parents revealed that they provided a great deal of support to grown children, but many parents expressed dissatisfaction over doing so (Levitzki, 2009).

Nonetheless, one study documented benefits parents derived from providing support to grown children. Byers, Levy, Allore, Bruce, and Kasl (2008) used data from the Longitudinal Study of Generations and found that parents reported fewer depressive symptoms when their grown children (ages 25 – 39) were dependent on them for instrumental, emotional, and financial support. The authors attributed these benefits to parents believing they mattered in their children's lives.

Individuals' evaluations regarding provision of support may explain these different patterns of association with well-being. Research drawing on cognitive behavioral theories to examine caregiving has found that evaluations of providing support play a greater role in well-being than actual burdens of provision of support (Aneshensel, Pearlin, Mullan, Zarit, & Whitlatch, 1995; Son et al., 2007; Zarit, Reever, & Bach-Petersen, 1980). By extension, intense support of grown children may be detrimental if parents deem the support as nonnormative or excessive. In sum, the bulk of evidence suggests parents who provide intense support to grown children will report diminished well-being, particularly if they view that support as excessive.

### **Other Factors Associated With Intense Support and Well-Being**

Finally, we controlled for factors that might be associated with intense support or well-being based on prior research. Daughters typically receive more frequent support than sons, and mothers provide more frequent support than fathers (Fingerman et al., 2009; Suito & Pillemer, 2006). Research also has found gender differences in the implications of providing

family support for well-being (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). Similarly, we controlled for age of the grown child, because younger grown children receive more frequent support (Aquilino, 2006; Hartnett, Furstenberg, Birditt, & Fingerman, in press; Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O'Brien, 2011). We considered race because Black and White parents may differ in support of grown children (although directions of racial differences vary by study; Fingerman, VanderDrift, Dotterer, Birditt, & Zarit, 2011; Laditka & Laditka, 2001; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Socioeconomic status indicators such as education are associated with variability in psychological well-being as well (Farmer & Ferraro, 2005; Lorant et al., 2003).

Three factors warrant particular attention, because grown children in diverse situations may experience intense support differently: (a) coresidence, (b) student status, and (c) parental status. Coresidence may elicit high parental involvement; data from the 1990s revealed that grown children who resided with parents reported high rates of instrumental and emotional support (Veevers & Mitchell, 1998), yet grown children can reside with parents and retain their independence emotionally, financially (i.e., pay rent), and practically (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000). Similarly, parents may feel more obligated and provide more financial and nontangible support to students (Aquilino, 2005; Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Fingerman et al., 2009; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Likewise, grown children who have children of their own often receive intense support in the form of child care (Schoeni & Ross, 2005; Silverstein & Marenco, 2001). When grown children receive intense support because of student or parental status, they may view such support as normative and may incur distinct benefits from that support.

In sum, this study extends prior research by examining three issues: (a) a descriptive overview of the frequency of intense support and of the parents and grown children who reported intense support; (b) an examination of parents' and grown children's evaluations of support as normative, or nonnormative and excessive; and (c) assessment of associations between intense support and well-being. Specifically, we hypothesized that grown children would evaluate frequent parental support as normative, but parents would not. We further hypothesized that grown children would show benefits associated with receiving intense support, but parents would report poorer well-being when providing such frequent support, particularly if they evaluated the support as nonnormative and excessive.

## Method

### Sample

The sample was from the 2008 Family Exchanges Study (Fingerman et al., 2009, 2010). In the larger study, 633 middle-aged parents (331 women, 302 men;  $M$  age = 50.67,  $SD$  = 4.80) with at least one child over age 18 years participated. The middle-aged parents were from the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area, which covers urban, suburban, and rural areas (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2001). Recruitment of parents relied on lists from Genesys Corporation as well as random digit dialing within regional area codes. We oversampled neighborhoods with a high density of members of racial/ethnic minority groups and obtained a sample in which 31% self-identified as Black and 6% self-identified as multiracial. The response rate for parents was 75%.

At the end of the interview, parents were asked to provide names and contact information for up to three grown children. On average, parents had 1.96 children over age 18 ( $SD = 1.46$ , range: 1 – 11); most participants (88%) had three or fewer children. Participants with more than three children were asked for contact about the child who received (a) the most support, (b) the least support, and (c) a child randomly selected by the computer. Parents provided contact information for 63% of grown children, and 75% of those grown children participated ( $N = 592$ ). Recruitment rates were higher than in studies that have recruited grown children via an aging parent (Suitor et al., 2007; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006).

The study included 399 parents (63% of 633) who had at least one child participate in the study. Of those 399 parents, 59% had one child who participated, 34% had two children who participated, and 7% had three children who participated. Descriptive information regarding parents and grown children in this study is provided in Table 1. We compared the parents and grown children who participated in this study with the larger sample. Middle-aged parents who provided contact information for grown children did not differ systematically from parents who did not provide contact information. Grown children who participated were somewhat younger ( $M = 23.7$  vs.  $25.7$ ), more likely to be female (53% vs. 47%), and lived nearer their parents ( $M = 120$  miles [193 km] vs. 270 miles [434 km]) than grown children who did not participate, but they did not differ on other characteristics (e.g., race, education).

## Procedure

Parents completed computer-assisted telephone interviews that lasted approximately 1 hr. In 2007, 92% of adults in the parents' age range lived in households with land lines (Blumberg & Luke, 2007). Grown children answered the survey either via land line (46%), cell phone (40%), or a web-based survey (14%). A burgeoning literature has found that web-based surveys are comparable to other survey modalities addressing broader psychological topics (Birnbaum, 2004; Church, 2001; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). As in other studies, grown children who completed the web survey did not differ on most characteristics except that they were more likely to be male and less likely to be Black than grown children who completed the telephone survey.

## Measures

**Parent characteristics**—Parents provided their age and gender during screening. In the interviews, they rated their health on a scale that ranged from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*; Idler & Kasl, 1991). Parents also reported years of education and household income in 2007, coded as 1 (*less than \$10,000*), 2 (*\$10,001 – \$25,000*), 3 (*\$25,001 – \$40,000*), 4 (*\$40,001 – 75,000*), 5 (*\$75,001 – \$100,000*), or 6 (*more than \$100,000*). Compared with the general population in the Philadelphia area, parents' average income was similar ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), but parents and grown children were slightly better educated (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008; see Fingerman et al., 2009, for additional information).

**Grown children characteristics**—Grown children ranged in age from 18 to 41 years ( $M = 23.82$ ,  $SD = 5.13$ ); most grown children (94.1%) were age 18 to 33. Grown children were distributed by gender; 313 (52.9%) were daughters and 279 (47.1%) were sons. Most grown



children were single and had never married ( $n = 410$ , 69.5%). Moreover, 176 grown children (29.8%) reported coresiding with their parents. In addition, 23.7% of grown children had children of their own ( $n = 140$ ). A large proportion of grown children reported that they were full-time students ( $n = 208$ , 35%).

**Intense support**—Participants completed the Intergenerational Support Index (Fingerman et al., 2010). Parents and children indicated how often parents provided six forms of support to the grown child: (a) emotional, (b) practical, (c) socializing, (d) advice, (e) financial support, and (f) listening to them talk about daily events; responses were made on the following scale: 1 = *less than once a year or not at all*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *monthly*, 5 = *a few times a month*, 6 = *weekly*, 7 = *a few times a week*, and 8 = *daily*. We generated a mean of the six items ( $\alpha = .85$ ), representing the average frequency with which parents provided six types of support. Grown children provided these ratings for each of their parents (mother and father) separately, and parents provided these ratings for each grown child.

We recoded this index to tap intense support with 1 = *intense support* and 0 = *less frequent support*. We defined intense support of grown children as the average of the six forms of support several times a week for the following reasons. In the 21st century, over half of young adults receive at least some financial or instrumental support from parents every 12 months (Schoeni & Ross, 2005), and other types of support more often (Fingerman et al., 2009). Therefore, we could not use definitions from studies in the 1990s that defined “tight knit” families on the basis of provision of any instrumental support in the context of emotional closeness (Silverstein, Bengtson, & Lawton, 1997) or “high exchangers” on the basis of instrumental and financial support in the past 12 months (Grundy & Henretta, 2006; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993). Instead, we drew on literature defining family caregiving as provision of several types of support several times a week; this support may take the form of hands-on tasks, running errands, lending an attentive ear, emotional support, and companionship (Zarit, Stephens, Townsend, & Greene, 1998). Intense family support in the form of caregiving requires not that all forms of support occur each week but that multiple forms of support occur several times a week on average. Following the caregiving literature, in this study, we defined intense support as comprising six types of support occurring, on average, several times a week. To ensure this measure was cogent, we also recoded each type of support (e.g., listening, practical, financial, emotional) separately as 1 (*intense*) and 0 (*not intense*) using the definition of several times a week. When a scale was generated from those binomial codes, the reliability for the scale was  $r \alpha = .75$  for both parents and grown children’s reports.

It is possible that support that occurs even more frequently could be detrimental to both parties. Thus, we also considered an alternate definition of intense support that defined intense support as occurring daily.

**Evaluations of support**—Grown children evaluated the amount of help they received: 1 (*less than you would like*), 2 (*a little less than you would like*), 3 (*about right*), 4 (*a little more than you would like*), or 5 (*more than you would like*). We considered an evaluation of *about right* as normative and other evaluations as nonnormative.

Parents completed the same 5-point scale for the amount of help they provided to each grown child. In addition, parents completed a 3-point scale evaluating their grown children's needs compared with other adults the same age: 1 (*needs less parental help than other adults*), 2 (*needs about the same amount of help as other adults*), or 3 (*needs more parental help than others*). To reduce burden in the interview, parents provided this rating for their grown children on the whole (rather than for each child separately).

**Grown children adjustment and well-being**—Grown child's adjustment consisted of two indicators: (a) a sense of defined goals and (b) life satisfaction. The measure of defined goals used four items asking whether grown children (a) have a clear sense of what is important to them and what they believe in, (b) have a pretty good sense of the path they want to take in life and the steps to take to get there, (c) have a specific action plan to help reach their professional goals, and (d) have the skills and abilities to achieve the goals they set (adapted from Robitschek, 1998). These items were rated on a scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). We used the mean of the items to form an index ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Grown children also rated their life satisfaction (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000), from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*).

**Parent life satisfaction**—We measured parental life satisfaction with the identical item (Diener et al., 2000), rated 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*).

### Analytic Plan

The study included parents and grown children, and we considered each party's reports separately. Furthermore, we had full information regarding each party's perceptions of ties to multiple family members; that is, parents reported on all of their children (not just children participating in this study). Grown children reported on both parents (not just the parent participating in this study). Thus, we conducted two types of analyses: (a) grown children's reports on both parents (590 mothers and 568 fathers) and (b) parents' reports on each of their grown children (453 daughters and 433 sons). In analyses of children's reports, children reported on their mother and their father ( $N = 592$  grown children, responses on 1,158 parents). Similarly, parental responses were not limited to the child who participated in the study; the responding parent reported on each grown child ( $n = 399$  parents reports on 886 grown children).

Because participants reported on multiple family members (i.e., grown children reported on two parents and parents reported on multiple children), most analyses employed SAS PROC Mixed to estimate multilevel models that account for nonindependence of reports in the data (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996; Singer, 1998). The variable of interest, intense parental support, was dichotomous: 1 (*intense support*) and 0 (*not intense support*). The evaluations of support, grown children's adjustment, and both parties' life satisfaction were continuous outcomes.

Initial analyses examined the predictors of intense support. We included grown children's and parents' characteristics in each set of analyses and used SAS PROC GLIMMIX to examine multilevel models with a binomial distribution.



We then examined whether intense support was associated with evaluations of support. We used SAS PROC Mixed with evaluations of support as the outcome and intense support coded 1 (*intense support*) or 0 (*less support*) as the predictor. Evaluations of support initially were rated on a 5-point scale including a midpoint, 3 (*about right*), and we considered higher ratings as nonnormative and excessive. We also estimated ordered logistic multilevel models treating appraisals as a 3-point scale combining ratings of 1 and 2 (*too little support*) and combining ratings of 4 and 5 (*nonnormative and excessive*) and treating 3 (*about right*) as the comparison category. The pattern of findings was identical to the pattern with the 5-point scale; for ease of interpretation, we present findings from the 5-point ratings.

Finally, analyses of the well-being outcomes differed for grown children and for parents. Because the study included multiple offspring from the same family, when examining grown children's goals and life satisfaction we used multilevel models to adjust for family-level error. Because parents had only one value for life satisfaction, we followed procedures from prior studies and used multiple regression, with support provided to children and appraisals of support as the predictor variables and life satisfaction as the outcome (see Fingerman, Cheng, et al., 2011; Lowenstein, 2007).

## Results

### Descriptive Information Regarding Intense Parental Support

First, we examined the distribution of intense support across the different types of support (see Table 2). Nontangible expressive support, such as listening or emotional support, were reported on a very frequent basis by over half of participants, whereas tangible financial support (which requires material resources) and socializing (which requires physical presence) were less likely to occur on a frequent basis.

Next, we examined the frequency of participants who provided intense support across multiple types of support. A total of 21.0% of grown children reported intense support (243 out of 1,158 reports on parents). Of these offspring who received intense support, 26.8% of grown children reported intense support from a mother, and 15.0% reported intense support from a father.

Parents reported on each grown child. On the basis of these reports, parents provided intense support to 17.9% of their grown children (159 out of 886). The proportion of parents who provided such support to at least one grown child was greater: Almost thirty percent (28.8%) of parents (115 out of 399) reported providing intense support to at least one grown child; that is, for parents who had two or more children, they typically offered intense support to only one child.

We also sought to describe the characteristics that predicted intense support. Offspring who coresided with parents were more likely to receive intense support ( $r = .34$ ). The correlations of intense support with student status ( $r = .09$ ) and having children of one's own ( $r = -.07$ ) were low. Student status, coresidence, and parental status were highly correlated with grown child's age, however ( $r_s = -.53$  for student status,  $-.49$  for coresiding, and  $.58$  for having children).

To examine characteristics of parents and grown children involved in intense support, we estimated multilevel models with a binomial distribution in which intense support was the outcome (i.e., 1 = *intense support*, 0 = *less support*). Parent and grown children characteristics were the predictors: parent gender and race and grown child's gender, age, education, student status, coresidence, and having children. We estimated this model for both the parents' reports and the grown children's reports of intense support. Consistent with prior studies regarding support to grown children (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman et al., 2009; Schoeni & Ross, 2005), these models revealed that grown children who were younger, who coresided with their parents, or who had children of their own were more likely to receive intense support. Mothers were more likely to provide such intense support (models are shown in supplementary Table A1 on the *Journal of Marriage and Family* web site; see [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1741-3737](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1741-3737)).

### Evaluations of Support

Our first research question asked how parents and grown children involved in intense support evaluated that support. We examined descriptive statistics and multilevel models.

**Descriptive statistics**—Descriptive statistics for grown children across the sample revealed that average evaluations of support fell at the midpoint on the scale, *about right* ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ); the majority of grown children reported that support they received was about the right amount (3 on the scale), yet 16.6% of grown children indicated they received more or a little more support than they would like (4 or 5), and 14.4% indicated they received less or a little less support than they would like (1 or 2). We considered the higher ratings as evaluations that the support was nonnormative and excessive.

Parents also completed evaluations of support. The majority of parents (55.3%) viewed the support they provided as *about right* ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ), but 25.4% of parents felt they gave more or a little more than they would like, and 19.3% of parents felt they gave less or a little less than they would like. We also considered parents' evaluations of their grown children's needs compared with other adults the same age, rated with a 3-point scale. This evaluation was obtained only from the parents (not the children). In these comparisons, 51.7% parents thought their children needed about the same amount of support as others the same age, 11.6% thought their children needed more parental support, and 36.7% thought that their children needed less support than other adults the same age. We considered parents' higher ratings on either of these evaluations as indicative that the support was nonnormative and excessive.

**Models examining evaluations of support**—To examine whether intense support was associated with evaluations of support, we ran two multilevel models treating grown children's and parents' ratings of whether the support was *about right* on the 5-point scale as the outcome.

The data in Table 3 show findings from the multilevel models. Parents and grown children who experienced intense parental support did not view this support as normative but rather were more likely to rate the support as nonnormative and excessive. As can be seen in the table, grown children who received intense support were more likely to report that they

received more support than they would like in comparison to those not in the intense-support group. Likewise, parents who reported intense support of a grown child felt they provided too much support to that child in comparison to those children not in the intense-support group. With regard to control variables, consistent with the literature on gender, grown children felt their mothers gave too much support, and mothers appraised support they gave as too much support.

### **Intense Support, Adjustment, and Life Satisfaction**

We next considered associations between each party's well-being and intense parental support. For grown children, we estimated multilevel models for the two continuous well-being measures: (a) clarity of goals and (b) life satisfaction. As can be seen in Table 4, receipt of intense support was a significant predictor of child well-being. For grown children, receiving intense parental support was associated with the positive outcomes of clearly defined goals and higher life satisfaction. Appraisals of support were not associated with the outcomes.

We estimated a multiple regression model to examine parents' life satisfaction as function of providing intense support and appraisals of support .

As can be seen in Table 5, the regression analysis revealed that parents' evaluation of their children's needs as greater than the needs of others the same age was associated with lower parental life satisfaction. Thus, providing intense support was not associated with parental life satisfaction, but believing that the children needed too much support was.

### **Tests of Stability of Findings**

We conducted several tests to assure stability of findings. We reestimated the analyses focusing only on dyads in this study; that is, we reexamined the models for grown children including only their reports on the parent in this study. We did the same in the models regarding parents, including only grown children who participated in the study. The pattern of findings was the same.

We reestimated analyses using parental reports, including the entire sample from the Family Exchanges Study ( $N = 633$ ) and their reports on all of their grown children ( $N = 1,384$ ). Again, the pattern of findings was the same, indicating that parents in this sample (whose children participated) did not represent biases in comparison to the original sample.

Furthermore, we considered an alternate definition of "intense" support, testing whether findings regarding grown children's adjustment and life satisfaction were consistent for daily support as well as weekly support. On the basis of grown children's reports, 8.9% ( $n = 47$ ) of grown children received multiple forms of support on a daily basis. In bivariate correlations, parental support was not associated with grown children's life satisfaction ( $r = -.05, ns$ ). Indeed, grown children who received daily support reported better clarity of goals ( $r = .09, p < .05$ ). Thus, we found no indication that daily support was associated with poorer outcomes.

Finally, we considered possible moderating effects of student status, coresidence, and parental status of adult children on the link between intense support and evaluations of support as well as the link between intense support and well-being. The models in Table 3 were consistent for grown children and for parents regardless of grown children's statuses.

The models in Table 4, linking intense support to well-being, varied by children's statuses. For grown children who were not coresiding, were not students, or who had children of their own, there was no longer an association between intense support and well-being.

It was not possible to examine associations of grown children's statuses, parental intense support, and parental well-being. Parents could have multiple children, some of whom were and some of whom were not students, some of whom did and did not coreside, and so forth.

## Discussion

This study contributes to the ongoing social debate regarding intense parental support of young adults in the postmillennium generation. Although the popular media lament parental dependency as detrimental to the current generation of young adults (Belkin, 2010; Gottlieb, 2011), the findings from this study provide a contrasting and more nuanced view. Frequent parental involvement, including a wide range of support, was associated with better well-being for young adults. Parents also did not suffer from providing such support per se but did report less life satisfaction when they appraised grown children as needing too much support. This study provides insights into generational similarities and differences in the experience of family support and potential implications of parental involvement during young adulthood.

### Descriptive Aspects of the Study

Intense parental involvement was common, but not pervasive. More than one-fifth of grown children reported receiving intense parental support, defined as parents providing several types of support several times a week. Using parents reports, one out of six grown children received intense support. When considering all of their grown children, however, more than one-quarter of parents provided such intense support to at least one grown child. These proportions are similar to reports of caregiving for aging parents; approximately 22% to 25% of middle-aged adults in the United States currently provide intense support to an older parent (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2000; Fingerman, VanderDrift, et al., 2011; Grundy & Henretta, 2006). Caregiving for a parent typically involves physical or mental disability, whereas intense support of grown children involved a wide range of needs, statuses, and future expectations. Nonetheless, the features of caregiving that make it potentially draining include both the intensity of support and emotional reactions to that support. Given the proportion of middle-aged adults involved in frequent support of grown children and variability in reactions to that support, intense parental support also warrants distinct attention in the family literature.

**Measurement of intense support**—Measurement of intense support may also require additional attention in future research. The measure of support in this study was more elaborate than definitions applied in the 1990s to tap intense involvement of parents.

Silverstein et al. (1997) developed a definition of “tight knit” families based on provision of any instrumental support in the context of emotional closeness. Hogan and colleagues (1993) defined “high exchangers” on the basis of instrumental and financial support in the past 12 months (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). The index in this study applied a more conservative threshold of involvement, with several types of support several times a week. This definition reflects societal shifts in parental involvement over the past three decades as well as the young age range of most grown children in the study.

Several issues regarding intense support remain to be addressed. Future studies might seek to distinguish the *quantity* of support from the *frequency* of support. Studies of financial support suggest such indicators are correlated (Schoeni & Ross, 2005), but additional research is necessary to determine whether the quantity of support also is important for young adults’ well-being. Moreover, it is possible that quantity of support may generate distinct outcomes. For example, a parent might bestow a large sum of money once a year. Future research will need to focus on alternate types of parental involvement.

Intense support in this study included a wide array of types of support. Support involving financial resources and personal contact (socializing) were least likely to occur several times a week. Listening, emotional support, and advice, which can occur via cell phone, text messaging, or e-mail, occurred most often. Thus, the nature of intense support deserves follow-up, particularly with regard to technologies that facilitate some types of support, but not other types. It is noteworthy, however, that when limiting consideration to practical and financial support studied in prior decades (e.g., Hogan et al., 1993; Silverstein et al., 1997), nearly one-fifth of grown children reported receiving such support from parents several times a week.

**Contextual factors and intense support**—Contextual factors that predicted intense support were consistent with prior studies that have examined support as a continuous variable. Gender was associated with intense support; daughters and mothers were more likely to be involved in intense support (Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995; Sutor & Pillemer, 2006).

Similarly, younger adults were more likely to receive intense support (Aquilino, 2006; Hartnett et al., in press; Swartz et al., 2011). Indeed, the tests of stability predicting life satisfaction were not significant when models were estimated for grown children occupying statuses associated with older age (e.g., nonstudent, not coresident, has children); that is, the models did not show associations between intense support and life satisfaction for grown children who were not students, who did not coreside, or who did have children of their own. Thus, as scholars have suggested elsewhere, parental support may be most beneficial in helping grown children transition into adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Fingerman et al., 2012; Schoeni & Ross, 2005).

### Appraisals of Intense Support

Norms for parental support also played a key a role in this study. Scholars have argued that norms for intergenerational ties have deteriorated over the past decades, leaving parents and grown children adrift in expectations regarding their relationships (Connidis & McMullin,

2002; Silverstein & Conroy, 2009). Across the sample, a majority of parents and grown children appraised the amount of parental support provided as about right. By contrast, parents and grown children who engaged in intense support tended to rate the support as too much.

The belief that intense support violates norms may reflect rapid historical shifts in parental support over the past few decades (Arnett, 2000; Eggebeen, 1992; Fingerman et al., 2012; Furstenberg, 2010). Norms for behavior often lag when societal changes occur; that is, people view behavior as uncommon when it is a relatively new societal occurrence (Coser, 1991; Merton, 1968; Riley et al., 1972).

It was surprising, however, that grown children, as well as their parents, viewed the intense support as too much; the children did not experience a prior era when parents were less involved with grown children. The popular media may play a role in shaping beliefs about support of grown children. Television shows, movies, and news reports portray grown children who receive intense parental support as overly dependent and poorly adjusted (Belkin, 2010; Briggs, 2008; Gibbs, 2009). Other studies have found that individuals internalize negative media portrayals about aging, even when those stereotypes are incorrect (Levy, 2003, 2009). Likewise, individuals may internalize views of intense parental support based on media portrayals. Family science might focus greater attention on the role of stereotypes in shaping norms for family behaviors.

### **Intense Support, Adjustment, and Life Satisfaction**

Despite popular conceptions that intense parental support prevents grown children from launching successfully, the results of this study suggest the opposite conclusion. For grown children, receiving intense support was associated with beneficial adjustment. For parents, provision of support presents a more nuanced portrait.

**Grown children's outcomes**—Grown children's reports of intense parental support were associated with better sense of goals and higher life satisfaction, particularly for grown children in statuses associated with younger ages. In prior research, receiving practical support has been associated with poor outcomes, but when received support meets needs, it can be beneficial (Uchino, 2009; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). That may be the case in this sample. Intense support was offered to grown children who were younger or students, perhaps reflecting their greater needs.

Other statuses that might be associated with need (i.e., being a parent oneself) were not associated with benefits from intense support. The majority of grown children who had children themselves were also married in this sample. Thus, their spouses may have provided support rendering parental support less essential.

It is interesting that support per se, and not appraisal of support, was associated with outcomes for grown children. Despite the fact that many grown children evaluated intense support as too much, they procured benefits. These findings are perplexing given research indicating that *perceived* support is associated with psychological outcomes more than *actual* received support (Uchino, 2009; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Perceived support is



typically assessed as an expectation of future support, or the belief that help will be available if needed. This study assessed evaluations of received support. Future studies might further distinguish between these types of assessments.

**Parental outcomes**—For parents, provision of intense support was not associated with psychological well-being, but appraisals of the support were. Parents who reported that their children needed more support than others of similar age also reported poorer life satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the caregiving literature. Studies have found that caregivers' appraisals of stressors and subjective burden are more predictive of their well-being than objective indicators (Aneshensel et al., 1995; Son et al., 2007; Zarit, Todd, & Zarit, 1986).

These findings also are consistent with studies regarding parents' evaluations of how their grown children have turned out (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, et al., 2011; Pillemer & Suitor, 1991; Suitor et al., 2007). Parents also fare worse when they believe their grown children are doing poorly. Future research might identify factors that contribute to these appraisals.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study is limited by potential biases in the sample and the cross-sectional nature of the data. In comparison to the larger pool of grown children available for this study, the sample of grown children who participated was younger, and more likely to be female, and a greater proportion coresided with their parents. These factors may contribute to increased parental support in young adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Thus, the sample may include a greater proportion of grown children receiving intense support than in the general population.

The definition of *intense support* also was new to this study and relied on frequency of multiple forms of support. This study included more in-depth measurement of appraisals than in prior studies. The Family Exchanges Study assessed parents' support to each grown child (rather than a randomly selected child) across many types of support. Nonetheless, measurement was not ideal on several indices. Assessments of appraisals of support were limited; parents and grown children indicated their overall assessment of support as too much, about right, or too little, rather than specifying assessments for each type of support. Some participants may have viewed one type of support as too much (e.g., financial) but other types as not enough (e.g., listening). Likewise, parents provided only one global rating of how their children compared with other children, rather than rating each individual child.

Finally, the pattern of associations between outcomes and intense support may reflect bidirectional pathways. Grown children who are faring better may evoke parental support either as an investment in their future or because it is rewarding for parents to help grown children who are well adjusted (Fingerman et al., 2009; Silverstein et al., 2002). Similarly, parents who appraise their life as less satisfactory may appraise their children as more needy. Longitudinal data are necessary to disentangle these patterns.

In conclusion, we found that a substantial proportion of parents provided intense support to their grown children, often while those children were still finishing school and living at home, but sometimes later as well. This support is one marker of the prolonged period of dependence that has come to characterize the early adult period. Grown children who received intense support also reported beneficial outcomes. Even when we considered daily support, grown children reported better outcomes. Delayed assumption of adult roles may be facilitated by the extensive support that parents provide. Viewed as an investment in the child's vocational and emotional development (Aquilino, 2006), this prolonged support may enhance outcomes for grown children. We do not wish to be overly rosy with regard to the long-term implications of intense support, however. To the extent that intense support places strain on parents' financial or emotional resources, it may lead to poor outcomes for parents, or lay the seeds of long-term tensions in the parent – child relationship. It is possible that, at least in some families, intense support may create expectations for reciprocation of practical and emotional support in later life, which children may be unwilling or unable to meet. The implications of intense parental support in early adulthood appear to be positive. How these relationships play out over time, however, will have implications for the well-being of both parent and child, affect the child's significant relationships, and may influence the likelihood that this child will come forward later in life when the parent needs care.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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**Table 1**  
 Demographic Characteristics of the Grown Children ( $N = 592$ ) and Their Parents ( $n = 399$ )

Variables	Grown Children			Parents		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Age	23.82	5.13	18 – 41	50.67	4.80	40 – 60
Years of education	13.91	1.82	10 – 17	14.25	2.02	9 – 17
Annual household income <sup>a</sup>	3.77	1.61	1 – 5	4.51	1.40	1 – 5
Self-reported health <sup>b</sup>	3.70	0.96	1 – 5	3.45	1.03	1 – 5
Distance in miles				172.18	580.85	0 – 5,000
				Proportions		
Female	.53				.52	
Racial/ethnic minority <sup>c</sup>	.35				.34	
Coreside with parents	.30				.21	
Have children	.24			1.00		
Marital status						
Married	.15				.64	
Remarried	.01				.09	
Cohabiting with partner	.11				.04	
Divorced or separated	.02				.17	
Widowed or other	.02				.01	
Single/never married	.70				.06	
Work status						
Employed full time	.45				.66	
Employed part time	.33				.10	
Unemployed	.12				.04	
Homemaker	.04				.06	
Retired					.03	
Disabled	.00				.09	
Other	.03				.04	
Student (full time)	.35					

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<sup>a</sup> 1 = less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001 – \$25,000, 3 = \$25,001 – \$40,000, 4 = \$40,001 – 75,000, 5 = \$75,001 – \$100,000, 6 = more than \$100,000.

<sup>b</sup> 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent.

<sup>c</sup> Proportion Black or multiracial.

**Table 2**

Proportion of Grown Children ( $N = 592$ ) and Parents ( $n = 399$ ) Who Reported Each Type of Intense Parental Support

Support type	Offspring	Parents
Listening	.52	.50
Emotional	.41	.44
Advice	.37	.29
Practical	.24	.17
Financial	.18	.15
Socializing	.18	.15

*Note:* Five hundred ninety-two grown children reported on 1,158 parents, and 399 parents reported on 886 children. Intense support was rated as follows: 0 = less support, 1 = intense support (i.e., multiple forms of support every week).

**Table 3**Multilevel Models Predicting Grown Children's ( $N = 592$ ) and Parents' ( $n = 399$ ) Appraisals of Support

Model	Grown Children		Parents	
	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE
Intercept	2.77***	0.23	3.31***	0.23
Intense support <sup>a</sup>	0.39***	0.06	0.50***	0.09
Control variables				
Parent gender <sup>b</sup>	-0.12**	0.04	-0.30***	0.08
Parent race <sup>c</sup>	-0.12	0.06	-0.11	0.08
Grown child gender <sup>b</sup>	0.09	0.05	0.12	0.06
Grown child age	-0.00	0.01	.001	0.01
Grown child education	0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.01

Note: Five hundred ninety-two grown children reported on 1,158 parents, and 399 parents reported on 886 children. Appraisal of support parents provided was rated as follows: 1 = less than would like, 2 = a little less, 3 = about right, 4 = a little more, 5 = more than would like.

<sup>a</sup>0 = less support, 1 = intense support (i.e., multiple forms of support every week).

<sup>b</sup>0 = female, 1 = male.

<sup>c</sup>0 = White, 1 = Black or multiracial.

\*\*  
 $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  
 $p < .001$ .

**Table 4**Multilevel Models Predicting Grown Children's ( $N = 592$ ) Goals and Life Satisfaction

Model	Goals		Life Satisfaction	
	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE
Intercept	2.59***	0.16	5.95***	0.44
Intense support <sup>a</sup>	0.10**	0.04	0.30**	0.10
Appraisal of parent support <sup>b</sup>	0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.04
Control variables				
Grown child gender <sup>c</sup>	-0.03	0.03	0.04	0.09
Grown child age	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.01
Grown child education	0.06***	0.01	0.11***	0.03
Grown child race <sup>d</sup>	0.22***	0.05	-0.24	0.14

Note: Five hundred ninety-two grown children reported on 1,158 parents.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = less support, 1 = intense support (i.e., multiple forms of support every week).

<sup>b</sup> 1 = less than would like, 2 = a little less, 3 = about right, 4 = a little more, 5 = more than would like.

<sup>c</sup> 0 = female, 1 = male.

<sup>d</sup> 0 = White, 1 = Black or multiracial.

\*\*  
p < .01.

\*\*\*  
p < .001.

**Table 5**Multiple Regression Predicting Parents' ( $n = 399$ ) Life Satisfaction

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE
Intercept	7.60***	0.26
Intense support <sup>a</sup>	-0.09	0.18
Appraisal of parental support <sup>b</sup>	0.11	0.06
Appraisal of grown children's needs <sup>c</sup>	-0.19*	0.10
Control variables		
Parent gender <sup>d</sup>	-0.11	0.12
Parent race <sup>e</sup>	-0.27*	0.13
$R^2$	0.01	1.74
$F(5, 765)$	2.51*	

Note: Three hundred ninety-nine parents reported on 886 grown children.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = less support, 1 = intense support (i.e., multiple forms of support every week).

<sup>b</sup> 1 = less than would like, 2 = a little less, 3 = about right, 4 = a little more, 5 = more than would like.

<sup>c</sup> Comparison of support children need: 1 = less than other adults their age, 2 = about the same as other adults their age, 3 = more than other adults their age.

<sup>d</sup> 0 = female, 1 = male.

<sup>e</sup> 0 = White, 1 = Black or multiracial.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .