

Just One provides balanced, empathic advice on how to navigate this path with intention, wisdom, and compassion.

—MELINDA BLAU, co-author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer*

Just ONE



The New Science, Secrets, and Joy
of Parenting an Only Child

SUSAN NEWMAN, PHD

CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
PART I: The Rise of the Only Child	
CHAPTER 1: Fueling the Trend	3
CHAPTER 2: How We Decide	17
CHAPTER 3: An Emotional Tug-of-War.	25
CHAPTER 4: Still on the Fence.	35
PART II: The Art and Science of Raising One Child	
CHAPTER 5: The Fall of Only-Child Stereotypes	49
CHAPTER 6: The Things You Worry About	60
CHAPTER 7: Parenting Your Only Child.	71
CHAPTER 8: Thinking about Parenting Differently	85
CHAPTER 9: No Sibling: Am I Cheating My Child?	92
PART III: Into the Future	
CHAPTER 10: Who Will Care for You?	107
CHAPTER 11: Only Children Tell It Like It Is	115
CHAPTER 12: The New Normal: Just One.	126
Acknowledgments	137
Notes	139
Index	155
About the Author	TK

INTRODUCTION

Just One is about making the biggest decision of your life, then living it. There's no study that shows one family size is better than another. But the decades of research I've conducted, myriad studies I've reviewed, and my personal experiences as a parent reflect how far we've come in desiring and accepting the one-child family.

I like to think that I'm objective about family size. Before having an only child in my second marriage, my ex-husband and I raised his four children. I've lived and loved family life both ways—neither configuration was more fun or rewarding than the other. When I had my now adult son, only children and their parents were openly stigmatized. Over time, though, much has changed to correct erroneous thinking and persistent misconceptions.

I've reported on scientific findings about only children and their parents—namely, the attitudes and feelings surrounding this family dynamic—for more than 17 years as a regular contributor to *Psychology Today*. During that time, the perception of what makes a family has changed dramatically, and the myths about only children have dissipated. Parents of “just one” have become savvier and unapologetic (as they should be) about their choice. The family size that was once viewed unfavorably has become desirable. It's a striking, welcome change, especially if you're thinking about having one child, raising one child, or wonder if your child needs a sibling.

Developed countries throughout the world are in the middle of a long, ongoing baby bust. That wasn't the case decades ago when I had my son. Barely a month postpartum, the interrogation and accusations started: “When are you having another?” Then when people found out I wasn't having another child: “You can't do that to your child!” “You are



being selfish.” Myths about only children were rampant at the time. The über-personal questions I faced led me to wonder what could possibly be wrong with having one child. I made it my mission to find out what all the negativity was about, and over the years have done a series of research studies to explore this issue.

What I learned during my latest study will help you rein in anxieties related to making a choice about family size. *Just One* delves into the nagging questions that can leave you stuck. You’ll better understand the factors that may be influencing your decision and get informed, evidence-based guidance on how to parent an only child.

The pervasive questions that may persist under the surface—whether or not you actually had a choice in family size—will be explored:

- Is one child enough *for me*?
- Am I being selfish by limiting my family to “just one”?
- Does my child need a sibling? Am I cheating my child?
- Will my child be labeled spoiled, lonely, or worse?
- How do I raise an empathetic, responsible, content only child?
- Is the burden of caring for aging or ill parents too much for one child?

To find answers, I’ve interviewed many people who wrestled with these types of questions. The study I conducted for this book includes more than 130 people from diverse cultures and countries and economic means, some with one child who aren’t sure how many children they want, and others adamant that they only want one. Those I interview open up about their very personal struggles, discuss solutions that worked for them, and give their tips for raising one child. They share what works, vulnerably acknowledge their missteps, offer tools for success, and talk about the mindset needed to raise a single child with confidence.

Participants who agreed to be interviewed were single, partnered, married, heterosexual, bisexual, and gay. I spoke with parents of singletons, and only children as young as 18 and as old as 80. I interviewed



people living in regions all across the United States and around the world, from Europe to Australia and Singapore. I met with study subjects in person, spoke to them on the phone, and chatted on Zoom.

A shocking number of only children went on to have only children themselves. You'll read about only-child "dynasties" with generations of singletons in the same family. A few only children I spoke with had more than one child not necessarily because they had unhappy childhoods. A limited number of older only children who grew up in the era when inaccurate stereotypes about only children prevailed reported having a negative experience.

The responses to my questions are markedly different from what parents of only children and only children themselves told me just a dozen years ago, the last time I did large-scale only-child research. The negative only-child stereotypes have all but disappeared, and women are choosing to start their families at a later age and increasingly becoming single mothers. These choices have a clear effect on childbearing.

The pandemic also has many rethinking family size. Lockdowns with no childcare and e-learning demands on parents have underscored how much more difficult parenting multiple children can be. Although the threat of COVID has faded for many, the worries and attitudes the pandemic generated will probably linger and affect family size.

"The only child is becoming the norm," writes Camilla Cavendish, a contributing editor and columnist at the *Financial Times*, which, like many other media outlets, closely follows changing family dynamics. "As populations shrink, we will have to redefine our notion of the family."¹

The shift toward families with one child is an integral part of the change in family structure, and a statistical fact, yet somehow it has largely remained a secret. The one-child family is outpacing the two-child family. The US Census underscores what's really happening: A growing number of families are having one child instead of two or more. According to 2020 figures, nearly 15 million parents lived in households with one child under 18, compared with about 13 million who had two children in the household.² As of 2022, the average family size was 3.1 people.³

INTRODUCTION

You don't have to take my word for it. Before the pandemic, the Pew Research Center's senior researcher on fertility and family demographics, Gretchen Livingston, noted, "The one-child family is definitely on the rise."⁴

It is the fastest-growing family unit, driven by women like 36-year-old Stella, the mother of a 5-year-old. "Just because I can have another child," she says, "doesn't necessarily mean I should."

If you're raising a singleton now, as Stella is, you may worry about your child's socialization and independence and how your child will feel as an adult. If so, tuck this thought away: Having siblings has less bearing on their development than you may think. Today, decisions about family size center around being the best parent instead of the number of children you have. It's about being content, finding joy in your life, and instilling that delight in your child.

Once you are privy to the new science, you'll be able to appreciate the bonuses of having one child for yourself *and* for your only child—insights that have not been broadcast loudly enough. The pluses are vast and can include, among others, an academic edge for the child and close, long-lasting bonds with parents.

In *Just One*, we'll cover these benefits. We'll also highlight the concerns that lead parents to decide to have one child or to think twice about having kids at all. One of these may be giving you pause: your job or career aspirations, your age, infertility, the cost of raising children, and less-than-ideal family leave policies and childcare options, especially in the United States. In these pages, you will find men and women who grappled with these issues and make sense of why the number of one-child families keeps growing and the stereotypes keep fading, and why so many are embracing and celebrating this popular one-child family dynamic.

Order *Just One* Now on
[Amazon](#) • [Barnes & Noble](#) • [Books-A-Million](#) • [IndieBound](#)
or wherever you buy your books.