

The Benefits of Being an Only Child

According to the (Australian) ABC, there is a lot of prejudice, negativity and downright rudeness directed [towards parents of a single child](#). Apparently such parents get asked things like: are you going to give your child a brother or a sister? Aren't they lonely? What happens if they die and you are left with no children?

(Are there such questions asked of strangers in the real world? I've never thought to ask such a question of a person with one child...but am I just too sheltered? Have you, if you are a parent of one child, been asked such questions?)

Apparently the reason that such questions are asked, assuming that they are, is because other parents are resentful and envious that they have had to "suffer" through raising several children. That is the view of Professor Toni Falbo from the University of Texas, who is about to undertake research into whether mothers of one child are seen negatively by people who have "suffered through the experience of bringing up several children". (As an aside, if that is actually the research question, then aren't you assuming the very thing you are setting out to prove? Or begging the question? If you assume that child rearing is something to "suffer through" then aren't you already assuming that having fewer children means less suffering and it is likely that people will envy those who suffer less?)

The ABC story is interesting since it says that the "evidence shows there are very few drawbacks to a one-child family". What is this evidence? Well, according to Dr Falbo, the benefits are that the children get more attention from their parents, the parents are able to enjoy more activities and that there is less pressure on the environment from additional

children. Since the parents invest in and promote peer interactions, only children are no more lonely than those children with siblings. The only drawback was that parents put all their eggs in one basket: if their child dies, then they are left with no children. (The reason the royal family needs an heir and a spare.)

Then the ABC has interviewed some parents who have chosen to have a single child, and are not likely to bemoan their choice. The benefits of a single child according to these parents include: a mother being able to be more dedicated to her work; parents being able to afford better schools without sacrificing something else; parents being able to go to the child's sporting activities on the weekend without having to split up; being able to travel more cheaply and easily; being able to substitute siblings with cousins; being able to spend more on extracurricular activities for the child; and lower childcare fees.

In short, parents can do more, children can do more and the cost is less when there is only one child. What I find interesting is that no one in this article discussed the elephant in the room: little emperor syndrome. When there is only one child, the danger of spoiling that child is more acute and the child ends up feeling entitled and selfish, used to getting its own way and not used to having its sharp edges rubbed smooth by having to interact with other siblings in the house each day. Overly protected by parents who can lavish all their attention, doting and protectiveness on the one child, [researchers found](#) that China's only children were turning into little Emperors.

"We document that China's One-Child Policy... has produced significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals,"

As Michael Cook blogged about a couple of years ago:

“The theory is that sibling ‘deprivation’ alters the relationships with parents and changes the way a child develops. Using standard economic games which measure trust and cooperation, [the researchers] found that this was correct. The children born under the one-child policy are ‘substantially more pessimistic, less conscientious, and possibly more neurotic’.”

And as Shannon blogged about a couple of weeks ago, the little emperor syndrome is [hitting the west](#), partly due to smaller family sizes. She concluded that:

“[Children] might actually turn out better equipped for school and life if they share a room with a sibling, get rained on if they forget their rain jacket, fall off the jungle gym once in a while, and get detention for failing to do their own homework.”

Finally, it seemed as if the entire ABC article was somewhat undercut by the last parent that they interviewed. This mother was herself an only child, and she thought that the only foreseeable pitfall was “leaving her daughter behind without siblings”. (So the only thing wrong with having an only child is that they don’t have brothers or sisters. Well, yes, quite.)

“‘From my experiences as an only child I know that at this point in my life if I lose my parents it will be very difficult because I am so close to them,’ she said.”

That is, once the parents go, an only child has no immediate family left. They are, *pace* Dr Falbo, perhaps left feeling...lonely?

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