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## Raised Alone, Thriving Alone: Understanding the Positives of Only Childhood

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**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16793958>**

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Research Paper

**Accepted:** 22-07-2025

**Published:** 10-08-2025

#### Keywords:

*only offspring; cognitive advancement; interpersonal skills; sibling competition; confluence model; resource depletion theory*

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### ABSTRACT

This theoretical research article contests the prevalent notion that being an only child is detrimental to social and emotional development by exploring the conceptual advantages of sole sibling status. This study posits that having an only child confers distinct advantages that may be evident in cognitive, social, and personality domains. This assertion is grounded in developmental psychology, sociology, and family studies. The "confluence model" and the "resource dilution model" suggest that only children benefit from the complete attention, resources, and engagement of their parents, hence enhancing their socio-emotional development, academic performance, and cognitive growth. The absence of sibling rivalry and conflict may enhance social skills, elevate emotional intelligence, and foster healthier parent-child relationships. Considering modern social trends, including reduced family sizes, more parental engagement, and evolving cultural values, raising an only child may provide advantages in today's competitive and rapid environment, where focused resources and attention can provide a distinct edge. This research seeks to challenge common misconceptions regarding only children and offer a more nuanced comprehension of the singleton experience by examining the potential advantages of being an only child.

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### INTRODUCTION:

For decades, researchers, clinicians, and society have been intrigued by the characteristics and



uniqueness of lone children—those reared without siblings. Negative conceptions about only children endure in contemporary low-fertility countries, despite scientific evidence that either contradicts or sufficiently contests these notions (Goisis et al., 2023).

China presently possesses the highest proportion and number of only children globally, attributable to measures that actively encouraged young families to limit themselves to a single child (Lin et al., 2021). The One-Child Policy (OCP) was implemented in 1979, subsequently leading the media to generate considerable apprehension over only children by depicting them as "Little Emperors." Only children were perceived as being excessively pampered by Chinese parents and grandparents, potentially leading to adverse outcomes such as the abandonment of familial obligations

It is often believed that parents and grandparents often indulge only children (Liu et al., 2010). This hypothesis posits that family members frequently prioritise the needs of the only child, thus adversely affecting the child's development and resulting in characteristics such as dependency, egocentrism, and apathy (Mancillas, 2006). Moreover, only children may lack the requisite interpersonal skills to adeptly navigate relationships with their classmates due to the absence of siblings, hindering their ability to engage with peers (Downey & Condrón, 2004). Nonetheless, most empirical studies conducted in Eastern nations (Guo et al., 2018) and the West (Falbo, 2012) did not validate the previously described prevailing notion, which was seen as a stereotype for only children (Mancillas, 2006). Consequently, the alternative perspective on only children is predominantly favourable: in numerous developmental aspects, only children are either typical or more advantaged than their counterparts with siblings (Chen and Liu, 2014).

The implications of being an only child have been explored through three theories in social science research. The resource dilution theory posits that siblings compete for parental resources such as time, financial support, and attention. Each sibling diminishes the time and money resources that any single child can obtain due to the limited availability of these assets (Downey, 1995). This hypothesis posits that only children, unencumbered by the necessity to share parental resources with numerous siblings, exhibit superior performance compared to those from larger families, and demonstrate similar outcomes to children from smaller households, particularly in academic achievement (Goisis et al., 2023).

According to the confluence theory, children without siblings will excel compared to those with siblings, but for distinct reasons (Goisis et al., 2023). The idea, initially proposed by Zajonc and Markus in 1975, posits that a child's cognitive ability diminishes with an increasing number of siblings and is affected by



the family's intellectual milieu. An only kid benefits from the absence of siblings, as they are immersed in a more intellectually stimulating environment.

The socialisation theory posits that siblings serve as a resource (Goetting, 1986), and having younger siblings can enhance the development of tutoring skills, enabling youngsters to refine their cognitive abilities while teaching their younger siblings. The socialisation theory posits that children raised without siblings may experience academic advantages; however, they may also encounter significant drawbacks due to the lack of sibling interaction, which can adversely affect their adaptability, cooperativeness, and interpersonal relationships with peers (Falbo & Polit, 1986).

The arguments of the dilution and confluence theories are corroborated by existing research (Mancillas, 2006), however the socialisation theory lacks substantial empirical support based on currently available information. Only one study (Downey & Condrón, 2004) indicated a social skills deficit among only children in kindergarten. Bobbitt-Zeher and Downey (2013) assert that puberty addresses these deficiencies.

#### COGNITIVE ABILITY:

Research comparing the performance of only children to those from small households is ambiguous; yet, only children typically excel compared to those with four or more siblings (Choi and Monden 2017). Regarding IQ scores, only children outperformed first-borns from four-child households and first-borns from two- and three-child families (Belmont and Marolla, 1973).

Only children exhibit cognitive ability scores that surpass those of children raised with two or more siblings and are comparable to those of children from two-child homes (Goisis et al., 2023). Moreover, lone children outperform those reared with two or more siblings on cognitive ability assessments.

The findings indicate that children residing in larger households exhibit inferior cognitive ability outcomes compared to only children, who are frequently a more privileged population (Goisis et al., 2023). Moreover, analyses by Goisis et al. (2023) indicate that, in contrast to larger sibling groups, the adverse correlation between parental separation or residing in a low-income household and cognitive ability persists unaltered for only children, who do not share resources with siblings.



Präg et al. (2020) assert that the reduction in large families has been the principal factor contributing to the gradual narrowing of parental education disparities by sibling size. They found that variations in parental education within one-child families were more stable over time.

#### SOCIAL INTERACTION:

Families with only one child generally possess a higher socioeconomic standing and exhibit similarities to families with two children rather than to those with more offspring (Goisis et al., 2023).

Chen et al. (2021) examined the attitudes, apprehensions, and cohabitation behaviours of siblings and only children. It is noteworthy that there were no significant differences in the sample's perceptions towards parental care between individuals with siblings and those without. Married only children, however, exhibited a greater propensity to cohabit with their parents compared to non-only children. The principal reason for only children residing with their parents was to have support in matters such as childcare (care for grandchildren).

Prior research indicates that China's one-child policy solely advantages daughters by removing competition with potential male siblings (Wang & Feng, 2021). Nevertheless, limited research has investigated whether this advantage would also apply to the families of only daughters as they mature, marry, and procreate, extending beyond the initial generation. To assess the resource dilution theory, Wang and Feng (2021) examined educational investment, a crucial metric of familial resource allocation among siblings. The results indicated that, even in the current scenario, Chinese families often prioritise the needs of their adult sons over those of their married daughters. It also indicates that married daughters retained access to their parents' finances, so affording them a rather influential role in determining the family's expenditure on their children's education.

Liu and Jiang (2021) examined the interactions of siblings and only children within familial and social contexts. Research indicated that only children were markedly more inclined to establish favourable parent-child interactions compared to non-only children, even those from two-child families. Moreover, the benefits of having an only child in Chinese families were gender-specific, with females deriving greater advantages from this position than boys. Moreover, among Chinese households, the advantages of being an only child were gender-specific, with females deriving greater benefits from this position than males. The study examined the impact of gender composition and found that males were more likely to gain advantages from having older sisters than from being an only child, and girls were more likely to experience disadvantages from having younger siblings than from being an only child. The findings



indicated that bias against females and a preference for boys persist in Chinese households with multiple children, notwithstanding the enhanced status of daughters in one-child families.

Singletons generally exhibit superior academic performance and enhanced capabilities, especially in verbal skills, compared to children from medium and large households (Chen & Liu, 2014).

#### DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY:

Studies indicate that only children excel in peer socialisation compared to those with siblings, and they demonstrate superior behavioural and psychological adjustment (Liu et al., 2010). Singletons exhibit a higher achievement motivation and self-esteem compared to youngsters from medium and big families (Chen & Liu, 2014).

Psychosocial consequences (problematic behaviours, psychological discomfort, and susceptibility to detrimental peer pressure) are comparable between only children and individuals with varying numbers of siblings (Chen & Liu, 2014)

#### CONCLUSION:

Fundamental enquiries persist on the distinctions between only children and those reared with siblings, notwithstanding the anticipated increase in only child families within many developed societies (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014). Investigations into the cognitive and educational outcomes of children in isolation have produced incongruent results. Only children surpass those from large families and exhibit similar performance to those from small homes, as indicated by most research (Goisis et al., 2023).

#### CONSTRAINTS AND PROSPECTIVE PATHS:

One-child households are increasingly prevalent and are anticipated to become more common in various contexts due to declining fertility rates and a gradual transformation in family size preferences observed in numerous countries (Präg et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it remains uncertain to what degree this is true and what ramifications it may have for the correlation between being an only child and child development. The demographic patterns linked to the composition of only child families, including parental separation, may have evolved throughout time (Goisis et al., 2023). Further rigorous investigation on only children, their characteristics, and their development is essential to enhance our understanding of the reasons behind any behavioural differences or similarities with those who have siblings.



The research provided minimal insight into the diverse selection processes affecting different families, specifically about whether being an only child was a deliberate choice or a limitation (Goisis et al., 2023). Future research employing diverse data should investigate additional factors contributing to variation, such as sex, health, or fertility, since these studies will enhance our understanding of only children, their well-being, and the underlying mechanisms. There is a scarcity of research regarding stigmatisation, societal attitudes towards only children, and the potential differential treatment by teachers, all of which may contribute to discrepancies between children raised with siblings and those who are only children.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam results for only children exhibit considerable variation across Europe, as indicated by Choi and Monden's (2017) cross-national analysis. In contexts such as Sweden, Ireland, and Belgium, where they constitute a lesser proportion of children and their parents experience greater deprivation, only children perform poorly than other sibling configurations. All evidence indicates the necessity for empirical and theoretical methodologies to contextualise the status of only children in relation to other sibling groups, based on familial resources, which may be more significant in influencing a child's development and life opportunities than the mere fact of being an only child. This contrasts with resource dilution and confluence hypotheses.

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