



Raise only-children to be smart and social

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Only-children have an image problem. It seems they, or at least their parents, always have to explain their 'singleness'. This is a throwback to the days when families were typically large and a small family usually indicated medical, social or personal problems.

These days having just one child is often simply a matter of choice.

One thing is certain. If school achievement and self-esteem are used as measures of a well-adjusted child, most parents would stop at one. Only-children repeatedly do well on these measures, presumably due to the hothouse effect in which they are more heavily exposed to adult language and concepts in the critical early years than children in a larger brood.

A similar effect can be seen in first-born children, who are generally fully exposed to their parent's language and thoughts (and hang-ups) for the first few years of their lives. Middle children, by comparison, probably hear more sibling language than parent language in their early years.

In my book 'Why first borns rule the world and last borns want to change it' I wrote that only-children never experience the ignominy of dethronement so they get 100 per cent of both parental attention and parental expectations. They get equal measures of pampering and pressure!

Single children don't have to wait in line to use the bathroom, pass the peas to a sibling at the kitchen table, or duck and weave when a bored or irritated sibling wants to take a shot at them.

It's often thought that children, especially only-children, who spend a great deal of time alone aren't socially able. But the research doesn't stack up in support of this notion. While some only-children are flummoxed by teasing at school, others are so confident and vocabulary rich that other children won't dare bait them.

In some ways only-children have a big advantage over other children: by spending more time alone they are able to feel comfortable in their own skins. This self containment and ability to go deeper into their imaginations is quite a plus for many only-children. It may be also be why most only-children are more than happy with their 'single' status.

Parents of only-children are often very aware of the potential deficits of the situation so they compensate by making sure their child has plenty of sleepovers; that the child is socially active through involvement in sports and interest groups; and that they create situations in which the child is able to learn that the world doesn't revolve around them.

I suspect the notion of being comfortable (in their own skins) and having parents and teachers who compensate (for any deficits) lies at the heart of successfully raising kids without siblings.

Here some practical ways to help only children become smart and social:

1. Help them wait their turn: Make a concentrated effort not to spoil or over-indulge your only child. Parents of singles are frequently in a better position than parents of large families to grant them their every wish. Often single children learn for the first time when they go to school that they can't have everything they want when they want, which comes as a shock. So get in the habit of waiting until their birthday or Christmas until they get big ticket item such as a bikes as would occur in a large family. Also limit treats so they learn to patience and restraint. Resist the temptation to always give your single what they want just because you can.

2. Encourage your single child to mix with other children regularly: Single children don't have the same opportunities to share their time and space with others nor care for someone else in the family. Ensure your child spends time with other children so they can develop the important social skill of sharing and also teach how families with siblings function.

3. Make sure they keep pets: Single children generally don't have the chance to care for others so keeping a pet is one practical opportunity for them to learn to look after something or someone other than themselves. Later in life they can also struggle as parents as they haven't learned to care for anyone but themselves as children. Looking after their own pets, or tending the family pooch, helps them develop the trait of reliability and develop the skills of nurturance, both essential for successful future adult relationships.