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Is Britain becoming a one-child nation?

The number of families with a single child is growing at a faster rate than ever. Damon Syson, father of one, weighs up the pros and cons of greedy breeding

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Damon Syson with partner Bethan and two-year-old daughter Ava Photograph: Sam Jones

Mealtimes at David and Paula's house are a rowdy affair. With three children under six, there's no place for etiquette. Cutlery is mainly used for percussion. Food dropped on the floor is still fair game if you can reach it before the dog. My daughter Ava, who is two, stares with a mixture of bewilderment and delight as Josh, three, climbs on to the table and drops his trousers. Pretty soon she's joining in, and loving it. Having three children has meant big changes for David and Paula. They moved from London to Hertfordshire, Paula gave up her job. They sold the Audi and bought a people carrier - no ordinary saloon could accommodate the three car-seats, double pushchair, single pushchair and all the other paraphernalia.

After lunch the children play. For about 10 minutes there's something approaching calm. Then there are tears when Jethro, who's nearly six, decides he likes the look of the monster truck Josh is playing with and exercises his *droit de seigneur*. I marvel at David's calm. A lot of the time, he admits, he feels like a referee at an ice hockey game.

We decide to go to the pub. Leaving the house feels like gearing up for an attempt on the North Pole. As far as I can see, everything is a three-man job. I wonder how Paula manages during the week, when David is at work. I think of how long it takes to coax Ava into clothes and out of the house in the morning, and triple it. David admits things are a bit hectic. "But it's getting easier each day and the nice thing is, it feels like the family is complete. Give it a year and we'll be playing two-a-side football in the garden."

I ask him how Jethro took to the arrival of his first younger brother. David snorts: "How would you feel? You've had your mother's undivided attention for three years and overnight you're sidelined. His world fell apart."

I'm asking this question for a reason. My partner Bethan and I are currently debating whether or not to try for a second child. As we leave David and Paula's, I'm full of admiration for the cool, un-neurotic way they deal with their new life. I'm drawn to the rough and tumble of it all, to the ever-shifting dynamics of the five-way relationship. It's what you imagine when you think of a family, rather than just two large people staring down at a small person. And yet, at the same time, I wonder how - or maybe if - Bethan and I would cope with the introduction of another person into our lives. We're already struggling - financially, emotionally - with one child. Would giving Ava a sibling "complete" our family, or would it be the equivalent of tossing a hand grenade at our already shaky domestic equilibrium?

Like many couples with one child, we are at a crossroads. Money is scarce, Bethan and I both work full-time. Both of us found the first year of parenthood hard. Things are just getting easier now. It feels like we're emerging from a dark tunnel. The idea of putting ourselves through it all again seems like madness. We're not alone. Although two children remains the most common family size in the UK, the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics indicate a steady rise in the number of only children. In 1972, 18 per cent of children were living in a one-child household. This had risen to 22 per cent in 1981, remaining at a steady level until 1991 and rising again to 24 per cent in 2001. By 2007, the last year for which figures are available, 26 per cent of the UK's children were living without siblings.

It's likely that the number of only children will continue to rise. Historically, the birth rate drops when there is a national crisis or recession. In the US, for example, there was a steep decline during the Great Depression and again in 1976 following the oil crisis. The US Census Bureau reports that women approaching the end of their childbearing years in 2004 had an average of 1.9 children, compared with 3.1 for their 1976 counterparts. In New York, more than 30% of children are only children. It may no longer be unusual to have one child, and yet the received wisdom is still that, biology permitting, you must have more. Parents who choose to bring up an only child are dubbed "selfish". Your few years of extra convenience, they warn, will be paid for, psychologically, by your child. To create a happy, functional family unit, having more than one child is seen as vital.

"It's a no-brainer, isn't it," said one father-of-two I chatted to recently. "Sure, life's hell for five years, but then it's job done and you can leave them to it. They amuse themselves."

As attractive as that sounds, I'm not convinced. Apart from the morbid rationale of equipping yourself with "an heir and a spare", what are the genuine benefits of having more than one child? Only children get a bad press - they are accused of being spoilt and needy, of being perfectionists and ill-equipped to deal with the emotional cut and thrust of adult life. But there are convincing arguments for raising just one child. Parents feel they can offer their best, both financially and emotionally. With two or more kids, the resources have further to travel.

In spite of the growing number of only children, a childhood with siblings is still the social norm. This has resulted in the stereotyping of the only-child experience. A 2001 study in Finland went as far as to "support the hypothesis that growing up as an only child is associated with violent criminality among males". We may have a daughter, but it still gives you pause for thought. From a selfish parental point of view, there are certain advantages that emerge from the morass of studies. Only children report having closer ties with their parents. They are slightly more risk-averse, less likely to go through a rebellious phase. In adult life, they are more likely to live close to their parents than those with siblings.

Whatever we decide, we have to decide it quickly. Bethan is 37, so holding fire until Ava is at school would mean she'd be 41. Experts agree that one of the main reasons for the increase in only children is that women are leaving it later to have children. We have discussed the question of a second child ad nauseam, but only recently. In the first year after Ava's birth, with the memory of colic still fresh in our minds, it was out of the question. Whenever people asked us when (always when, never if) we planned to have a second child, my stock answer was: "Around the time they host the winter Olympics in Hell." Bethan, meanwhile, would simply hiss: "Never again!"

But gradually the memory fades. You look at friends with two or more children and hanker after some of that domestic hurly-burly. Moreover, anyone faced with the unbridled solipsism of a toddler may wonder if the only way to ensure your child doesn't grow up as a frightful egotist is to throw another baby into the equation. Bethan is an only child, brought up by a single mother, and she has turned out, in my view, exceptionally well - apart from suffering from an over-developed sense of fairness (I'm convinced she counts out the green beans to make sure we each get an equal number) and a tendency towards collecting things (she still has a display of more than 100 scented rubbers at her mother's house). And yet we both worry that by failing to provide Ava with a sibling we will be somehow depriving her of a vital component for a successful, happy life and that in years to come she may feel she has missed out on something.

It certainly seems to be true for many grown-up only children. Google "only child" and

you'll discover a number of websites in which "onlies" express their feelings of loss, grieving for the siblings they never had. There are even only-child conferences and workshops.

Bernice Sorensen is a psychotherapist based in the west country, and the author of *Only Child Experience and Adulthood*. Through her website, onlychild.org.uk, she has collected thousands of personal accounts from adult only children which contain a number of common themes.

"I've been surprised at the number of people I hear from who have spent their whole life wishing they had a sibling," she says. "Usually they're people who have been brought up in isolated places. They feel a huge lack in their lives. Generally it comes to a head later in their life, especially when their parents get older."

Without doubt the biggest challenge for onlies is the realisation that when your parents need care, the burden will fall squarely on your shoulders, and when they die you will be left alone. At that point, a sibling can be a huge comfort.

Sorensen believes that many only children find it difficult to form relationships in later life. (I have a sudden flashback to the 1970s sitcom *Sorry*, starring Ronnie Corbett, about the infantilised adult only child still struggling to break away from domineering parents.) She also believes that because they have "quasi-adult" ways of approaching things, they can be made to feel odd at school. "A child may be able to hold her own in adult conversation, but at school he or she might be bullied, simply because they don't know how to interact with other children. A child saying something in the voice of a parent... You can imagine how that goes down."

I post a message on the site's noticeboard and three people respond. Jane, 34, is privately educated, now works in sales and is based in southwest London. Jane first started taking an interest in her only-child upbringing after the break-up of a long-term relationship a year ago. "It made me question aspects of my personality," she says. "I found myself asking, 'Why has this failed?' I'm not saying my relationship failed because I'm an only child, but I think it was a factor."

Jane describes her upbringing as privileged, but says she was the victim of "horrendous pressure" from her parents. "All their hopes were on my shoulders - education, career, it still goes on. They'd be like, 'Why didn't you get into that school? Why didn't you do well on sports day?' Sometimes it felt like they were ganging up on me. Being an only child wasn't just about not having a playmate, it was about not having an ally. If you do argue with someone it's your parents and they're always right. So as an adult you become very good at sitting there meekly, and taking a lot of crap."

While the other people who contact me have, on the whole, positive memories of growing up as only children, it's clear from talking to Jane that she and many others are convinced the experience left them emotionally hamstrung.

In the past, this was also the professional belief. At the turn of the last century, psychologist Granville Stanley Hall compared being an only child to having a "disease". And in the 1920s, Austrian psychoanalyst Alfred Adler argued that because the only child has never experienced the trauma of being "dethroned" by the arrival of another child, he or she is left in an arrested state of egocentricity. Adler's theories have since been challenged by Toni Falbo, professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas's Population Research Center. She has studied the outcomes of only children in the US and China for more than 30 years and insists that, if anything, only children have a slight advantage when it comes to academic achievement, motivation and self-esteem.

Falbo also warns against treating birth-order research like some sort of crystal ball into the future of your child. "The differences between one and two children are not night and day," she explains. "In terms of educational outcomes, the disparity is minimal. This type of research doesn't speak to the individual."

And what of the legions of onlies who complain of feeling alienated and odd on websites such as www.beinganonly.com? "Yes, you'll find siblingless people who are miserable," Falbo counters. "But you will also encounter siblinged people who are miserable. I would say that if you take a more representative sampling of people - that is not just people who want to complain and find friends to complain with on the internet - on average only children do not feel depressed or alienated or odd." In other words, growing up an only child may be a convenient peg on which to hang insecurities.

The question remains that if there aren't really any major differences between adult onlies and those of us who grew up with siblings, why does the societal prejudice against only children persist? Falbo believes it's hardwired: "There is a lingering belief that's been around probably since humans first existed that to have just one child is somehow dangerous, both for you and for the continuation of your race. In the past a lot of children died. You'd have had to be crazy to only have one."

To get a clearer idea of what life has in store for Ava as an only child, I decide I need to consult someone experiencing it first-hand. Chloe is on Star Doll when I phone. "It's like a virtual world where you make friends and get famous," she informs me. All her friends from school go on it so it's a bit like socialising even though she's alone. Chloe is nine, but she has the confident delivery of a teenager. When she grows up she wants to be "an organiser. Like parties and stuff. Yesterday I had a Valentine's party and I organised quite a lot of stuff. I made strawberries dipped in chocolate. This year I'm

organising an Easter egg hunt."

Does she like being an only child? "I think it's quite good," she says, "but sometimes I do regret being an only child because I don't have anyone to play with on weekends. The good things are that when you're shopping, most of the money gets spent on you. And when you're at the park and your dad's pushing you on the swings, he doesn't have to stop and push someone else."

What about people who say only children are spoiled? "I think it's true," she laughs. "If I had a brother or sister we wouldn't get as much. I get quite a lot."

All the same, it feels quite strange when she goes round to her friend's house: "I join in and try to pretend her brother is my brother, too. It's noisier and they fight a lot more. Mainly they fight over the remote control or the computer, whereas at home I get to watch what I want. My mum's trying to teach me fighting skills because I don't have a brother or sister."

Talking to Chloe is like getting a snapshot of where Bethan, Ava and I might be in seven years time if we decide to stick at one. The situation her parents, Sue and Chris, find themselves in feels almost identical to ours. Sue had Chloe at 35, the same age Bethan had Ava. At the time she was working in advertising, but she has since retrained as a teacher.

"I completely underestimated how hard it would be to go back to work full time and leave Chloe," she tells me. "For the first three years it made me increasingly unhappy. The situation began to really grind me down. So the idea of having another child seemed a bit crazy. Plus, we were in a two-bedroom flat so having another baby would have meant moving to a bigger place, which would put even more financial pressure on us."

Did she feel under pressure to have a second child? "Definitely. I remember a neighbour of ours saying that he didn't really think a one-child family was a 'proper' family." After much soul-searching, they made a decision to raise Chloe as an only child. "With hindsight," Sue says, "I'm still happy with the decision we made. It's a really enjoyable experience just the three of us. You see plenty of examples of how having a second child can wring the life out of a relationship."

For some people, the decision to have only one child is taken for them by circumstances. Relationship breakdown - usually within the first year after the birth of the child - is a major factor. Between 1972 and 2007 there has been a dramatic rise (from 2% to 7%) in the number of households consisting of a mother living alone with one child. The number of men with one child has remained steady at 1%. This means

that in 2007 there were 910,000 only children living with a single mother. If you throw in the single dads that's over 1 million kids living with a single parent. There is no official term for this, but we could call them Spoc (Single Parent Only Child) households.

From a developmental point of view, growing up an only child with a single parent brings distinct problems. Their domestic arrangement can be very intense, and often the child can end up acting as a replacement partner, leading to a blurring of the adult/child boundaries. This is something Olivia, 40, is all too aware of. She separated from her husband when their daughter Sasha was just four months old. Sasha is now nine and lives with her mother in west London. Her father now lives in America. "I'm very conscious," she says, "of not burdening Sasha with anything you might burden a partner with in a relationship, but I have to watch myself sometimes. She's so intelligent and articulate that sometimes it's easy to forget she's only nine."

Having weighed up the options, one thing is clear, I've seen no real evidence to suggest that if we decide not to have a second child, we will be adversely affecting Ava's future. One important fact to emerge, however, is that if we spend our whole time worrying about her growing up disadvantaged and bored and lonely, we will probably convey that to her and she will grow up thinking that she missed out on something. The secret seems to be to make your decision and free yourself from any lingering guilt. The ideal family size, I've come to understand, is whatever works best for you. For Bethan and me, forcing ourselves into four more years of penury and stress will almost certainly have a more negative effect on our child than failing to provide her with a sibling.

At this point I realise the one person I haven't consulted is Ava herself. I sit her down and ask: "Ava, would you like a brother or a sister to play with?"

"No," she says, without hesitation. "What I want is a yellow dog."