**Why Are People Weird About Only Children?**

“Onlies” don’t seem to be any worse off than kids with siblings. So why do stereotypes about them persist?

When I was a child, my lack of siblings was often a source of bewildered concern. Don’t you get lonely? people would ask. But as I grew up, sympathy was overtaken by suspicion. You’re such an only child became a recurring mantra, whether I’d asserted a strong opinion or played sick to avoid dodgeball. In the cultural consciousness, only children are frequently pegged as weirdos: maladjusted, selfish, spoiled, uncompromising, or just unusually precocious. We are at once pitied for our sibling-less childhood and judged for the supposed eccentricities it left us with.

Research doesn’t support the idea that only children are any worse off than those with siblings, but kids as young as 8 have still been found to hold prejudices against only kids. You can hardly blame them: That bias is woven right into our lexicon. The moniker “only child”—rather than, say, “solo” or “individual” child—suggests a sense of deprivation. It’s one consonant away from “lonely child.” Where does this weirdness about only children come from?

The mythic persona of the only child can be traced back as far as 1896, when a Clark University fellow named E. W. Bohannon conducted a study of “Peculiar and Exceptional Children.” After observing more than 1,000 children, he declared of the 46 onlies, “They have imaginary companions, do not go to school regularly, if at all, do not get along with other children well, as a rule, and are generally spoiled by indulgence.” Notably, many of his subjects lived in isolated farmhouses, where they worked long hours; it made sense, then, that kids with siblings would be better-adjusted than those who hardly interacted with other children at all.

Depictions of onlies in movies, TV, and literature haven’t helped our case. Eloise, the children’s-book character who lives at the Plaza Hotel, and Veruca Salt, who’s tossed into the garbage chute at Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, are both spoiled brats. Hermione Granger is the annoying know-it-all of the Harry Potter series. Indeed, being an only child is regularly used to convey otherness, whether exceptionally bad or good.

Today, only children are much more common than they’ve been in the past. Our World in Data reports that the average number of births per American woman shrank from 3.6 in 1957 to 1.7 in 2021. According to Toni Falbo, who researches only children, financial considerations and career ambitions may take precedence over having multiple children—especially now, with record-high student-loan debt and child-care costs. Women are also having a child later in life than ever before, leaving less time to do it again. Still, Falbo believes that onlies agitate people’s understanding of what a family should look like.

Of course, sibling relationships can be rich and formative; maybe some people can’t imagine growing up without a built-in playmate and confidant. But other relationships can fulfill these functions—and perhaps without the typical sibling conflicts and competitiveness. Research shows that only children tend to be closer to their parents and to regard them with more warmth and respect than people with siblings do. They may feel more at ease interacting with teachers, probably because they speak mostly with adults at home. And unlike Bohannon’s junior farmers, kids today spend most of their waking hours with peers, at school and during playdates and extracurriculars.

Indeed, most contemporary studies don’t find any notable disadvantages for only children. Onlies actually tend to have higher intelligence-test scores and more ambitious educational goals—perhaps in part because they face less competition for their parents’ emotional and financial resources. But these advantages seem to even out in adulthood. According to a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development study, only children and children with siblings ultimately have the same employment rates, marriage outcomes, levels of mobility, and average number of kids.

The one trait that might separate them is sociability. A longitudinal study—for which more than 400,000 teenagers were interviewed in 1960, and again one, five, and 11 years after they graduated from high school or were supposed to—concluded that onlies are more interested in solitude and less likely to join group activities. (As a kid, I spent long hours every summer tearing through Scholastic-book-fair hauls, thinking I was in the best possible company among fictional characters, unaware that I was tanking my sociability score.) And in 2016, researchers in China took MRI brain scans and found that, compared with kids with siblings, onlies showed greater flexibility—a measurement of creativity—but lower agreeableness.

Then again, it’s possible that onlies tend to be less sociable because the culture doesn’t embrace them. That’s generally the issue with studying only children: It’s tough to distinguish inherent only-child qualities from those that develop in a sibling-centric world. Bohannon’s stereotype has stuck to the culture like gum to a shoe, and as an only, I’ve spent years trying to pick it off. I wrote this entire essay arguing that only children aren’t self-obsessed or lacking in social skills. But now that I’ve reached the end, I’m not sure whether I’ve proved that idea or undermined it. Detailing how normal only children are is, perhaps, exactly what an only child would do.