

When Family Bonds Fray: Understanding Family Estrangement Through a Trauma-Informed Lens (written by Sue Badeau for ATTACH)

Families are beautifully – and sometimes painfully - complicated.

A grandmother stood quietly outside the hospital room, waiting for a text message. Her granddaughter had just come through major surgery, but she couldn't simply walk in to offer comfort. Instead, she had arranged with another relative to let her know when her adult daughter—the child's mother—had stepped out for a meal. Only then could she slip into the room for a few precious minutes, whisper words of encouragement, hold her grandchild's hand, and quietly leave before her daughter returned. It wasn't the first time. Two grandchildren had undergone major surgeries in recent years, and each time the grandparents had navigated this painful choreography. Their daughter had ended her relationship with them years earlier, while allowing the children to maintain contact. The grandparents respected that boundary, but their hearts ached—not only because they longed to comfort their grandchildren, but because every instinct in them wanted to stand beside their daughter during some of the hardest moments of her life. Few losses are more painful than loving someone deeply while being unable to show up when they need you most.

Stories like this remind us that family estrangement is rarely about only two people. It reshapes entire family systems, leaving grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and especially children trying to navigate relationships that have become unexpectedly fragile.

Whether formed through birth, adoption, foster care, kinship care, remarriage, or other pathways, families are woven together through relationships that stretch across generations. They carry stories, traditions, expectations, wounds, resilience, and hope. They also carry conflict. For those of us who live in the trenches and/or work in the fields of attachment, trauma, and healing, it is important to remember that healthy families are not families without conflict—they are families continually learning how to navigate it. As professionals committed to understanding attachment and trauma, we are uniquely positioned to approach these situations not with judgment, but with curiosity, compassion, and hope.



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In recent months, family estrangement has become an increasingly visible topic. Stories have appeared everywhere from Oprah to the Wall Street Journal, while social media is filled with conversations about adult children choosing to cut off contact with parents. Some have wondered whether estrangement is becoming more common, while others believe we are simply talking about it more openly than in previous generations.

Research suggests that family estrangement is far from rare. In one of the first large-scale national studies on the subject, Cornell sociologist Karl Pillemer found that more than one in four American adults reported having been estranged from at least one family member.

To help us better understand this complex issue, I recently spoke with Dr. Laura Katharina Preissler, whose research explores family estrangement as part of a larger study of kinship and family relationships. Her work offers a perspective that feels especially relevant to the mission of ATTACH.

One of the most helpful ideas she shared is that kinship is not simply something we are born into. Relationships are continually created through care, connection, shared experiences, and mutual investment. At the same time, those relationships can also weaken, fracture, or even dissolve. Yet even when contact ends, the family relationship itself is never entirely erased. Parents remain parents. Children remain children. The emotional significance of those relationships often continues long after communication has stopped.

That perspective helps us move away from asking, "Who is to blame?" and toward asking, "How did this relationship come to this place?"

One of the strongest themes throughout Dr. Preissler's research is that estrangement almost never has a single cause.

Certainly, some families have experienced profound trauma, violence, abuse, neglect, addiction, or serious mental illness. In those situations, distance may be an important step toward safety and healing. But many estrangements arise from a far more complicated accumulation of experiences: years of recurring conflict, perceived rejection, unresolved hurts, sibling dynamics, disagreements over finances or inheritance, differing parenting philosophies, or simply a growing sense of not feeling understood or respected.

Rather than one explosive event, estrangement is often the end point of a long journey marked by disappointments that accumulate over time. Even when families identify one argument that appeared to trigger the final separation, that event is usually only the visible tip of a much larger iceberg.



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Another important finding challenges the assumption that estrangement involves only two people.

Families do not exist as isolated pairs of relationships. They exist as networks.

When one adult child cuts off contact with a parent, siblings often find themselves caught in the middle. Grandparents lose access to grandchildren. Aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and in-laws may struggle with divided loyalties or uncertain boundaries. Holiday gatherings become complicated. Family traditions shift. Entire family systems reorganize around the rupture.

As Dr. Preissler noted, estrangement rarely remains confined to one relationship; it almost always ripples throughout the broader kinship network.

This systems perspective will feel familiar to many ATTACH readers. We have long understood that attachment develops within relationships and communities, not in isolation. Healing—and hurt—both reverberate across generations.

Perhaps one of the most poignant parts of our conversation centered on the very different emotional experiences of parents and adult children.

For many adult children, choosing to end contact is not experienced as an impulsive act of anger. Instead, participants in Dr. Preissler's research often described feeling relief, freedom, peace, or distance from relationships they had experienced as chronically painful. Most described the decision as one made only after years of struggle rather than a momentary disagreement.

Parents, however, frequently experience the same event quite differently.

Many describe overwhelming grief, confusion, sadness, and profound shame. Some struggle to understand why relatively minor disagreements appeared to result in complete loss of contact. Others spend years searching their memories for explanations, replaying conversations and wondering what they missed. Several parents described feeling embarrassed to tell neighbors or friends that they no longer see their adult child or grandchildren, fearing that others will assume they must have done something terrible.

Their grief is often compounded by the loss of an imagined future—the birthdays, holidays, grandchildren, family gatherings, and ordinary moments they believed would always be part of their lives.

That idea of grieving the "imagined family" may be especially familiar to those of us who prepare adoptive, foster, and kinship families. We often encourage parents to



E-News Article

August 2026

acknowledge the gap between the family they imagined and the family they are actually building. Every family requires us to let go of idealized expectations and embrace the beautiful, messy reality of real relationships.

Estrangement can reopen that grief in powerful ways.

Dr. Preissler observed that many participants were grieving not only the loss of the relationship itself, but also the loss of the family they had hoped to have. She reminds us that families are not naturally harmonious units. They are deeply meaningful precisely because they carry enormous emotional investment, lifelong expectations, and histories that span generations. Conflict within families is not evidence of failure—it is evidence that these relationships matter deeply.

For those of us working and living in attachment and trauma, this perspective offers both humility and hope.

Humility reminds us that every family's story is more complicated than it appears from the outside. We rarely know the entire narrative. Each person holds only part of the story.

Hope comes from recognizing that estrangement itself is often a process—and processes can change.

In Dr. Preissler's research, reconciliation did occur. Sometimes it followed significant life events such as the birth of a child, a marriage, or impending death. Sometimes it happened gradually, through small steps toward renewed connection. Often, the individual who had originally ended contact was the one who eventually reached back out.

Perhaps the most moving observation came from parents themselves.

Again and again, despite their heartbreak, many described keeping "the door open."

They continued to hope.

They remained willing to reconnect if their child was ready.

For families experiencing estrangement today, that image may be one of the most compassionate places to begin. An open door does not erase healthy boundaries. It does not minimize past hurts or require immediate reconciliation. Rather, it reflects the enduring nature of kinship itself—the belief that relationships, while sometimes deeply wounded, are never beyond the possibility of healing.

As professionals, caregivers, and family members, perhaps our role is not to rush people toward reconciliation or assign blame, but to create spaces where grief can be acknowledged, stories can be heard, shame can be replaced with understanding, and hope can quietly remain alive.

Because even when family relationships become fractured, they continue to matter.

And as long as a door remains open, healing is always possible.



Laura Preissler completed her bachelor's degree in Cultural Studies with a focus on Social Anthropology at the University of Lucerne. After earning her master's degree at Maastricht University, she worked for five years as a research assistant at the University of Lucerne within the research focus Family Change in the Context of Migration and Globalization. In this context, she conducted her doctoral project on parenting in Switzerland. Laura Preissler is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the SNSF-funded project De-Kinning and Re-Kinning? Estrangement, Divorce, Adoption and the Transformation of Kin

Networks. Her research explores processes of estrangement between parents and their adult children in Switzerland, examining how kin networks are transformed through tension, conflict, and the cessation of contact.

Dr. Laura Katharina Preissler

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