

You Asked?

Raising an Only Child

This answer comes from Angie and Jim Bugg

Question:

What are some of the unique challenges to raising an only child?

Answer:

We are parents of a 15-year-old, so we know a bit about parenting an only child. We each have three siblings, so we have some experience in larger families. There are, of course, both advantages and disadvantages to having one child. Let's discuss some of the advantages and see how we have to be careful that they don't turn into disadvantages.

An obvious advantage is the reduced cost of having a smaller family. However, depending upon your family's means, this could present the opportunity to lavish the only child with gifts. These gifts could come directly from you as the parents or from other family members (i.e., grandparents, aunts, and uncles). The fact that you have one child might make it possible for you to immediately update her or his cellphone to the latest model; however, that does not mean it's a good idea to do so. Clearly, some restraint is required. Is your only child always the first to get the latest gizmo? Is he being squeezed out of his room by possessions? Do you find yourself borrowing power tools from your five-year-old? You may be lavishing her with gifts that will lead to unsustainable expectations when she gets older.

Another obvious advantage is the peace and quiet that tends to be present in the house when there aren't multiple, active theatres of war raging between siblings. Although peace is a good thing, in this case it exists because there is less opportunity for your child to interact with other children, so even healthy opportunities for interaction are limited. Children learn a myriad of negotiating, conflict resolution, and coping skills through fighting, arguing, and problem solving with siblings; therefore it is important to provide as many opportunities as you can for your child to interact with peers. School takes on some of this role, but play dates, parent-tot groups, and indoor playgrounds can be important for younger children. Older children need to spend time with friends in both organized and open activities. Involving your child in theatre, music, church groups, team sports, and volunteer activities can broaden his or her social contacts and can help to develop social interest. Your child can learn communication and teamwork while participating in a variety of activities. We need to be careful, however, that competitive sports aren't the only extracurricular activities our children are involved in.

In our case, our child has enjoyed a strong relationship with several cousins who live nearby. Also we've been lucky that our daughter has several friends her age who are living within a couple blocks of our house. Cousins and friends help, but nothing can quite simulate the 24/7, in-your-face, button-pushing reality of living with siblings.

Clearly, only children will get more attention from their parents. Of course, from the child's point of view this can be good or bad. As well as the risk of giving too much time and gifts to an only child, there is the risk of high expectations. Several years ago, a friend of ours with four children shared this analogy: The first child is china, the second is stoneware, the third is Corell, and the fourth is Tupperware. We have only china. The only child is precious, treasured, and could be somewhat "spoiled." However, as well as being "china," she is expected to have the qualities of stoneware, Corell, and Tupperware. She is expected to fill the roles that a few children share in other families.

Our daughter often comments on how nice it would be to have a sibling. (She's not getting one!) However, a few years ago, she was talking about where she would live if anything bad happened to both of her parents. She said, "I could live with these cousins, but then I'd have two brothers and two sisters. I could live with other cousins, but then I'd have one brother and two sisters. I'll live with Grandma and Grandpa. Then I can still be an only child."

Having an only child can reduce the mayhem, cost, transportation challenges, and noise in a family. However, it's important for us as parents of only children to be careful that we don't pile all of our gifts and expectations on one set of shoulders.

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