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The Rise of Single-Child Families: Psychologically Harming the Child?

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ABSTRACT *The number of single-child families continues to increase yearly due to financial burdens, social contexts, and even governmental restraints (Wong, 2005). While having only one child might be easier financially (Griffin, 2002), what are the psychological costs of single-child families in relation to an only-child? This literature review explains how despite only-children typically being more creative and intellectual, many problems surface due to having no siblings. It is generally found that only-children lack social and emotional ability because of not having siblings with which to interact. Only-children also tend to experience increased parental pressure. These problems typically last throughout an only-child's lifespan. Ultimately, current research seems to indicate that the disadvantages of single-child families overwhelm the advantages.*

Although one-child families are commonplace in culture and society, conclusions on psychological implications are, and continue to be, a subject of wide debate within academic circles. The debate began among scholars, and rapidly progressed when China's radical one-child policy set the standard for single-child families in 1979, when Deng Xiaoping, the ruler of China at the time, saw China's overpopulation as a hindrance to economic development (Wong, 2005). Following China's unique demonstration, U.S.-based groups, such as Negative Growth Population (NPG) and Population Connection, have encouraged single-child families as a means of population control for the same economic reasons. Even without such efforts, the family size in the U.S. today is decreasing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2010; see Fig. 1).

Several factors are contributing to this decline, though a major factor is yet to be found. The current research points to financial disadvantages being the most likely cause. However, it is also in vogue for couples to marry and begin families at a later age, which also may cause

single-child families to become more prevalent (Griffin, 2002).

There are now two prominent sides to the debate of the psychological impact of only-children families. On one hand, some scholars have demonstrated that only-children have been brought up in a more effective manner; they have *all* of their parents' care because there are no other siblings with which to compete, leading them to become more productive individuals (Falbo & Polston, 1993). On the other hand, some scholars have found that only-children are missing the valuable opportunity to interact with siblings, and as a result endure a poorer quality of living that severely affects them as they age (Richardson, 2006). The objective of this paper is to create a more conclusive argument about which one of these sides is correct. To the author's knowledge, a holistic study of the current research on single-child families has yet to be undertaken. In order to assess the psychological impact of single-child families on only-children, this paper will address the following: first, an only-child's intellectual and creative capabilities; second, the stress encountered from parents; third, the child's social inabilities with others; and finally, the tendency for only-children to internalize problems.

The Benefits of an Only-child

"Biologically speaking, life's purpose is not happiness but survival and reproduction" (Myers, 2006, p. 659). In order to ensure survival and reproduction, it is desirable to be intelligent and motivated. Consequently, only-children would better suit this goal of life; their intelligence and motivation achievement scores are consistently higher than their multiple-sibling counterparts (Falbo & Polston, 1993). Additionally, it has been found that only-children complete more years of education and obtain more prestige than children with siblings do (Mancillas, 2006).

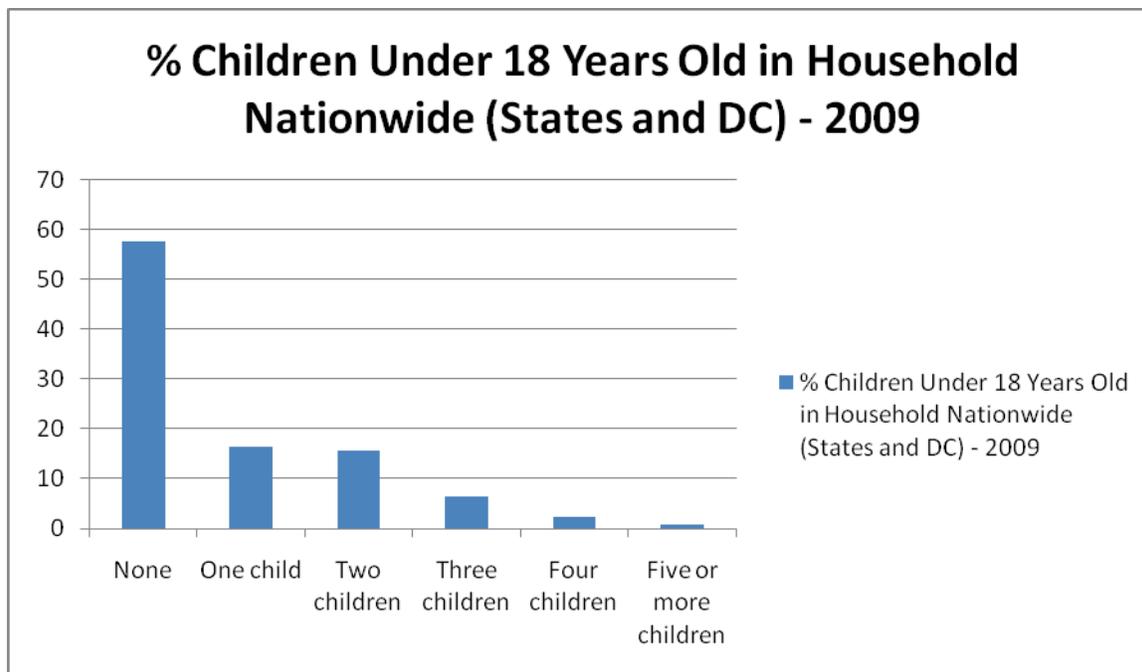


Fig. 1 Current family proportions in the U.S. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009).

According to a 26-item questionnaire presented to 20 first- and second- grade teachers, Lavin (2001) found that 68% of the teachers thought only-children students to be bright, articulate, and motivated to do well. This may be because of strong parental involvement with only-children's affairs—there is no struggle of allocating attention to siblings, so it all goes to the single child (Lavin, 2001).

Generally, creativity has great opportunity to abound in single children. “Because only-children inevitably spend time alone, many have developed a strong creative muscle, inventing imaginary friends, siblings, landscapes or adventures” (Richardson, 2006, p. 1). In fact, as adults, only-children report having enjoyed the time spent alone in order to strengthen creativity (Mancillas, 2006).

But is life just creativity and intellect? According to editor Marian Sandmaier of *The Psychotherapy Networker* magazine, “A sibling may be the sole keeper of one's core identity, the only person with the keys to one's unfettered, more fundamental self” (1994, p. 11). To this end, intellect and creativity might not mean much to an only-child if he or she also has to deal with the increased pressure of parents due to absence of siblings.

Factors Leading to an Only-child's Stressful Life

Parental Focus

Multiple studies have documented how parents' stressors can be placed onto their only-child because the role of the parent is magnified, consequently creating extensive amounts of stress (Lavin, 2001). In a two-parent family, any interaction a child can have within his or her family will involve an adult component. Moreover, any interaction the child wishes to observe will be exclusively between adults within his or her family. This creates the issue of having to cope with a solely adult perspective on the world. Children growing up with siblings will typically not encounter this scenario because they do not have to depend on their parents so heavily for support. Furthermore, for only-children, expressing powerful feelings of love, hate, or anger can only be done in the family with an adult. According to Lavin (2001), it becomes difficult for only-children to express their deepest feelings and, consequently, they usually repress their feelings in order to conciliate with the parent. Lisen Roberts, a professor of human environment at the University of Western Carolina, and Priscilla Blanton, a professor of child and family studies at the University of Tennessee, illustrated this concept with an experience shared by an only child:

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I didn't have somebody to sit on the bed late at night and talk to. I had to learn to kind of sort things out myself. There's a lot of things that kids can't relate to parents; you know, a kid needs to talk to a kid. And there's some things brothers and sisters talk about that you don't feel comfortable talking about with your friends. I didn't have that. I had to deal with all those things myself. (2001, p. 5)

Becoming Independent of Parents

Single-child parents typically have much more control over their child's agenda; therefore, only-children often have to be more aggressive in establishing their own agenda. Unfortunately, exploring and discovering their own agenda poses the threat of damaging their relationship with their parents, leaving the only-children with nobody else in the family in whom they can find support. Because there is no sibling to avert the attention while they "rebel," most only-children never completely separate from their parents, as found in a study by Richardson (2006). Many only-children adults still feel their parents' influence on them into their forties and beyond. Moreover, most only-children see themselves as an extension of their parents' hopes and fears, never realizing the potential to break free. This parental pressure is felt much more by only-children than by those with siblings. When many only-children try to live outside of themselves, they often experience self-hatred and feel that they have no right to have their own identity (Richardson, 2006).

The Lack of Siblings

Being devoid of siblings, many only-children have fewer opportunities to develop advantageous relationship skills, according to Richardson (2006). In a family with at least two children, the older child has to deal with the younger child destroying the protective barriers that have already been put into place, such as parental attention which is no longer exclusive to the only-child. Conversely, the younger child has to deal with the terror of being "overpowered" by the older child. Only-children do not have to worry about their parental bond being disrupted by another, which would have forced them to find ways of getting through the dislocation. In addition, only-children do not have to meet the challenge of a sibling already present, which may have forced them to find ways to vanquish established threats. Indeed, those with siblings have no choice but to find a way to work conflicts out with each other: They will always be brothers or sisters. Only-children often choose to walk away from social conflicts, subsequently gaining little understanding of how to effectively deal with a similar scenario in the future (Richardson, 2006). This concept is

known as "rough and tumble" learning relationship skills (Pitkeathley & Emerson, 2004; Smith, 2009), because one is forced to work around the consequences of his or her decisions within a familial relationship.

A recent study was performed in 2010 by Walker and colleagues in which 478 families completed a questionnaire assessing the family's functioning. This study found that siblings also promote positive outcomes such as increased empathy, kindness, and generosity due to having a relationship with family members of one's own age, instead of a "vertical" relationship with parents. This study seems to indicate that having a sibling, specifically a sister, can help children avoid depression and likely lead better lives.

Moreover, a life with multiple siblings enables children to try out a multiplicity of roles. It sets them up to effectively address larger groups and in time, the world. To be able to win, lose, compromise, vie for dominion, compete with parents' attention, and overall pull through the experience are things that an only-child is less likely to have available (Richardson, 2006).

Another possible problem of not having experience with siblings involves classroom interaction. Two studies have found that classmates of only-children usually liked only-children less as a group. The first performed by Kitzmann and colleagues in 2002 involved peer-ratings of 139 only-children in elementary school. Kitzmann found that only-children were more likely to be victimized and aggressive in the group, which suggests that having a sibling would be helpful in coping with conflict. This study echoes the results of a similar study performed by Downey and Condon (2004).

As adults, only-children often express the desire to have siblings, specifically a brother who could have led them through their adolescent years. According to Roberts and Blanton (2001), some only-children have said one of the first things they started to have major problems with was social interaction. When beginning middle school, they wished to ask questions of their "fantasy" older sibling about how to interact with others, instead of using the trial-and-error method. Roberts and Blanton (2001) also found that some only-children have even developed lifelong wishes of having a sibling, believing that friends do not necessarily know what it is like to live in their home and are unable to provide adequate social support.

Other Stressors

Another prominent difficulty of only-children is their capacious accountability for their achievements and failures; as a result, they feel heavily stressed and are unable to cope with challenges (Zuber, 1982). In

the same research, it was found that only-children were more likely to attribute their chances of passing an exam to their own abilities and skills rather than to situational factors. A more recent study of 724 only-children and 806 children with siblings found that only-children were more likely to have an internalization of problems (Tao, 1996). This internalization usually leads to depression; when one attributes receiving poor grades, being socially rejected, and issues in one's career as unavoidable and one's own fault, as only-children often do, he or she is more likely to be depressed (Li, 2002; Myers, 2006). Furthermore, as adults, only-children typically have lower quality friendships and their overall life satisfaction rating is poorer than adults with siblings (Hill, 1995).

Conclusion & Coping with the Future

As only-children become adults, they express anxiety over parenting. This is often because only-children are responsible for perpetuating their own family lines—which is the only way their parents can have grandchildren—and the stress to do so remains substantial. A balancing act of dividing attention appropriately among more than one child, if they choose to have several children, then becomes another stressor of only-children parents, as they do not have the memory of parents who *did* have to divide attention among siblings (Greenberg, 1998).

When only-children are older, they frequently have the stress and pressure of caring for their parents, which encompasses emotional, financial, and physical demands. A study in China (Fong, 2002) found that for only-children having to support families, “Only an elite job [could] supply enough income to enable one person to support so many dependents” (p. 1424). This study found that this stress also applies to only-children outside of China. Fong highlights how the modern forces of single-child families are both a cause and an effect of the unrealistically high expectations often said to be put upon modern youth worldwide (Fong, 2002). In effect, only-children often feel immense pressure to succeed, seek undivided attention from others, experience problems with connecting and negotiating with peers, and worry about later life issues such as parental care giving and death of parents (Roberts & Blanton, 2001). In one study, the issue of caring for their parents (Duetsch, 2006) guided most only-children to have strong desires to remain in the same city for the rest of their lives. Many feel responsible for the happiness of their parents, including specific

aspirations such as paying off the family debt. In the same study, participants with siblings did not have the same goals concerning their parents. While most still had a deep love for their parents, children with siblings did not express the same degree of anxiety about providing for their parents later in life. Others have expressed anxiety over potentially losing their parents and lack of anybody to connect with concerning their family experience and history of childhood, which could create a lack of lifespan continuity.

Although intellect and creativity prosper, only-children can suffer from a lower quality of living overall from much stress. The high parental expectations typically impede an only-child's chance at breaking free and becoming truly independent, especially with lack of siblings to provide support; this leads to increased anxiety. Never fully emotionally separating from their parents, these children may suffer the entire burden of having to care for their parents when they grow older. All of these issues are compounded when the only-child feels responsible for his or her problems and consequently has to endure depression and even aggression. Ultimately, the current research suggests that the temporal savings of a single-child family are not worth the psychological costs.

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