

## To Have Another or Not to Have Another: That is the Question Melanie Horn Mallers, *CSU Fullerton*

From the moment my husband and I had our first child, we were asked the golden question: when are we planning to have our second child. Now, nearly 6 years later, we are still being asked and are still pondering the answer. For many people, this decision seems to come easy, but for us, we are completely and utterly confused. In polling strangers, acquaintances, and even friends on the matter, most tell us that we are selfish if we do not provide a sibling for our son. They say things like "How will he learn to share?" "What will happen to him when you both pass?" and "Won't he be lonely?" With questions like these, our confusion oftentimes turns into guilt. Such questions are not surprising when you consider the stigma of single children as selfish, shy, over-protected, overly-indulged and socially withdrawn (Roberts and Blanton, 2001). In China, where couples were encouraged to have only one child in order to help curb population growth, single children (often male) were known as "little emperors," and were oftentimes seen as spoiled. G. Stanley Hall, considered the father of child psychology, promoted the notion that being an only child is a "disease in itself". The negative stereotyping of only children has also recently been documented as occurring among counselors and psychologists when making clinical impressions about a hypothetical client (Stewart, 2004) that the only child is "particularly likely to experience problems" (Steward, 2004, p. 173). Furthermore, a 2004 Gallup poll indicated that only 3% of American adults think that one child is the ideal family size (Saad, 2004). With a strong image of single-children as "bad", it is hard to consider that the perception of the only-child family structure is actually based on stereotypes rather than on accurate information

To help us resolve our perplexing decision, I have turned to a few other families I know of that have single children and to the literature regarding the developmental outcomes of children reared without siblings. **And the take-home message seems to be that single children are actually doing quite well.** In fact, single children benefit from many advantages, including having more parental attention, greater stimulation, and high achievement and motivation in later life (Brophy, 1989). One outcome of this is that only-children consistently show higher levels of intelligence and achievement (Blake, 1989; Falbo & Polit, 1986; Falbo & Poston, 1993) and complete more years of education (Blake, 1989; Travis & Kohli, 1995). Single children also report they are happy to have been single; they had less conflict with others, more time with their parents, and more time to imagine, explore and develop personal interests.

As a parent of a single child, I am also concerned with whether or not my son will know how to cope with stress and if he will learn to have healthy relationships with others as he gets older. Thankfully, the literature shows that in relation to personality development, because only children do not have siblings with whom to interact, they learn to be children on their own and become conditioned to depend on themselves. Says one adult only child, "Possibly the best part was developing the ability to enjoy being alone and to entertain myself. I've always had plenty of friends, yet people are surprised by how much of a loner I can be" (Koontz, 1989, p. 39). Although this self-sufficiency can have its benefits, it can also mean that only

children are inherently alone as their personalities develop. The benefit though is that single children learn to be both extroverted and introverted; that is, they must learn to be outgoing enough to make friends, but also adaptable to play alone. Additionally, only children are able to establish strong intimate relationships as a result of being able to develop close bonds with their parents (Mancillas, 2006)

Currently, there is a growing trend towards single-child families. This is primarily due to financial reasons (which is understandable given that it currently costs on average over \$250,000 to rear one child from 0-18 years of age!) and the trend for couples to marry and start families later in life (Newman, 2001). These issues were discussed in a recent *Time* [article](#) by Lauren Sandler, "Singletons on the rise: They're supposed to be selfish, spoiled and lonely. In fact, they're just fine...and on the rise". What I find most interesting about the article is not so much the content (which similarly reviewed much of the advantages discussed above regarding developmental outcomes of being raised as a single child), but the range of reader's blog responses on *Time.com*:

I was surprised that in "One and Done," Lauren Sandler barely mentioned the absence of siblings, brushing off the topic with a comment about "not necessarily missing what I don't have" [July 19]. As one of five siblings, I find it hard to imagine not having the range of emotions and experiences my brothers and sisters brought to bear on my existence. I look forward to having them around to remind me of where I came from, long after my parents are gone.

Thank you, TIME! I'm a parent of an only child, and I am so tired of hearing comments like "Oh, he must be lonely." I had a very difficult pregnancy and am so blessed to have my son. We are able to provide for his every need and give him our undivided attention, and we don't have to deal with sibling issues. (My husband and I both have siblings.) People choose to have one child for a variety of reasons; the choice should be respected. Do you go up to the woman with four kids and say, "Geez, when will you start using birth control?"

The argument for the financial benefits of having one child might make mathematical sense, but family dynamics cannot simply be reduced to financial calculations. The best college education, unlimited one-on-one time with parents and all the music master classes in the world cannot match the very special joy of life shared with siblings. Single children are robbed of the immense healing power of grief shared with sisters, the weirdly wonderful sense of silliness between brothers and that magic moment when siblings recall the same hilarious childhood memory.

I will quickly tell you the strengths of my big family: the camaraderie, the give and take, the lifelong friendships. But I will also tell you the challenges: the chaos, the paucity of alone time with each child, the hurdles to help each develop into a unique self. Sandler's piece would have benefited from acknowledging there are downsides to not having siblings and upsides to a full house.

Admittedly, it is hard not to take such opinions into account. And ultimately, for my husband and I, we are left with even more unresolved questions related to whether or not to have another child. For now though, we continue to embrace a message that was inscribed on a necklace given to me: 3 Live Simply.

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