

When I was growing up, there was a first-day-of-school ritual that went like this: After the class recited the Pledge of Allegiance, the teacher would ask each of us to stand up and talk about what we did on our summer vacation, and to share something about ourselves that made us unique. I'd always say, "I went to Rhode Island with my parents. And I'm an only child."

There weren't any other only children in my class, so my status made me feel different, but "different" as in "special." Back then I loved everything about

being an only child: my superclose relationship with my parents, who lavished me with every opportunity, educational and otherwise, that my heart desired; our neat and orderly house, where I had my own bedroom and bathroom; and the ease that I felt around adults.

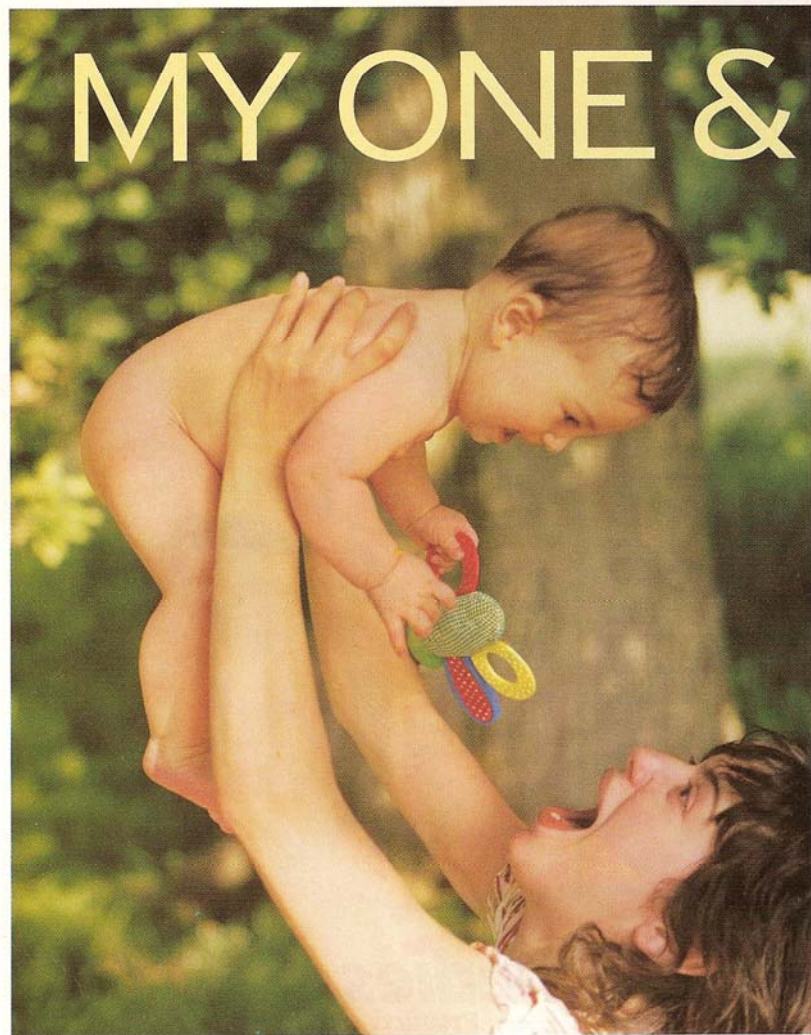
As I got older and met other well-adjusted and successful only children, I couldn't imagine raising more than one child myself. But it wasn't merely pure emotion that led me to this decision. I saw practical reasons for having a single-child family, including the soaring

GUESS WHAT? Only children aren't spoiled or antisocial. In fact, having just one is more popular than ever.

BY CYNTHIA HANSON

cost of child care and the challenge of maintaining a work-home balance. I wanted to offer my child the same emotional and financial advantages that I enjoyed, and my husband, Aaron, happily agreed with me.

I hope that our son, Eric, now 2½, will come to appreciate his one-and-only status the way I did mine. But his experience will be very different, in at least one respect: He'll have lots and lots of company.



MY ONE & ONLY

ONLY CHILD BOOM

For the past two decades, the ranks of only children have been on the rise. Today, single-child families are the fastest-growing family unit in the nation, up from more than 10 million in 1972 to more than 15 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. What's going on? In addition to the parents who choose to have only one child, people are marrying later in life, which sets the stage for fertility problems that can leave them with a small family by default. Plus, the stigma once associated with only children isn't as strong as it was 30 years ago, according to Susan Newman, PhD, a psychologist, the mother of an only child, and author of *Parenting an Only Child: The Joys and Challenges of Raising Your One and Only* (Broadway Books, 2001).

"The most common myths—that only children are spoiled, bossy, and socially inept—haven't panned out," says Newman, who has been studying only children for two decades.

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“Studies show that only children are no different from other kids. Specifically, they're not more spoiled, lonely, selfish, or overly dependent.”

Actually, there's plenty of good news about only children. In fact, research shows they're self-confident, well-organized, and ambitious. Still, many couples agonize over whether or not to have a second baby, concerned that they or their child may miss out on the sibling experience. Here are the pluses and minuses of raising just one child.

ONE SINGULAR SENSATION: THE PROS

One of the most obvious perks of having one child is the one-on-one focus you can give him. There's plenty of time to teach social graces, impart the values you hold dear, and drive to your child's myriad activities. “I enjoy lavishing my daughter with attention, without feeling like I'm being pulled in other directions,” says Marla Paul of Northfield, Illinois, whose daughter is now 15. Only children benefit from their parents' undivided attention and emotional support in several ways, say experts. They instill high self-esteem, foster maturity, enable a child to develop a strong identity. “Onlies typically have strong personalities and know who they are because their needs aren't overlooked, and they don't compete for attention,” explains Erika Karres, author of *Make Your Kids Smarter* (Andrews McMeel, 2001) and an educational consultant who practices out of Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

What about the reality that only children tend to spend so much time alone? Turns out, it's also an advantage. “Onlies are often creative and focused because they need to learn to entertain themselves. They'll build that cathedral out of blocks,” Karres says. Beth Blumberg of Dresher, Pennsylvania, is pleased that her 8-year-old son can play with toys or draw for hours. “Aaron is very self-sufficient, and he's never bored,” she says.

Another benefit to both parent and

child: The financial pressure is eased, so you can offer more extracurricular activities, travel, and educational opportunities. “If we had another child or two, our spending would be much more limited,” says Paul. “It's not that Elizabeth has limitless possessions, but she takes guitar and tennis lessons, and she wants to start studying voice. I'm glad I don't have to say, ‘No, we can't afford that.’”

THERE'S ONLY ONE: THE CONS

Of course, there are disadvantages for both only children and their parents, too. Paul attributes her daughter's sensitive nature to her lack of siblings. “Brothers and sisters tease each other, and it gives you a thicker skin,” she says. “As a young child, Elizabeth was sensitive to friends' remarks because she'd never had that experience. We explained that kids often behave this way with each other and that it was normal. We tried to frame it in such a way so that her friends' comments

LEARNING HOW TO NEGOTIATE, to share, and to develop a thick skin are just a few perks siblings enjoy.

didn't seem so hurtful.”

Susan Kelleher of New York City feels she learned many important life skills as the oldest of six children; she regrets that her 4-year-old son won't have the same experience. “Growing up with siblings teaches you how to get along with people who are different, how to share, how to stand up for yourself, how to negotiate, and how to compromise,” says Kelleher. “There are downsides to having siblings, but I wish Ethan could experience the positive aspects of a big family.”

Another large drawback: Your only won't have the mutual support that many siblings enjoy. And what about drawbacks for parents of only children? They'll never know the joy of watching their child forge a bond with her younger sibling.

RAISING YOUR ONE AND ONLY

Parents of onlies face their own particular challenges. Here are the most com-

mon pitfalls and effective strategies on how to sidestep them.

1. Being overprotective "These parents put all their eggs in one basket, so it's natural for them to be extra cautious," Newman says. "When an only child starts to walk, his parents hover over him and don't let him fall. When an only child gets in a fight with a friend, her parents rescue her. She can't learn how to navigate the world if her parents always are interfering or fighting her battles." When it's appropriate, try to look the other way, and check in with parents of siblings. Asking them what their parameters are can help you strike a balance between protection and overprotection.

2. Providing limited peer interaction Since only children are the center of their parents' universe, these kids may have difficulty relating to peers. "Early socialization helps them learn how to share, take turns, and resolve conflicts," says Patricia Henderson Shimm, associate director of the Barnard College Cen-

ter for Toddler Development in New York City. Make sure your child spends plenty of time with other kids her age through play dates and classes. If you live near family, time spent with cousins in the same age group can offer sibling socialization benefits, too.

3. Setting unrealistic expectations Some only children become perfectionists to please their parents, who may impose high (or even unrealistic) expectations on them because the child is their one shot at parenting success. Keep your expectations in line with your child's age and natural abilities, and assure him that he doesn't have to be the best at everything. If your daughter loves to draw, for example, that doesn't mean she has to (or will) become a gifted artist. Focus on her enjoyment of the activity rather than the goal of creating a mini Picasso.

4. Making too many decisions for your child "When Mommy and Daddy are the

sole directors of a kid's life, an only child can end up relying on their input before making a move. If you're always doing and thinking for your child, she won't learn to do and think for herself," says

PARENTS OF ONLY children put all of their eggs in one basket, so they tend to be a bit overprotective.

Shimm. To set the stage for future decision-making, give your toddler simple choices: At bedtime, does she want you to read her *Babar* or *Curious George*? Also, try not to make too many suggestions when your little one is playing, such as what color crayon to use or where to put the piece of puzzle. With a lot of love from you and some help from friends, your only child will turn into a well-adjusted little person. *

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