

by Melinda Blau

Your One and Only



TO DENISE and James Whitely, who have a 5-year-old boy named Aaron, having an only child is just the way their family is—and it's fine. "I considered becoming pregnant again when he was 2,

and then when he was 3," admits Denise, a fund-raiser

for Morehouse College in Atlanta, "But he was too active and I was too tired. When I reconsidered, I real-

pave the way to a well-adjusted only childhood.

ized that I had wanted my children to be close in age. At that point, they wouldn't have been, and I was almost 40."

The Whitelys don't give much thought to comments such as, "He needs to have a brother or a sister" or "How selfish of you not to have another child." They also don't worry about the much-touted dan-

gers of onlyhood—that their son will be spoiled, demanding, shy, and clingy. Aaron already defies the stereotypes: He is "bright and articulate, and he loves spending time with other children," his mother says. Besides, she knows firsthand that only kids don't have to have problems later in life: "I was an only child, and I came out fine."

Evidently, many parents agree with the Whitelys. Single-child families now outnumber families with two children!

With one-child families on the rise, avoiding the clichés of spoiling and loneliness is key. Here's how to

According to March 1992 statistics, the Bureau of Census Household and Family Division in Suitland, Maryland, reported 12.3 million two-child families compared to 13.6 million one-child families—up dramatically from 10 million one-child families in 1972. And in 1990, 17.3 percent of women 40 to 44 years old had just one

child—a significant increase from 10.7 percent a decade before. "More women are saying that they *intend* to have just one," notes Linda Peterson, a statistician at the National Center for Health Statistics in Hyattsville, Maryland. In 1982, 12 percent of women said they planned to have just one child; six years later, that figure rose to 14 percent.

G. Stanley Hall, Ph.D., an eminent psychologist in Ashfield, Massachusetts, in the early 1900s, would probably turn over in his grave at the thought of parents being content with an only child.

"Being an only child is a disease in itself," Dr. Hall concluded. He

and other early researchers convinced mental health experts—and made parents fear—that only children were destined to suffer a life of loneliness, selfishness, and social maladjustment.

"Parents of only children and only children themselves face a tremendous amount of prejudice," notes Phyllis Katz, Ph.D., a psychologist and director of the Institute for Research on Social Problems in Boulder, Colorado. Dr. Katz, herself ►

an only child, conducted a 1984 study of gender role differences that compared only children with oldest of two and youngest of two. "Kids with siblings were very likely to say negative things about only children," she found.

In the last decade, however, because of the sheer weight of numbers and evidence that dispels the disparaging myths, the stigma of having an only child has finally begun to fade—and it helps to have Chelsea Clinton in the White House.

Lynn Scott Jackson, a public relations executive in New York City, finds it "comical" when friends ask how she could "let" her 9-year-old son, Clinton, be an only child. "By the time I do what I have to do at work and I take the time to be with him, to expose him to different things, different activities, I can't imagine having more than one child," Jackson says. "Deciding how many kids to have depends on the demands on your time, how you make a living, what you want to be able to give your child, and how you want your child to be raised."

Parenting Pitfalls and Pluses

How will the growing army of onlies stack up against their peers with siblings? Mostly, it depends on how we parent them. Onlies outperform academically and are no different from children with siblings when it comes to social skills, according to a 1987 study co-authored by Toni Falbo, Ph.D., professor of educational psychology and sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and a leading authority on only children.

That is not to say that certain traits aren't related to a child's single status in the household. The only child grows up in the spotlight. He has his parents' undivided attention. He is the recipient of not only all their love but also all their anger, hope, and disappointment. The only child has no built-in playmates, no siblings to comfort or taunt, to teach or learn from, to challenge or support. All of these factors undoubtedly impact on the kind of person a child grows up to be. But so do a host of other variables, like his parents' socioeconomic status, education, and occupation; their physical and emotional health; and whether they send their only

Beyond the Myths

Only children have more emotional problems than other children. Research shows that onlies are quite self-reliant. In her 1987 study that compared self-esteem, achievement, motivation, anxiety, loneliness, and other "indices of emotional health," Dr. Falbo discerned no statistical difference between only children and children who had siblings. "When we looked at large numbers, only children had a slight advantage on self-esteem," Dr. Falbo says. And a 20-year study conducted by three psychologists from the American Institutes for Research in Palo Alto, California, found that only children from two-parent homes exhibited higher intelligence than peers with one sibling.

Only children are spoiled. "Spoiled" is hard to measure scientifically, Dr. Falbo acknowledges, because "people indulge their children differently—by paying too much attention, by giving them too many material goods, by letting them get away without discipline." While there are apparently no studies that have looked at the last two factors, "lots of documentation" indicated that parents spend more one-on-one time with only children. "They do get more attention, but that doesn't necessarily lead to spoiling," Dr. Falbo stresses. According to Dr. Sicher: "A spoiled child is one who has gotten a lot of what he wanted but not what he needed. Being attuned to children's needs is the best protection against their being spoiled—not having more children."

A child needs siblings to learn how to develop social skills. Paradoxically, onlies have better social skills than their peers with siblings, Dr. Katz says. Dr. Sicher's description of her 10-year-old son is consistent with this view and reflects how other parents of onlies characterize their children. "I never have to worry about him being lonely," she says. "He'll walk up to anyone and engage them."

If you are unable to have more than one child, your child will feel disappointed with your family's size. "You don't see a lot of regret on the part of kids as long as their parents aren't telling them what they lost," Dr. Falbo says. However, he adds, if parents are depressed, guilty, or regretful about not having more than one child, the only child will pick up on their feelings. Dr. Falbo cites a study that looked at mothers who had one, two, or three kids. When the mothers expressed regret, guilt, and talked openly about their discontentment, their kids expressed disappointment, too.

child to preschool and expose him to a variety of experiences and people. Being an only child pales in comparison to such other environmental factors, Dr. Falbo maintains, noting that it accounts for "no more than about 2 percent of the variants affecting personality and behavior."

Still, only children definitely face challenges that other kids don't. Sometimes a child feels outnumbered by parents, says Martha Moriarity of Springfield, Massachusetts, whose daughter, Kate, is now 10. "In a big family you don't always know who 'did it'; in ours, she's it."

"Onlies get not only the best of their parents, they also get the worst, with no

siblings to buffer the impact of their anger or to complain to about unfair treatment," says Pamela Sicher, M.D., a New York psychiatrist, who is also the mother of an only child. "Usually the two people who have an only child work, so the child may feel doubly isolated—from the parents and from the child world."

"It's difficult not to be overfocused when you have only one child," says Chicago mom Mary Hayes. Hayes recently joined the Only Child Association, which is based in Riverside, California, looking for guidance about her 5-year-old daughter, Kelly. "I wanted to see how other parents handle this," she says. ►

Networking is particularly important for parents of onlies. "If parents are given a good education and become aware that they can become overprotective and overindulgent, that they can have unrealistic expectations, they can prevent the downside," stresses Joan Kinlan, M.D., a psychiatrist in Washington, DC.

The Only Impact

Being sole object of adult focus can enhance a child's intellectual curiosity and inspire poise, confidence, and the

sense that he will be listened to, says DeeJay Schwartz, a kindergarten teacher in Metuchen, New Jersey. But pseudo-maturity can be a pitfall of spending so much time with adults. "Only children can have an almost pedantic quality to their speech and not use a lot of gestures," Dr. Kinlan says. But many onlies are extremely verbal and more adept at processing complex ideas. "I have children who are talking pretty lofty ideas in my class, and that's usually fueled by only children," says Rebecca King, a

kindergarten teacher in Pittsburgh.

Surely, being an only can make it more difficult for a child to learn the rough-and-tumble play that kids with siblings experience naturally. But the flip side, professionals say, is a long attention span, a rich imagination, and the ability to play alone and to tolerate aloneness. Onlies also tend to be more independent and resourceful than children with sibs.

Lawrence Balter, Ph.D., a New York psychologist and author of *Not in Front of the Children: How to Talk to Your Child About Tough Family Matters*, also reminds parents not to romanticize sibling rivalry. "It isn't necessarily a beneficial thing," he says. "Kids can learn to negotiate and argue with classmates."

An Anti-Doting Attitude

The truth is, no family size is ideal. It's a matter of balance and mindfulness. Parents with more than one child may struggle to provide special one-on-one time or to offer them intellect-building activities and enriching experiences, but this comes almost naturally to parents of only children.

"If you're a doter or a worrier, you're going to have to watch out," warns Judith Allik, Ph.D., a clinical child psychologist at the University of Dayton in Ohio. For example, if your child is just learning to fit shapes into a puzzle or to ride a tricycle, restrain yourself and allow her to make mistakes and to perform at a level that's appropriate for her.

"Whatever your expectations, lower them," says Susan Newman, the mother of a 12-year-old son in Metuchen, New Jersey, and author of *Parenting an Only Child*. As your child gets older, make sure he has other adults in his life he can turn to—a kind of emotional safety valve to diffuse the intensity of the parent-child-parent triangle. Also beware of doling out excessive praise. "If you constantly tell your child that he is so special and wonderful—and that's why you didn't want any more kids—it can make it just a little harder when the child goes to school and has to accept that he's not so special," Dr. Kinlan notes.

A good "anti-doting" strategy, Dr. Sicher says, is for parents to take time for themselves. "It's healthy for both of you,"

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she maintains. Newman also suggests adopting a "think big" attitude to avoid becoming too entwined in your child's life: "I always ask myself, 'Would I do this for him if I had four children?'"

But don't automatically assume that every negative trait is linked to your child's only status. With young children, acting "spoiled" or "selfish" at times goes with the territory. Young children simply view everything from the perspective of their own needs, Dr. Sicher explains.

"We realized that we needed to be deliberate about things like sharing and getting along with other kids and not assume that they'll take care of themselves," Whitely says. When her son was a toddler and refused to give her a lick of his ice-cream cone, she says, "I wouldn't just let it go. I'd say something like, 'You want Mommy to share with you? Then you have to share with Mommy, too.'"

Parents of onlies also need to take care not to "adultify" their child, Dr. Balter says: "Don't make the child privy to adult matters or have expectations

beyond the child's years," he recommends. It's fine to stretch children—say, by exposing them to classical music at a young age—but also pay attention to their age-appropriate interests.

"Only children are taken so many places with adults," King adds, "but they may not always get to play with other kids." This is why it's so important for the only child to be in playgroups or nursery school, to have afterschool playdates, and to take part in other kinds of group activities. "It helps them not to be anxious when they separate from parents," Dr. Allik adds.

"Friends are more important to only children than to other children," Newman agrees. "They become their sibling sounding board." Include other children on day trips, during holiday celebrations, at Saturday lunch, and for overnights. Encourage family gatherings, as well, consciously building a sense of "family" composed of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, as well as close friends.

Jackson, whose father was an only child, says that some of her "uncles" and

"aunts" in Hampton, Virginia, where her parents grew up, are actually her dad's old friends. "They grew up on the same block and today are as much a part of my father's family as my blood uncles and aunts are on my mother's side in North Carolina. Their children are like my cousins," she says. Jackson and her husband, Roland, already see a similar pattern with their son.

"He's fortunate in that 10 or so of the children he started with in daycare at 18 months are still in school with him. A lot of these friends are like family; they have a history together. They are serious buddies!" she says. Every year, Jackson hosts a Black History Month slumber party for her son and his friends.

"Not having siblings doesn't have to be traumatic," she says. "A person in the building, someone from church, or kids from the block can substitute. A lot of times with an only child, you can create a unique family situation!" ■

Melinda Blau is a contributing editor to Child and the award-winning author of Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting.

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