

What's Ripping American Families Apart?

July 29, 2021



Credit...Richard Foulser/Trunk Archive



By **David Brooks**

Opinion Columnist New York Times

At least 27 percent of Americans are [estranged](#) from a member of their own family, and [research suggests](#) about 40 percent of Americans have experienced estrangement at some point.

The most common form of estrangement is between adult children and one or both parents — a cut usually initiated by the child. A [study](#) published in 2010 found that parents in the U.S. are about twice as likely to be in a contentious relationship with their adult children as parents in Israel, Germany, England and Spain.

The Cornell sociologist Karl Pillemer, author of “Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them,” writes that the children in these cases often cite harsh parenting, parental favoritism, divorce and poor and increasingly hostile communication often culminating in a volcanic event. As one woman [told Salon](#): “I have someone out to get me, and it’s my mother. My part of being a good mom has been getting my son away from mine.”

The parents in these cases are often completely bewildered by the accusations. They often remember a totally different childhood home and accuse their children of rewriting what happened. As one cutoff couple [told](#) the psychologist Joshua Coleman: “Emotional abuse? We gave our child everything. We read every parenting book under the sun, took her on wonderful vacations, went to all of her sporting events.”

Part of the misunderstanding derives from the truth that we all construct our own realities, but part of the problem, as Nick Haslam of the University of Melbourne has

suggested, is there seems to be a generational shift in what constitutes abuse. Practices that seemed like normal parenting to one generation are conceptualized as abusive, overbearing and traumatizing to another.

There's a lot of real emotional abuse out there, but as Coleman put it in an [essay](#) in The Atlantic, "My recent research — and my clinical work over the past four decades — has shown me that you can be a conscientious parent and your kid may still want nothing to do with you when they're older."

Either way, there's a lot of agony for all concerned. The children feel they have to live with the legacy of an abusive childhood. The parents feel rejected by the person they love most in the world, their own child, and they are powerless to do anything about it. There's anger, grief and depression on all sides — painful holidays and birthdays — plus, the next generation often grows up without knowing their grandparents.

No one even thought to measure family estrangement until relatively recently. Coleman, the author of "Rules of Estrangement," argues that a more individualistic culture has meant that the function of family has changed. Once it was seen as a bond of mutual duty and obligation, and now it is often seen as a launchpad for personal fulfillment. There's more permission to cut off people who seem toxic in your life.

Becca Bland, founder of the British support and advocacy group Stand Alone, told the BBC: "Now I can put my needs first rather than trying to fix things beyond my control. But, yes, I'm angry I didn't get the mother I wanted."

The meritocracy and high-pressure parenting are also implicated here. Parents, [especially among the upper-educated set](#), are investing more time and effort in their kids. A 2012 [survey](#) from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture found that almost three-quarters of parents of school-age kids said they eventually want to become their children's best friend.

Some kids seem to think they need to cut off their parents just to have their own life. "My mom is really needy and I just don't need that in my life," one Ivy League grad told Coleman. In other cases, children may be blaming their parents for the fact that they are not succeeding as they had hoped — it's Mom and Dad who screwed me up.

I write about this phenomenon here because it feels like a piece of what seems to be the psychological unraveling of America, which has become an emerging theme of this column. Terrible trends are everywhere. Major depression rates among youths aged 12 to 17 rose by almost 63 percent between 2013 and 2016. American suicide rates increased by 33 percent between 1999 and 2019. The percentage of Americans who say they have no close friends has quadrupled since 1990, according to the Survey Center on American Life. Fifty-four percent of Americans report sometimes or always feeling that no one knows them well, according to a 2018 Ipsos survey.

I confess, I don't understand what's causing this. But social pain and vulnerability are affecting everything: our families, schools, politics and even our sports.

A friend notes that politics has begun to feel like an arena where many people can process and regulate their emotional turmoil indirectly. Anxiety, depression and anger are hard to deal with within the tangled intimacy of family life. But political tribalism becomes a mechanism with which people can shore themselves up, vanquish shame, fight for righteousness and find a sense of belonging.

People who feel betrayed will lash out at someone if there is no one there to help them process their underlying hurt. As the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr wisely wrote, if we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.