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Lilly



“It will cost \$227,000 to raise a child born in 2010 to age 18 (excluding college expenses).”

Glenn C. Altschuler, Ph.D.



This Is America

The case for progress

by Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D.

Flying Solo

Review of One and Only: The Freedom of Having an Only Child, by Lauren Sandler

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Some myths die hard. Others don't die at all. In 1895, in a study entitled Of Peculiar and Exceptional Children, G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association, proclaimed that "it will be noticed that creatures which have large families, whether beast or birds, have less trouble in rearing them than those which have only one or two young." In a lecture delivered more than a decade later, Hall declared "Being an only child is a disease in itself." A cottage industry of parenting literature, journalist Lauren Sandler reminds us, "sprung up in the fallow provinces of Hall's child study movement." Although researcher Norman Fenton produced evidence in 1928 that only children tended to be more generous, sociable, and self-assured than kids with siblings, almost no one listened. Although subsequent studies have confirmed his conclusions, Sandler points out that the stereotypes of the selfish only child and the selfish parent of one have persisted into the twenty-first century. In a recent Gallup poll, 76 percent of Americans deemed being an only-child a serious disadvantage in life. And only 3 percent believe that a single child family is the ideal.

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In *One and Only*, Sandler, who is an only child and the mother of an only child, tries to inter the myths once and for all. Charming and informative, the book draws on empirical work in psychology to demonstrate, clearly and convincingly, that onlies are at least as well adjusted and successful in school and at work as other kids. And that the image of siblings splashing one another in a bubble bath or sharing secrets about their adolescent crushes is, itself, something of a myth. Sandler also makes a compelling case that having one child can provide parents, especially mothers, with a more fulfilling personal and professional life.

Sandler makes the obvious, but often overlooked, point that each child dilutes parents' resources, including time, attention, and money. She cites studies showing that the more parents talk to a child, the higher his or her IQ will be; and as the number of siblings go up, the intellectual environment in the family goes down, regardless of its educational level, and mom and dad tend to adopt more authoritarian forms of control in the household. According to the USDA, Sandler reveals, it will cost about \$227,000 dollars to raise a child born in 2010 to age eighteen (excluding college-related expenses). Adding in the loss of a mother's income – a single child reduces her employment by about eight hours a week and a second child leads to a further reduction of about twelve hours – brings the total to about one million dollars.

As she shows that only children flourish as they fly solo, Sandler identifies "complexities cold data cannot reveal." Only children, she suggests, can experience "light that can warm until it burns," in the form of intense, double-edged relationships with their parents. Without another kid to distract them, no lousy report grade, no curfew violated, no silence at the dinner table, escapes their attention, and, in all likelihood, disapproval, sometimes with "undertones of a legacy tarnished by the only person who will carry it on." Virtually every only child she interviewed, Sandler reveals, admitted "a consuming dread" of the loneliness of life without them. "We onlies fear the winds that howl around the last one standing," Sandler writes, elegantly, if a bit hyperbolically, especially in light of the evidence she has introduced that only children report less psychological distress than their peers with siblings. "We fear the black silence of carrying those

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ever-fading histories alone.”

Sandler also makes a carefully reasoned – and emotional – claim that when the resources of parents are stretched thin – each child, for example, adds approximately 120 hours of housework a year – they lose the space to ruminate about and act on opportunities and challenges that are important to them. “It’s madness enough,” she declares, “when there’s only one Ivan to manage....Multiply that madness by two or three” and it’s probably “time to subtract something.”

A growing number of adults in the United States may now be ready to agree with her. A survey conducted in 2007, Sandler reports, found that by about 3-1 respondents believe that the main purpose of marriage is the “mutual happiness and fulfillment” of the adults rather than “the bearing and raising of the children.”

The more children we have, Sandler notes, the more we accelerate the environmental degradation of the planet. But, as she well knows, that’s not the reason two consenting adults, whether or not they are “greener-than-thou,” or have drunk the Kool-Aid about ideal families, will or will not decide to be fruitful and multiply.



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Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D., is Vice President for University Relations, Dean of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, and The Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell. [more...](#)

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