The Only Child Syndrome—

Only Is Not Always Lonely

By Joan Wester Anderson

Three-year-old David was having a tantrum in the supermarket while two neighbors looked on. "What can you expect?" one nodded knowingly. "After all, he's an only child."

Jenny seemed to enjoy day care, but now she is balking. Her caretaker dismisses the problem by reminding herself Jenny has probably been pampered because she is an only child and now is suffering from separation anxiety.

Along with the early bumps and bruises of babyhood and the normal pressures of growing up, the only child usually carries an extra burden—being misunderstood.

For although it is no longer rare for couples to have just one child, misconceptions about Only's lifestyle still abound. Because of a lack of siblings, the reasoning goes, an Only usually turns out to be selfish, spoiled, dependent, anxious, unhealthy—and worse of all, lonely.

We all know Onlies who fit this description to a T. But have not we also met children with similar annoying traits who are the oldest, middle or youngest in their family constellations?

The point ought to be obvious: there are problems and advantages in being "one of a kind," just as there are in being part of a 2 or 10-child family. The situation is not necessarily better or worse, just different.

Nevertheless, society questions the wisdom of raising "just one," and parental misgivings abound. Is it fair to have an Only? Will a choice that seems right for us be wrong for him or her? And, most common, are we dooming our child to a life of loneliness and isolation?

Much research has been done recently on birth order and the attributes of the only child. While such insights are not complete or all-encompassing, learning about the only child can help parents make a more informed decision about family size.

According to today's experts, what is the "typical" only child like?

Barbara Sullivan, author of FIRST BORN, SECOND BORN (Chosen Books), has conducted many workshops for adult Onlies. She concludes their growing up years are somewhat different from their peers, for two reasons.

First, parents of one-child families tend to be older and in many cases, had difficulty conceiving. "Hence, they are often overprotective, anxious about illnesses, disappointed over their barrenness," said Sullivan. "Not surprisingly, these emotions [illegible] a somewhat tense environment."

Also, the lives of these concerned parents usually revolve around their one-and-only creation, and Child comes to believe that being served, adored and indulged is his or her "right."

According to Sullivan, "if the parents themselves are in conflict, whether over the child or other matters, an Only soon realizes she or he can play one against the other, manipulating and putting them into direct competition for his or her affection."

Such a scenario is unhealthy for everyone and is less likely in a two or a three-child family."

There is a flip side to this uncomfortable portrait. Many of today's one-child parents are **choosing** this situation, and thus view it as a positive. In doing so, their confident feelings spread to Junior, who is regarded as a cherished member of the family but not its pivotal point.

A recent survey at the American Institute for Research in Palo Alto, California concluded that on average, only children were smarter and more ambitious than peers with siblings, but not as out-going.

This is the second major environmental difference noted by Barbara Sullivan and other birth order researchers, the isolation of the only child.

Despite good parenting, in the social mileau, the Only has difficulty. Youngsters with siblings learn early how to negotiate, find allies and protectors, defend themselves, how to share, cooperate and compete.

Because an Only has never been dethroned by a new baby, he or she never has had to share clothes or toys or think up ways to grab a share of attention. There is little competitiveness and jealousy in his or her nature.

Many parents of Onlies worry about the amount of time their offspring spends alone. It helps to remember that all youngsters need to develop the capacity to be by themselves. Some will need more "down" time than others, but everyone requires space for studying, artistic endeavors and just plain thinking.

What endangers the only child—and what parents must be alert to—is the **reason** for self-imposed isolation.

Developing peer relationships is important for every child, but especially an Only, no matter how loving and companionable parents are, they cannot make up for the interplay occurring between children.

Chances to meet and interact should occur regularly from babyhood on—Mom and Dad should learn to keep "hands off" in most settings unless blood is drawn.

An only child needs healthy affectionate parents who set firm behavior standards, and refuse to allow themselves to be manipulated. The child also needs a good balance of time alone and time with friends and family.

Given these important ingredients, there is no reason to assume an Only will have more problems—or be lonelier—than any other child. In fact, he or she will probably be bright, confident, curious and good at following directions, tidy, well-organized, conscientious, dependable and self-sufficient as well.

What more could any parent want?

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