

ONLY ONE: THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF PARENTING THE SINGLE CHILD

By Nancy Morrow

Just a generation ago, the “only child” faced many negative stereotypes. Today, the family with a single child is more common than it once was, for a variety of reasons, including later childbearing, medical problems, and birth control advances, as well as financial, career, and ideological considerations. The good news is that current psychological research suggests that single children are no more likely to be spoiled or maladjusted than children with siblings. In fact, many of the qualities (both good and bad) once associated strictly with “onlies”) now seem characteristic of all first-born children, including those with siblings. Nevertheless, raising a single child does present unique challenges, even as it offers special rewards.

A Closer Bond

Not surprisingly, the single child usually has a closer bond with both parents than do children with siblings. This can work to the child’s advantage, by making him more self-confident and secure than other children. Then too, single children are sometimes better able to resist the pull of peer pressure because they feel comfortable talking to their parents about problems and relying on their parent’s advice. Despite these advantages, such closeness has its risks. Both parent and child may feel an unusually strong sense of “separation anxiety” during major life transitions, and parents of single children may be overprotective. Children who are closely bonded with their parents are usually intensely aware of their parents’ moods and anxieties and especially sensitive to any problems between their parents. Single children of single parents are especially vulnerable, sometimes feeling the pressure to meet their parent’s emotional needs for companionship or emotional support. And children tuned into their parents’ feelings are often more adept at consciously or unconsciously manipulating those feelings to their advantage.

Parents can avoid these pitfalls by helping the single child to develop warm, supportive, and consistent relationships with other adults. The sense of a “village” – that

extended network of relatives, friends, and neighbors – is particularly important for the smaller family to cultivate. At the same time, including the single child in too many of your own social activities, especially those dominated by adults, may make it more difficult for the only child to socialize well with her peers. While it is often expedient to take the well-behaved young single child to an adult gathering, it may be more appropriate to have her visit a friend (or invite a friend over to stay with a reliable babysitter) than to bring her along with you. Single children need the time and space to develop close relationships with other children, since those relationships often supply much of what they might get from siblings.

Before worrying about whether the single child will be “lonely,” parents might want to consider that even in larger families, children make clear distinctions between peers and siblings. Even children with several siblings enjoy having close friends their own age, especially as they get older. They complain about boredom and loneliness when such opportunities are not available, sometimes because a parent with an already full household is less than eager to add other children to the mix. And there is, of course, no guarantee that siblings will enjoy each other’s company, either as children or as adults. In terms of development, “peers” are at similar stages, while “siblings” are almost certainly at different stages. Contact with both groups provides children with important learning experiences. Parents of single children are often quite successful at providing their children with “peers,” yet they do not always cultivate the relationships that are actually more similar to sibling relationships: those with children slightly older or younger. Encouraging your child to make friends with older and younger children and participating in community activities where children of different ages mix may compensate for what a single child misses.

Too Many Advantages?

Many parents consciously choose to limit their family to one child, precisely because they want to invest more time, attention, and financial support. Clearly, a single child will almost certainly receive more help with homework, more enrichment opportunities, and more material advantages than a child whose parents' have a similar income but several children. While a family with several children may need to ask each child to choose one outside activity, the single-child family may be able to afford several activities. A private school may not make sense for families with several children, but it is often well within the reach of the single-child family. These material advantages may even help to explain why single children so often achieve academic and professional success.

But this multitude of opportunities, as well as the extra parental attention, may create enormous pressures on the single child, who typically has an intense need for parental approval. The single child (like the first-born) is usually more susceptible to perfectionism, over-achieving, and excessive fear of failure. Even if parents can afford both soccer and piano lessons, it might be desirable to ask the single child to choose, much as he might need to choose if he were part of larger family. Similarly, the single child needs the responsibility of household chores, even if they are not necessary to the smooth operation of the home. Expectations for behavior need to be clear, and discipline consistent, even though it is often easy to overlook infractions in a home where only one child is misbehaving. Most experts agree that children develop traits such as sharing and compassion in developmental stages, whether or not they have had siblings. And finally, we are beginning to see that "being spoiled" is less a function of family size than of increasing affluence and changes in parenting style. In his book about this problem, *Spoiled Rotten: Today's Children and How to Change Them* (1992), Fred G. Gosman cautions parents against "unreasonable concern for their [children's] every thought and feeling." Because the single child's voice seems louder than the individual voices of children in larger families, parents may find themselves giving too much weight to their child's every opinion on every topic. Thus, parents of single children need to be especially careful about maintaining clear boundaries between adult and child concerns.

At some point, almost every child will wonder about the choices and circumstances inherent in one's family size, whether it is small or large. As with many issues, it is probably best to let the children lead in exploring these questions. If a child doesn't seem particularly concerned about why he or she is a single child, there is no real need to offer explanations. With younger children, the possibility of having another child might still be open, but if children ask, they rarely want details. Start with a simple response such as, "Daddy and I would be very happy if we had another baby, but you never know what will happen." Children who want to know more will ask questions. Older children may want to understand more precisely why they don't have brothers or sisters, and eventually you may want to share the details of the decision or circumstances. If, for example, secondary infertility made it impossible to have another child, an explanation like "Daddy and I tried to make another baby, but it didn't work," should suffice until children are well into adolescence. If having a single child was a choice, tell the child so in terms that are neutral and positive and that raise no implications about your feelings toward parenting your single child or your expectations for that child. Children often hear things we did not mean to say. The best answer, until children are much older, may be simply, "We have always been very happy with the size of our family." Responses like "We didn't feel that we could afford more children," or "We wanted to give you every opportunity we could," might raise questions that the child may not be prepared to ask or that you are not prepared to answer.

Just as we teach children to respect other kinds of social diversity, we need to teach them to respect differences in family size. And we need to avoid perpetuating the various stereotypes associated with almost every family configuration, since so often those stereotypes are hurtful. Parents of single children need to accept that sometimes their child may wish he lived with the large family down the street and may other times be grateful for the love and attention in his own home. Recognizing the differences in these situations may help the child to make his own decisions later in life.

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Respecting Diversity in Family Size

