

Quantitative Review of the Only Child Literature: Research Evidence and Theory Development

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Six meta-analyses of the research literature on the only child were conducted in order to evaluate the status of the only child and to guide theory development in this area. The 115 studies included here generated enough information to justify meta-analyses on the following topics: achievement, adjustment, character, intelligence, parent-child relationships, and sociability. Only borns were found to surpass all others except firstborns and people from two-child families on achievement and intelligence. They also surpassed all non-only borns, especially people from families with three or more children, in character and they surpassed all non-only borns, especially those from large families, in the positivity of the parent-child relationship. Across all developmental outcomes, only children were found to be indistinguishable from firstborns and people from small families. Theories relating to only child deprivation and only child uniqueness were discredited by the results of the six meta-analyses. The meta-analysis supported parent-child relationships as an important factor in producing the developmental outcomes attained by only children, firstborns, and people from two-child families.

In this article we report the results of six meta-analyses of the research literature on the only child, and use these results to evaluate the status of the only child and to guide theory development in this area. Since 1925, over 200 studies have been published that either focused directly on the only child or included only children within a larger framework of investigation. Reviewers of the sibling relationships, birth order, or family size literature have bemoaned the lack of theory in this general area as well as in the specific area of only children (B. N. Adams, 1972; Kammeyer, 1967; Polit, 1982; Rodgers & Thompson, 1984; Schvaneveldt & Ihinger, 1979). Ex post facto explanations for observed differences between only borns and others are commonplace, as are inconsistencies in the research results (B. N. Adams, 1972; Falbo, 1984; Kammeyer, 1967; Polit, 1982). However, regardless of their theoretical orientation, researchers have often assumed that the absence of siblings has a profound impact on the developmental outcomes of children.

From a theoretical standpoint, only children represent a useful and challenging concept. Because they do not grow up with siblings, only borns are a natural comparison group for those studying the impact siblings have on development. For this reason, data on only borns are frequently found in the literature on sibling processes and relationships. Only children represent a challenge to birth order theorists, who have classified only borns in a variety of ways. Alternately, they have been categorized as firstborns, as last borns, or as a totally distinct class

(B. N. Adams, 1972; Adler, 1964; Falbo, 1981; Schvaneveldt & Ihinger, 1979).

Finally, only borns also represent the offspring from a single family size, the one-child family. Therefore, data about only borns can be found in the more sociologically oriented family size literature. Here, only borns and their families are frequently considered as similar to other small families, such as two-child families.

Prejudice Against Only Borns

Appreciation of the theoretical significance of only children may have been hindered by the long-standing prejudice against them. Psychologists and psychiatrists have historically portrayed only children as developing abnormally and acquiring undesirable personalities and social behaviors. Hall reportedly said, "Being an only child is a disease in itself" (Fenton, 1928, p. 547). Later, Brill (1922) wrote, "It would be best for the individual and the race that there should be no only children" (p. 28).

As the science of psychology developed, investigators made empirical comparisons between only children and others. Although these early investigators were severely limited by the tools available to them, they compared only children to others on a variety of attributes, including IQ and teacher evaluations of personality. In general, these studies failed to support the earlier negative image of only children. One of the earliest studies (Fenton, 1928) reported that the teacher evaluations of only children were comparable to those given to non-only children. These evaluations included ratings on such traits as generosity, sociability, and obedience. In other studies, only children were found to be more intelligent (Lentz, 1927) and gregarious (Goodenough & Leahy, 1927), and to have fewer behavior problems in school (Blatz & Bott, 1927) than non-only children. The

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Lois Wladis Hoffman, Martin L. Hoffman

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