What’s up with the ‘only child’ family?

By Susan Newman, Ph.D.

There’s a growing trend toward one-child families. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that, in the last 20 years, the number of families with “singletons” or “onlys” has more than doubled.

This is a worldwide phenomenon: 46 percent of England’s families now have one child, and families are smaller in most industrialized countries including Italy, Portugal, Spain, South Korea and Japan. They’re shrinking in India as well and, of course, China adopted its strict one-child policy in 1979.

Why is this happening now?

The increase of women in the workplace has combined with a number of social changes to encourage one-child families. For example, the pattern of marrying later results in fewer remaining years of fertility, and many older women especially have difficulty conceiving a second child. An unstable economy also deters people from having children, as does the high cost of raising and educating a child. Many parents say they want to provide the best for their children in terms of time, attention and educational opportunities—and they feel they can manage this with one child, but not more.

Many families would like to have more kids but cannot or are discouraged by forces over which they have little or no control such as divorce, tightened adoption regulations or fertility problems. Others are constrained financially to support children from a previous marriage or by unforeseen complications with an aging parent.

Pressure to have more children

The increasing number of parents who choose to have an only child and are happy with that decision may be subject to pressure from family, friends and even their own child (as well as perfect strangers) to have a larger family. This pressure, along with widespread and negative myths and stereotypes about only children, can create doubt and render the decision more difficult.

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Myths about singletons have been passed down through generations. They received “scientific” backing beginning around 1896 when a few psychologists conducted studies and reported that only children had a host of “peculiarities” including being lonely, bossy, selfish and spoiled.

Fact vs. fiction

Most concerns about raising just one child are without merit today. Here are some of the myths debunked by recent research.

On social skills There are great benefits to having siblings, but being accepted and well-liked are not among them. A study conducted at Ohio State University of 13,500 kids in grades 7–12 reported that only children were just as popular with their peers as kids who had siblings. Onlies were also found to be as capable as other children of settling disputes, compromising and understanding that they are not the center of the universe.

On imaginary friends Sometimes people worry that onlies have more “pretend friends” than kids with siblings have. Marjory Taylor, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon, found that it’s not solely firstborns or those who have no siblings who create imaginary companions—65 percent of all children have pretend pals. The appearance of these companions is not necessarily a sign of loneliness or psychological distress.

On independence The myth that only children are shy, introverted and more dependent than kids with siblings is just plain wrong, says Jerome Kagan, the prominent Harvard psychologist. His studies have shown that shyness has a biological basis and is often outgrown or overcome. He found that only children are the same as their peers who had siblings in this respect.

On self-reliance Most singletons become increasingly self-reliant as they get older. They want friends, they want to be involved and they do whatever it takes to achieve that goal. Independence is fostered more by parents who do not “hover” than by the presence of siblings in the house. “Helicopter parents” exist in homes with both only children and siblings alike.

On being spoiled There’s a perception that the parents of onlies indulge their children more than parents with more than one child do. Large studies have evaluated only children in China and many other countries and have found that singletons are no more spoiled than the population overall.

Parents who consistently support commercialism and submit to a child’s demands create spoiled kids—with or without siblings. “Spoiling” is a parenting problem not cured by having two or more children.

What parents can do

Just as larger families cope with sibling rivalry, favoritism and fighting, parents with one child face their own set of challenges. For one, they need to be mindful of the intensity of a close-knit family. Real differences between onlies and children with siblings, wherever they grow up, have more to do with how parents treat their child than the fact that they have one child.

Mapping the future

In the not-so-distant past, when only-child families were an extreme minority, many parents of one felt odd or ostracized. That’s changing quickly with the times, the economics and the social atmosphere. As the number of onlies grows, any lingering stigmas will continue to fall away.

Even so, getting people with dated outlooks to think differently is one of the hurdles parents with one child confront. But before you can influence how skeptics think about only children, you may have to change how you yourself think and respond. Abandon any guilt or shame for deciding not to give birth to or adopt a second child. Stop the “blame game” if you are playing it. And if your only child exhibits poor behavior, for example, don’t assume it’s because of an absent sibling. Real differences between onlies and children with siblings, wherever they grow up, have more to do with how parents parent than the fact that they have one child.
Talking to your kids about ‘sexting’

Young people these days seem very comfortable talking about all aspects of their lives online. I’m trying to impress on my teenage kids that “sexting” a revealing photo or explicit message can have serious, long-term consequences, beyond just being embarrassed. I’d appreciate your take on this.

—M.J., Gainesville, FL

In a world where anything can be copied, sent, posted and seen by a huge audience, there’s no such thing as being able to control information. And you’re right. When a photo or message that was meant to be private goes public, the subject almost always feels humiliated.

The website commonsensemedia.org offers this advice for parents:

☐ Don’t wait for an incident to happen before you talk to your children about the potential consequences of sexting.

☐ Remind your kids that once an image is sent, it can never be retrieved and they will lose control of it. Ask how they would feel if their teachers, parents or the entire school saw the picture or message, because that’s what happens—all the time.

☐ Let teens know that you understand how kids can be dared or pushed into sending something. Tell them that no matter how big the social pressure is, the potential humiliation can be much worse.

☐ Teach your children that the buck stops with them. If someone sends them a pornographic photo, they should delete it immediately. It’s better to be part of the solution than the problem. Besides, if they do send it on, they’re breaking the law.

☐ Visit ThatsNotCool.com. It’s a terrific website that gives kids the language and support to take texting and cell phone power back into their own hands. It’s also a great resource for parents who may be uncomfortable dealing directly with this issue.

Have you become a procrastinator of pleasures?

Psychologists and economists are studying the strange impulse to put off until tomorrow what we could enjoy today. They cite unused gift certificates, expired frequent flyer miles and all those vacations we promise ourselves that don’t happen.

A UCLA marketing study found that people who moved to Chicago, Dallas and London visited fewer local landmarks during their entire first year than the typical tourist saw during a two-week stay. Chicagoans in the study visited more landmarks in other cities, and their local sightseeing was done mainly in the course of entertaining out-of-towners.

If there’s no deadline, people tend to put off going to local attractions to a time when they’re not so busy. But that time never seems to come.

UCLA’S Suzanne Shu, Ph.D., suggests: Don’t wait for the “perfect scenario.” Cash in gift certificates quickly. Use frequent flyer miles by summer. And instead of waiting for a special occasion to indulge yourself, create one.

Dads too struggle with work-life balance

Balancing work and family life has long been thought of as a woman’s issue. But several studies have reported that men struggle just as much—and sometimes even more—to fulfill both their job and personal responsibilities.

A Boston University study, for one, suggests that new dads face a subtle bias in the workplace—which presumes that having a baby will not make much of a difference in their lives.

However, the Families and Work Institute in New York has found that, in dual-earner couples, 59 percent of men report “work-life conflict,” compared with 45 percent of women. Institute President Ellen Galinsky explains: “The conflict is newer to men, and it feels bigger than the same amount of conflict might feel to a woman. Women have been doing it for a longer time, and they have more role models.”

Joan C. Williams, director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law, agrees: “Men are facing the same clash of social ideals that women have faced since the 1970s—how do you be a good parent and a good worker?”

A complicating factor is that work time is eating up more and more family time. The Georgetown University Law Center reports that couples are working a combined average of 63 hours a week, up from 52.5 hours in 1970. And these days only 40 percent of U.S. families have a stay-at-home person to handle domestic demands during the workday.

How much work at home are men really doing?

An earlier study found that nearly half of dads feel like they provide “most or an equal amount of child care,” but only 31 percent of moms gave their husband that much credit. There’s an even wider perception gap for cooking and housecleaning. Half of the men say they do as much work as their wives, but 70 percent of women say they still “do it all.”

Women continue to orchestrate the family’s daily events and activities, especially for kids. For example, mothers typically are the one who make dental appointments, know when new shoes are needed, and stay on top of a million other details.

Fathers often do things like fix bikes, put outdoor toys away and play video games with kids—but mothers may not give them enough credit for these activities.

“We women consistently underestimate how much their husbands do,” says marriage historian Stephanie Coontz. “They don’t always recognize that what he does with the kids is a form of care, too.”

This is your column. We invite you to send questions about work and family life or tell us how you solved a problem that you think a lot of people face. Write: Dr. Susan Ginsberg, Work & Family Life, 305 Madison Avenue, Suite 1143, New York, NY 10165. E-mail: workfam@aol.com.
Try listening more, talking less with older parent

By Joseph A. Ilardo, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., and Carole Rothman, Ph.D.

Talking with your parents may seem like the most natural thing in the world—after all, you’ve done it all your life. So “planning” for an in-depth conversation with a specific goal in mind may seem contrived.

But if you don’t plan, you may create unnecessary distress and actually undermine the effects of a potentially productive conversation. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when you have a sticky or difficult talk with your parents.

Set the tone for meaningful communication. If you remain calm, your composure will increase the likelihood that everyone will listen to each other, maintain perspective and respond more or less logically. If you are panicky and start to yell, or if you talk at your parents rather than to them, they will probably yell back, cry or otherwise become upset. At that point, good communication has come to an end.

It’s important to listen more than talk. To get your parents involved in solving the particular problem at hand, you have to find out what they feel, need and want. You can do this best by asking them questions and listening to what they say rather than dictating right away what you think ought to be done.

Listen actively. Tune in to the feelings your parents are expressing with their gestures, facial expressions, postures, use of eye contact and tone of voice.

For example, your mother may try to reassure you (and herself) by saying something like, “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” But is she saying what she really means? Perhaps not.

Use “I” messages much of the time. These are personal statements of feelings, free of labels, judgments or advice. For example: “I’ve been very worried about your not eating, Mom.” Or “Dad, I get upset when you lose track of the money I give you.”

What if your parents are behaving like bullies? When a discussion heats up and emotions run high, your parents may try to intimidate you by shouting, threatening or being offensive and rude. One option is to take a break from the conversation. Tell your parents that you will not be drawn into an argument and leave the room if you can. Or, without being rude yourself, try “you messages” to set limits. For example: “You may not talk to me like that.” Or “You’re out of line, Dad. Stop shouting!” Or “You may be able to frighten others by raising your voice, but you won’t get away with that with me.”

What if the conversation gets out of control? Try to slow your parents down if they seem to be rushing. Try to calm them down if they are agitated. Hold up your hand to signal that they should stop or take a moment to gather their thoughts.

Remind your parents that you are talking in order to reach an agreement, not to out-shout each another or prove that someone is right and someone is wrong. Take out a pad and get ready to write things down.

Say something like, “I really want to understand your concerns, Mom. Tell me again, slowly, what you’re worried about. I’m going to take notes.” And do it! This action will let your parents know that you are taking their words seriously and should serve both to calm them and to convey your respect.

Avoid patronizing. Do not underestimate your older relatives’ capabilities. You may be providing care for them, but you are not their parents’ parent. Talk straight and with respect.

You may need to make some age-related accommodations such as talking more loudly or at a slower pace, but do not treat your parents as though they were difficult or incompetent children. This undermines your ability to have a meaningful dialogue with them. The same goes for withholding important or distressing information. Don’t do it.

5 key roles you may need to play

Information provider If your parents are hiring a home health aide, for example, you might provide them with a prescreened list of agencies and offer to help arrange for an on-site visit.

Facilitator If your parents are upset, you may need to help them vent. Listen patiently and accept their feelings without judging. They will be reassured to know that you understand.

Fact seeker If there’s something you need to know from your parents, you must be able to ask questions and accept answers in a straightforward, nonjudgmental way.

Encourager Remind your parents that other people have faced similar problems and have solved them. Let them know that it’s important to keep trying until something works.

Peacemaker There will be times when your parents do not agree with each other, and their disagreement may be intense. If your parents are arguing and their conflicts are making your job more difficult, you may need to mediate the dispute to help keep the peace.

—J.A.I. and C.R.R.

“Now I understand what bothered you. It helped to take some notes.”

—Adapted from the authors’ book “Are Your Parents Driving You Crazy? How to Resolve the Most Common Dilemmas with Aging Parents” (VanderWYk & Burnham).
Make sure teens get the ‘drive time’ they need

Teenagers get into about 10 times as many crashes as middle-aged drivers do, but not for the reasons you might suspect. A new study of 800 accidents involving teen drivers found that two-thirds were due not to reckless behavior such as speeding but to three novice errors: failing to scan the road, misjudging driving conditions and becoming distracted.

Parental role is critical

Since a short Drivers Ed course is not enough to make a teenager a safe driver, the role of parents is key. The best teaching, of course, is by example. If your children have observed a careful, considerate, skillful driver over the years, they’re ahead of the game. If not, it’s time to change your ways.

When the time comes for you to move into the passenger seat to assume the “instructor” role, and your teenage son or daughter is behind the wheel, here are some pointers to help your child be a good, the bad and the idiots.

Look in all directions. Teens are five times more likely than adults to get into left-turn accidents. Teach young drivers to always be wary and keep their wheels straight until they know it’s safe to turn.

Watch out for surprises. Cars pull out and car doors open suddenly, drivers exit from parked cars, and so on. Point out the clues: brake lights, turn signals, smoke from exhaust pipes, someone in the driver’s seat. Look out for pedestrians (especially kids) and animals darting into the road.

Play 20 questions. Without checking in the mirror, can your child describe the car behind you? On your left? Does your teen know how fast he/she is driving? How much gas is left in the tank? Ask questions like “What color is the car three cars ahead of you?” or “What color jacket is the person on the sidewalk wearing?”

Give clear directions. Say where to do something before you say what to do: “When you get to the next corner, turn right.” Avoid saying right except for turns. Say correct, so there’s no confusion. Be explicit when you give directions: “Stop before you turn.”

Be constructive. Saying “I’d feel better if you gave that car a little more room” will be better received than “How many times do I have to tell you to stop tailgating?” Unless it’s an emergency, say “Bring the car to a stop” rather than yelling “Stop!” Make your positive feedback very specific: “Smooth turn.” “Good job parking.”

Discuss the research

On drinking and driving. Teen drivers who have had 1–2 drinks are 7 times more likely to be killed than sober drivers of any age. With 3–4 drinks, teens are 40 times more likely to be killed.

On driver safety. As a group, teens are less likely than adults to use safety belts, and their use of seat belts is least likely when driving at night, under the influence of alcohol or with several teenage passengers. The more kids riding in a vehicle at any time of the day, the more likely they are to be involved in a serious accident.

On distracted driving. Any distraction increases the risk of an accident, and “driving while distracted is roughly equivalent to driving drunk,” writes Dr. Amy Ship of Harvard in The New England Journal of Medicine. This is a problem for all drivers, but worse for teens because they tend to look away from the road for longer periods of time. Eating, drinking, retrieving dropped objects and adjusting radio/CD or climate controls have also been found to cause even more accidents than talking on a cell phone.

Write a contract

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends writing a contract with teen drivers that includes specific penalties for violations. It should cover safety rules, restrictions on night driving, the number of passengers allowed in the car and any situation that may involve impaired driving and the need for a designated driver. For example, a teen driver in Virginia agreed in writing that he would lose his driving privileges if he was found to be texting or talking on the phone while driving.
Sharpening your workplace communications skills

By Leil Lowndes

Knowing how to break the ice and make meaningful connections is a skill that all of us can learn, practice and conquer. There are graceful ways to do and say things that will set you apart in a positive way—at business meetings and when you communicate in person or online. Here are some ideas you may not have considered.

**Meeting and greeting**

Do a “dress rehearsal” before a big event. Don’t wear something brand new to an interview or important occasion. Give it a trial run first.

When you make introductions, say names first. Put the person’s name before the position he or she plays in your life. “This is Josie, my assistant,” instead of “This is my assistant Josie.” Or “Meet Harold, my boy friend,” not “Meet my boy friend Harold.”

Try this polite way of asking for a person’s name. When you meet a person for the first time, don’t say “My name is ___. What’s yours?” Say, “my name is ___. And yours?”

Pause before you respond. Even if you know what you want to say, don’t be too quick to answer a serious question. Wait for three seconds and, during this time, keep your eyes focused on the questioner. If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t wing it. Say pleasantly, “I’d like some time to think about that.” If you don’t want to respond to a question, look the person straight in the eye and say, “I don’t know how to answer that, Dave.”

Be careful about hugging. A hug can be spontaneous and friendly or uncomfortable and inappropriate. Stay in an embrace as long or short as the other person warrants. Just don’t let your hands become flippers: lots of little back pats are a signal that a person wants to disengage. And in a diverse workplace, be aware that people have different customs for physical contact, greetings and how much personal space they like to maintain in their face-to-face meetings.

Welcome the individual who enters alone. Give loners at a company party a big, sincere smile the minute they walk in the door. Even if they don’t make a beeline to say hello, your warmth will make them want to meet you.

Make your “bye” as big as your “hi.” Next time you meet someone, make a note of how enthusiastic you were when you said hello. Then, when you say goodbye, make it just as lively. “I’m so pleased we ran into each other, Brendan!” When you’re about to hang up the phone: “Jill, great talking to you. I look forward to seeing you when you get back.”

**Having a conversation**

To get started, try asking “how” and “why” questions. With very little effort, you can find out where a person lives or some facts about his or her day. Questions about a person’s last few hours can also kick-start a conversation. For example: “Was there much traffic on the way here?”

Don’t make excuses—until later. If you arrive late for a meeting (or anything else), a gracious “excuse me” will suffice. Later on, you can explain that you hit traffic or another appointment ran long.

Use whole sentences. In a professional situation, express yourself with a noun and verb: “I’m happy to meet you” or “I’m very happy to meet you.” And pronounce all three syllables in greetings: “Good morn-ing” and “Good eve-ning.”

Speak s-l-o-w-l-y for non-native speakers. In our increasingly global society, we meet more and more people for whom English is a second or third language. Slow down your speech—way down.

Let people overhear your compliment. The only thing nicer than hearing a compliment is overhearing it. It’s OK to talk about people behind their backs—if you’re saying nice things about them.

If someone asks you the same question twice, be polite. Answer it again, using different words the second time. The other person is likely to remember you with gratitude for sweeping her or his forgetfulness under the rug.

Avoid “fuzzy” phrases. Sadly, even the most truthful, trustworthy people these days use phrases such as “to tell you the truth.” But when you say things like “I’ll be honest with you,” “this is a true story” and “quite frankly,” it suggests you’ve not been truthful at other times.

**In email communications**

Write “make ’em smile” subject lines. Be warm and upbeat—never scary. Even when the subject thread is established, you can perk it up. For example: “Re: The Patton Project (Great job everybody!”

Write in the present tense. It’s stronger and more confident. Instead of “I was hoping you would...,” say “I hope you will...” Instead of “I thought it was a good idea,” say “I think it’s a good idea.” Say “I want you to...,” not “I wanted you to...”

Make your signature the other person’s name. “It was great meeting you, Maia.” “Thanks so much for your help, Nick.” “Good going, Emma.”

Check your ccs and chains before sending. If you are copying others, list their names under your signature. Check all previous messages contained in email below your new communication. Remove anything you would not want to see posted on the company bulletin board.

Nix 9-to-5 jokes. Never advertise that you’re goofing off during work hours. Don’t add people to your humor list unless you ask them if they’d like to be a recipient.

Substitute “you” for “I.” Instead of “I received your order and I’ll let you know...” say “Your order arrived today. You will be notified as soon as it comes in.”

Have a human out-of-office reply. Don’t sound like an online robot. Let your message be friendly. It’s no less professional to write your message the way you would say it.

—Adapted from the author’s book “How to Instantly Connect with Anyone” (McGraw Hill).
Do’s and don’ts for weathering storms

A n ordinary summer thunderstorm can be fun to watch, if you’re not in harm’s way. But even from a cozy indoor perch, storms have been associated with adverse health effects. The classic example is arthritis that may act up when it rains. Researchers are also looking at storm-related upticks of asthma, sleep apnea and lung problems.

Lightning strikes, the most obvious summer storm danger, are more common than you might think (20 million a year in the U.S.). But they are rarely fatal, although some survivors end up with neurological or eye problems and headaches, similar to what people experience when they fall, get hit or are involved in an automobile accident.

Here’s more information about lightning and some advice on what to do if you’re outside when a storm hits, from the journal Emergency Medicine Clinics of North America.

Seek shelter in a large structure. Bus shelters or huts on a golf course may increase your risk, if they are the tallest objects in an area. And, by all means, avoid tents with metal poles that could act as lightning rods.

Stay away from single trees and clearings. If you’re in the woods, take cover in an area with small trees or bushes. Or, in dire straits, find a low-lying area and assume the lightning position: squatting or sitting cross-legged with your hands over your ears.

Don’t wait until you see clouds overhead. Lightning travels in front of storm clouds, so a strike can come out of a clear blue sky. Seek shelter when the time between seeing lightning and hearing thunder is 30 seconds or less. Wait until 30 minutes after the last lightning is seen or thunder heard before you resume outdoor activities.

Avoid faucets and landline phones. Plumbing and telephone wires can carry current from a lightning strike during a storm. A cautious approach is to turn off electrical appliances and devices like computers before the storm.

—Adapted from the Harvard Health Letter

Older personal trainer may be wave of the future

Y our mental picture of a personal trainer may still be a young, bronzed, chiseled male, but a growing number of older adults have joined the fitness profession. At a Personal Trainer Institute in Alexandria, Virginia last year, 42% of the participants were between the ages of 45 and 64.

There can be some clear advantages to working with an older trainer, especially if you are an older person yourself. For one, older trainers probably have a better understanding of the aging process. They may also be motivated more by a desire to be helpful than simply because they work in fitness as a livelihood.

Many older adults get interested in fitness after they retire or after they’ve had a health scare themselves. They tend to be passionate in their commitment to a healthy lifestyle.

How does one find a good older trainer?

Typically by word of mouth or by asking at your local gym or Y where older trainers are becoming more common.

Another option is to check out the website ideafit.com. It has a database called “Fitness Connect” that allows users to find a personal trainer by age, location and specialization.
What’s wrong with having one child? Is one enough for you? What constitutes a complete, happy family? Does your child need a sibling? Will an only child be lonely, bossy, selfish, spoiled?

In her timely new book, The Case for the Only Child, social psychologist Susan Newman, Ph.D., answers these perplexing questions and describes the rich trove of research that debunks the stereotypes and other long-held views about only children.

“With so many people having just one child, it’s important to understand the facts and dismiss the myths,” she says.

Dr. Newman does not advocate a particular point of view, but she outlines the pressures many people face as they consider the pros and cons of having an only child as well as the factors that can and do influence their decision.

There’s reason to be optimistic, says Dr. Newman. “The large and growing number of happy, caring, responsible only children, their positive self-image and exemplary social interaction will change how people think—and speak—about only children.”

The author documents and explains the trend toward only children in the U.S. and abroad. She includes interviews with parents of singletons and with only children from different generations who report on what it was like growing up without a sibling. Whether by choice or by circumstance, parents reveal why they are content with their one-child family and how they dealt with pressure to have more children.

While the perception is that only children are overly indulged, Dr. Newman argues that the parents of onlies “do not own the market on spoiling kids.”

But she does say that the parents of onlies should be aware of certain things: for example, encouraging children to solve their own problems and not shielding a child too much (see front page article).

The Case for the Only Child: Your Essential Guide (Health Communications, soft cover, $14.95) is available in bookstores and online. ♦