



Laura with Paddy and, below right, with husband Jamie

FAMILY FIRSTS

Why we decided to have ONLY ONE CHILD

Writer Laura Kemp, 40, explains why she's part of a growing trend for couples to have one child – and how she makes up for the lack of siblings

My childhood memories are a kaleidoscope of technicolour scenes of fun thanks to growing up with a big sister. We loved to re-enact classic 80s moments – from *Kids From Fame* songs to *Star Wars*. I never got the leading role, being nearly three years younger than Cathryn, and it was the same when our cousins were visiting; I took what was on offer – never Princess Leia, always Stormtrooper No 3 – because it was enough to be in the gang, to feel included and loved.

When I revisit these memories it's now tinged with guilt because my seven-year-old son, Paddy, will never know the bond formed by such relationships. Like an increasing number of couples, my husband, Jamie, and I made the decision to have only one child, and though Paddy has a baby cousin – my sister's son – they live 200 miles away.

The urge to have my son was all-consuming. Months after meeting, Jamie and I both felt that instinctual desire to have a child together. And we were blessed to bring Paddy into our lives. But in the years that followed his birth, I realised I wasn't feeling the same need

to have another. When I met my friends' new babies, I expected to feel a longing for number two. Instead, I felt overwhelmed with "rather than me".

Yet I did feel the expectant, unspoken and now, I realise, self-inflicted pressure from living in a two-point-four-kids society. If I was asked when I was having the next one, my honest answer was "never". Some people felt I was being selfish, putting my needs over Paddy's,

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although my mum was convinced that, in time, I'd feel the yearning for another. I began to think, despite both Jamie and I being happy with just one, that perhaps we should try again.

But time passed. My son began to walk, talk and terrorise the cat, my career as an author began – and Jamie's new job as a sports reporter took him away for nearly half the year, leaving me to parent solo without the helping hand of a mum down the road. As Paddy started nursery, I was able to focus on writing, missing him but at the same time, appreciating two hours of quiet.

Now, at 40, there's some comfort in knowing I'm not alone. I have lots of friends who have 'onlys' like me, and

currently, almost half of families in the UK have only one child.*

But not a day goes past when I don't feel guilt at not giving him a sibling. To not have someone there, like my husband (who has a sister, who lives nearby) and I do when times are tough, is a constant worry. Paddy will have to bear stresses and strains of ageing parents without a sibling to rely on, and I can only hope he will find himself a support network of his own as he grows up.

Yet my beautiful son has grown into a hilarious, tender yet feisty "big" boy, full of stories and imagination, and outrage when the Wi-Fi is on the blink. He also has a large circle of friends and loves his after-school clubs. Paddy is as close to his best friend as to any sibling, and perhaps, as a result, he has never once asked why he doesn't have a little brother or sister. Ultimately, I feel that he doesn't – and won't – miss what he's never had.

Certainly, he can be all those things that only children can be labelled – from bright and able to socialise with adults, to domineering. And I admit that I've made mistakes along the way, sometimes putting more pressure on him because he's my first, and my only. But there's no way of knowing if a sibling would have changed that. And I wouldn't have him any other way. When the three of us sit at the kitchen table having tea, we are missing nothing. Our jigsaw is complete.



Only children are more likely to...

+ Have an edge in motivation, verbal skills and intellectual ability, as they don't have to share their parents' time and resources.

+ Be more likely to continue higher education.

+ Be as social and caring, and have just as many friends as their peers with siblings.

(Dr Susan Newman, author of *The Case For The Only Child: Your Essential Guide*)

BUT ALSO...

+ Have a sense of entitlement, as they don't have to compete with a firstborn.

+ Grow up too quickly if interaction is mainly with parents.

+ Be sensitive to criticism.

(Clinical psychologist Dr Funke Baffour) w&h