



# Intergenerational Family Relations in Transition

# 6

## Introduction

Together with partnerships and longstanding, close friendships, bonds with parents, children and grandchildren are among the most important of personal relationships. The family is often a source of stability and support in life and thus a major factor in social integration, personal development and quality of life well into old age.

Public and academic discourse in part reflects concern on sustained demographic and social developments. The assumption is being made that families in their traditional form are be-

coming rarer and smaller and that the family forms that are gradually replacing these are not able to offer the same kind of reliable help and support. The key question being put is whether demographic developments mean that a growing number of the elderly will be socially isolated and without sufficient support.

German Ageing Survey (DEAS) data traces how families organise their daily lives and give intergenerational support.

Answers to questions like the following show whether fears of the disintegration of the family are realistic or not:

- How numerous are intergenerational family relations in the second half of life?
- How frequent is the contact between members of the family?
- How far apart in distance are the homes of family members?
- What role do grandparents play in the second half of life?
- How do the various generations within a family support each other?

## Family life in transition

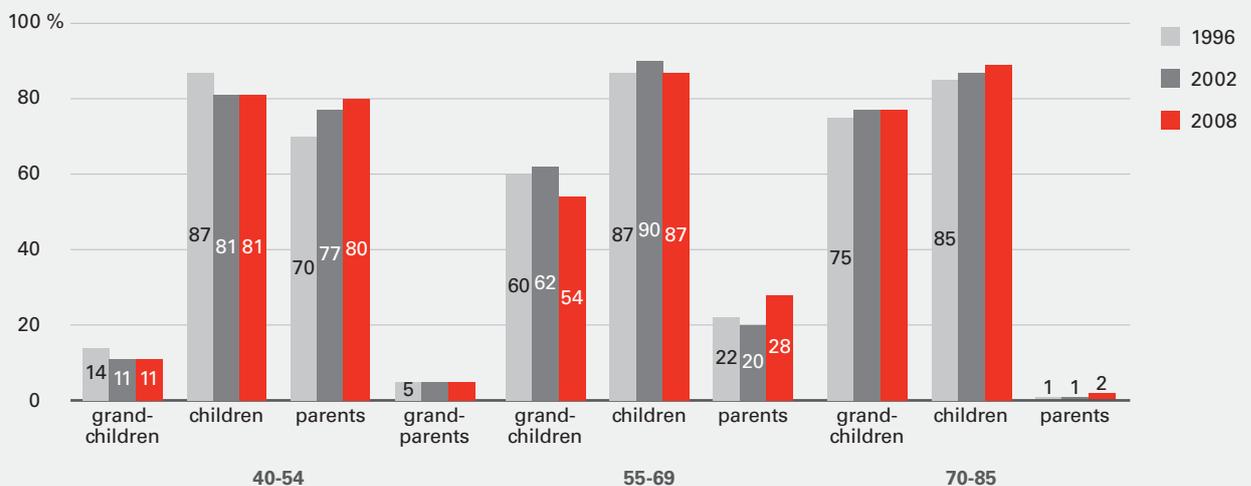
Most people in the second half of life live in a family and report good relations with the other generations in the family. Over the past twelve years, the distance between the homes of various family members has increased, the number of parents living near their adult children is declining.

### a) Prevalence of intergenerational relations

In 2008 four out of five people aged between 40 and 85 had children of their own and 40 percent had grandchildren. Despite the increased prevalence of people without children, the percentage of people who became grandparents grew slightly (see Figure 1). There is a general trend toward smaller families. Because of growing life expectancy, the generations within a family have more time together.

**Figure 1** | Prevalence of intergenerational relations according to age.

The graph shows the percentage of those aged 40-54, 55-69 and 70-85 who had relatives in the preceding or following generation.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

## b) Growing distance between homes

Over the past twelve years family members are living increasingly farther apart, partly because of growing job mobility. In 1996 over one in two parents (55 percent) lived in the same neighbourhood as at least one of their children or at least in the same location: in 2008 this had dropped to 45 percent. Most of those parents whose children live some distance away in 2008 had up to two hours travelling time to reach the nearest child (see Figure 2).

This means that a growing number of people in the second half of life have to travel greater distances to visit relatives or to lend help if needed.

## c) Close relations between parents and adult children

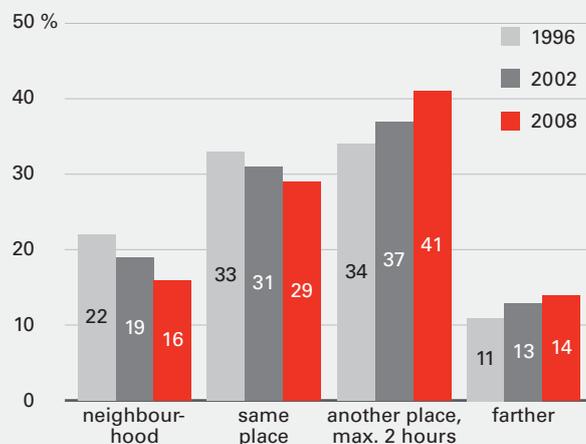
The quality of family life in old age depends largely on how people in the second half of life experience and structure the relationship with their children and grandchildren. DEAS supplies representative data that examines to what extent growing geographical distance impacts on contact between the generations. Do growing geographical distances mean that contact with children is less frequent or the family relationship generally less close?

In 2008 four out of five people aged between 40 and 85 reported good relations with their family, only one in twenty said they were not good. German parents aged 40-85 usually communicate regularly with their adult children: most have contact at least weekly, over ten percent at least monthly and only a smaller percentage less than that (see Figure 3).

There was little change in this picture between 1996 and 2008. It would seem, therefore, that most families cope well with increasing geographical distances.

**Figure 2** | Distance to home of nearest child.

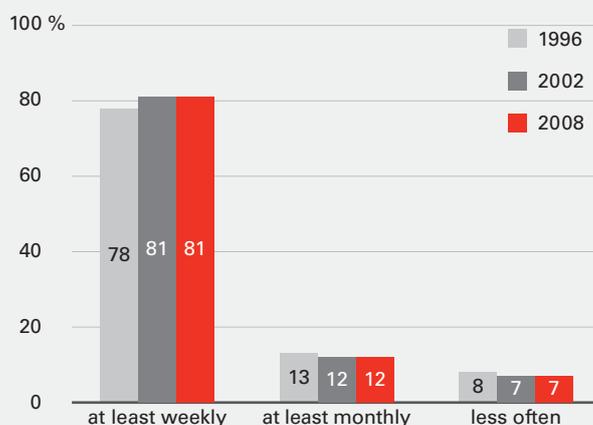
The graph shows the percentage of those aged 40-85 who had an adult child living in the neighbourhood, in the same place, in another place no more than two hours travelling time or farther away.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

**Figure 3** | Frequency of contact between older parents and adult children.

The graph shows the percentage of parents who had contact with their adult children at least weekly, at least monthly or less often.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

#### d) Grandparenthood is an important role in old age

The bond with their grandchildren is often very important to grandparents. Grandparenthood is increasingly occurring later in life and although it is no longer as common as it was, most people still embrace this role in the second half of their lives. It is also important or very important for the majority. In 2008 being a grandmother or grandfather was important or very important to three out of four (see Figure 4). This applies in particular to younger grandparents and women.

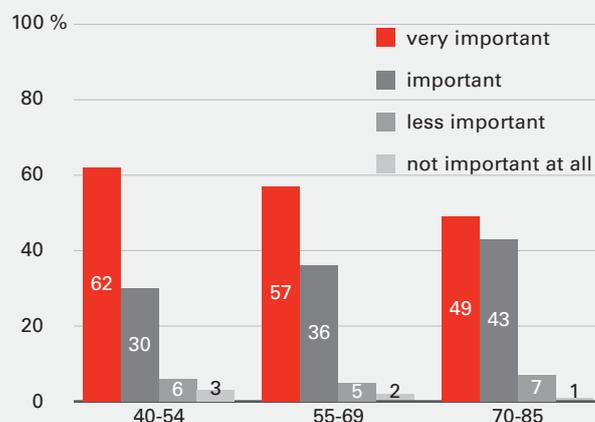
#### e) Regular contact between grandparents and adult grandchildren

The quality of relations between grandparents and grandchildren is also shown by the frequency of contact. When the grandchildren are still small, parents often determine to a large extent how often they see their grandparents. As the grandchildren grow up and leave their parent's home, they themselves decide how intensive the relationship with their grandparents will be. In 2008, 40 percent of grandparents had contact with their adolescent grandchildren (from the age of 16 on) weekly or more often, one third at least monthly (see Figure 5).

Only around one quarter of grandparents seldom or never had contact with grown up grandchildren. Most grandparents feel a close bond with their grandchildren, even though contact is not quite as intensive as that between parents and grown up children. ■

**Figure 4** Importance of grandparenthood according to age.

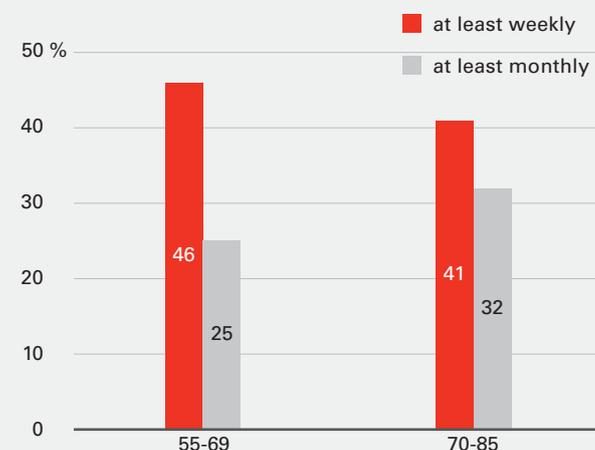
The graph shows the percentage of those aged 40-54, 55-69 and 70-85 who found their role as grandparents very important, important, less important or not important at all.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

**Figure 5** Frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren according to age.

The graph shows the percentage of those aged 55-69 and 70-85 who had contact with their grandchildren at least once a week or once a month.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

## Changes in intergenerational support in the family

Reciprocal assistance generally takes place within the family. Parents often give financial support to their adult children, but grandchildren too are becoming more frequent recipients of this kind of help. The extent to which generations within a family are able to help each other depends to a large extent on how closely together they live. Practical support in everyday life between the generations has tended to become less frequent over the past twelve years.

### a) The frequency of gifts in money and kind has remained more or less stable

The overall quota of gifts in money and kind from older to younger generations in a family remained stable between 1996 and 2008. Grown up children often receive gifts in money and kind

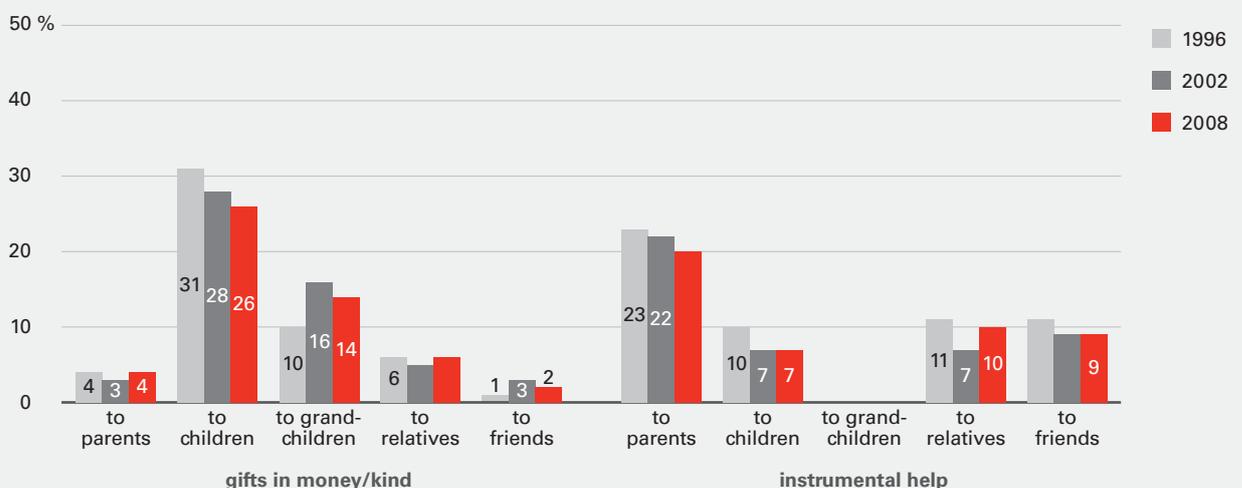
from their parents: one in four parents supports adult children in money and kind. Over the past twelve years children have received gifts slightly less often, but the number of grandparents giving their grandchildren this kind of support is growing (see Figure 6).

As a rule the older generation is more likely to make gifts in money or kind to the younger generation, whereas the help given by the younger to the older generation is more likely to be instrumental, meaning practical support in everyday life.

This stands out, particularly when we recall that it is the older generation that has more time, as younger people are more likely to be working and thus have less time at their disposal.

**Figure 6** | Gifts of transfers and help to family members and friends.

The graph shows the percentage of those aged 40-85 who donate gifts of money and kind and instrumental assistance to parents, children, grandchildren, relatives and friends.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

## b) The elderly receive slightly less practical assistance with everyday life

The form taken by support within a family depends ultimately on many factors. One of the basic questions is how well relatives can and are willing to meet the specific requirement for support – and if they can be on the spot.

This last consideration is decisive in the case of practical help with everyday life and plays a lesser role in material support. The rate at which money and gifts in kind are distributed within the family as a whole has changed little over the past twelve years. Seen overall, however, practical (instrumental) help in everyday life has become less frequent (see Figure 6).

Greater distances between the homes of family members could play a role here. It could also be the case that instrumental help is required less often since older people are now healthier than they were formerly.

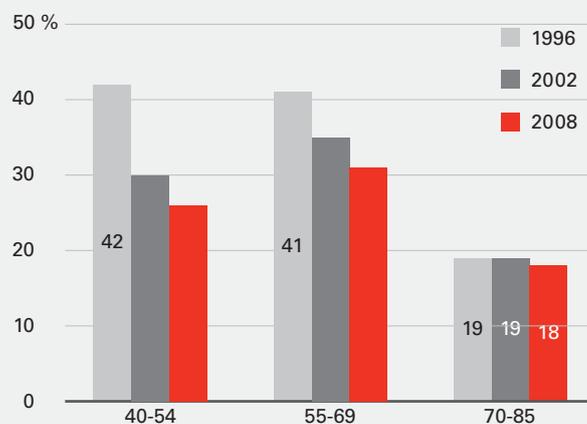
The question as to who can lend practical, everyday help on the spot becomes particularly important in old age and can put great strain on family members who live greater distances apart.

## c) Grandparents look after their grandchildren less often

A very important way in which older parents support their adult children is by looking after their grandchildren. This assumes that they are fit enough, that they have time and are generally willing to take on this responsibility. DEAS collects information on the extent to which grandparents look after their grandchildren.

**Figure 7** Care of grandchildren by grandparents according to age.

The graph shows the percentage of grandparents in the age groups 40-54, 55-69 and 70-85 who looked after their grandchildren.



Source: German Ageing Survey, German Centre of Gerontology.

In 2008 it was mainly the 55-69 year olds who looked after their grandchildren followed by the next youngest age group of 40-54 year olds (see Figure 7). Grandparents aged 70-85 were the least active in their respect. One of the main reasons for this is that the grandchildren of this age group are often relatively grown up and no longer in need of supervision.

The proportion of grandparents who look after grandchildren has fallen since 1996 from around one third to just under one quarter. One explanation for this could be the growing distances between the homes of family members live. Also many grandmothers are now working and no longer have the time required to look after grandchildren.

Possibly the increased number of children being looked after in crèches and day care centres also makes itself felt here. ■

## Summary: Demographic change challenges family and society

The findings lend little support to the fear of a 'decline of the family'. Most people are in close contact with the various generations within their family, feel emotional bonds and find reliable support in the family. There has been little change in this over the past twelve years. It is only the framework conditions of family life that have changed. Increased life expectancy means that the various generations of a family have more time to spend together. The mobility required by working life means that families often do not live in the same location and are increasingly likely to have to travel some distance to visit each other. In future the ways and forms in which generations within the family keep in touch and lend reciprocal support will continue to change and probably become even more diverse.

In the light of longer geographical distances between family generations and growing female

labour market participation, it will become more difficult in future to maintain the customary forms of family support mechanisms. Alternative solutions will have to be sought, for instance, to accommodate the widespread wish of older people to live in their own homes despite health impairments and a growing need for care.

So far care and everyday support for older family members was mainly the responsibility of relatives, particularly daughters and daughters-in-law. The question as to how to integrate the growing number of older people who are not part of a closely knit family is one of the greatest challenges for society.

The extent to which these people will suffer from isolation and inadequate support will also depend on the relationships they build up and maintain beyond the partnership and parent role. ■

### **The German Ageing Survey (DEAS)**

The German Ageing Survey is a comprehensive study of the second half of life, meaning mid- and late adulthood. The study aims to provide scientifically sound information helpful for political decision makers and relevant sections of the general public as well as providing data to be used in scientific research. The study was conducted to date in 1996, 2002 and 2008. The DEAS is funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The authors are responsible for the contents of this publication.

### **This document is based on the following book:**

Motel-Klingebiel, A., Wurm, S., & Tesch-Römer, C. (Eds.). (2010). Altern im Wandel. Befunde des Deutschen Alterssurveys (DEAS). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

**This document is free of charge and not for sale.**

**The following documents summarizing main results are available online at**

**<http://www.dza.de/EN/DEAS-Press-Information>**

- The German Ageing Survey (DEAS):  
A Long-Term Study on the  
Second Half of Life in Germany
- Material Security
- Health and Well-being
- Participation in Society:  
Employment, Voluntary Work and Education
- Living Arrangements and Partnership
- Intergenerational Family Relations in  
Transition

A brochure containing the press information listed above is published as part of their public relations work by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth ([www.bmfsfj.de](http://www.bmfsfj.de)).

**You may obtain further information on this topic from the German Centre of Gerontology (DZA) and online from [www.german-ageing-survey.de](http://www.german-ageing-survey.de)** ■

Editor:

**German Centre  
of Gerontology (DZA)**

Manfred-von-Richthofen-Straße 2  
12101 Berlin

Telephone +49 (0)30 - 260 74 00

Fax +49 (0)30 - 785 43 50

**[www.dza.de](http://www.dza.de)**