



ONLY CHILDREN AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT: A META-ANALYTIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a meta-analytic review of the psychological development of onlychildren, with a focus on personality traits, emotional competence, and social behaviour. Traditionally, only children were perceived as socially maladjusted and emotionally vulnerable due to the absence of sibling interaction. However, contemporary empirical research challenges these assumptions and provides evidence-based insights into their developmental outcomes. The review synthesizes findings from major meta-analyses and empirical studies conducted in both global and Indian contexts.

The analysis reveals that only children are not psychologically disadvantaged; rather, they often perform equally well or even better than children with siblings in areas such as academic achievement, self-esteem, and emotional stability. Factors such as greater parental attention, better access to educational resources, and strong emotional bonding contribute significantly to their development. The study also highlights that personality and emotional outcomes are more strongly influenced by parenting style, family environment, and socio-economic conditions than by sibling status alone.

Furthermore, the review incorporates cross-cultural perspectives, including evidence from China and India, to demonstrate that socio-cultural context and parenting practices play a crucial role in shaping child development. In the Indian setting, increasing urbanization and the rise of nuclear families have led to more focused parental investment, which positively affects only children's developmental outcomes.

Overall, the findings emphasize that the concept of only child disadvantage lacks empirical support. Instead, a supportive and resource-rich family environment emerges as the key determinant of healthy psychological development.



1. Introduction

Child development is a complex and dynamic process shaped by the interaction of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Among these influences, family structure plays a central role in shaping personality, emotional competence, and social behaviour. One critical dimension of family structure is sibling status, particularly the distinction between only children and those with siblings. Developmental psychologists have long emphasized the role of sibling interactions in fostering cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution skills (Brody, 2004).

Historically, only children were often viewed negatively. Early theorists such as Adler argued that the absence of siblings could lead to maladjustment, dependency, and self-centeredness (Adler, 1954). However, these assumptions were largely based on theoretical observations rather than systematic empirical evidence. With advancements in research methodologies, particularly meta-analytic approaches, these traditional views have been critically reassessed. Empirical findings now suggest that only children are not inherently disadvantaged and often perform equally well or even better than children with siblings in domains such as academic achievement and self-esteem (Falbo & Polit, 1986; Falbo, 2012).

In contemporary societies, the prevalence of single-child families has increased significantly, especially in urban and developing contexts such as India. Socio-economic changes, rising educational aspirations, and urbanization have contributed to smaller family sizes (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2019). Indian scholars have also noted that shifting family patterns and increased parental investment are transforming child-rearing practices and developmental outcomes (Saraswathi & Ganapathy, 2002; Saraswathi, 2019).

Given these transformations, it is essential to examine the developmental outcomes of only children through an evidence-based perspective. While only children may benefit from greater parental attention and resources, concerns remain regarding reduced intra-family social interaction. Therefore, a balanced and research-based understanding is required. This study



adopts a meta-analytic perspective to evaluate whether sibling absence significantly influences personality development, emotional competence, and social adjustment.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Only Child: Definition and Characteristics

An only child refers to a child without siblings, either biological or adopted. The developmental environment of only children differs significantly in terms of parental attention, allocation of resources, and patterns of social interaction. Only children often receive concentrated parental support, which can enhance academic performance, emotional security, and self-confidence (Falbo, 2012). However, the absence of sibling interaction may limit early opportunities for peer-like social learning within the family (Downey & Condon, 2004).

The resource dilution model explains that parental resources such as time, attention, and finances are distributed among children, thereby giving only children a relative advantage in smaller families (Blake, 1981). Similarly, the confluence model suggests that only children benefit from intellectually stimulating adult interactions, which can positively influence cognitive development (Zajonc, 1976). Empirical studies further indicate that smaller family size is associated with better educational outcomes due to increased parental investment (Blake, 1989).

In the Indian context, these dynamics are shaped by socio-cultural and economic transitions. Increasing urbanization and changing parental aspirations have led to a rise in single-child families. Indian research highlights that such children often receive enhanced educational support and parental involvement, although they may also experience higher expectations (Chaudhary & Gupta, 2019; Saraswathi & Ganapathy, 2002).

2.2 Psychological Development

Psychological development encompasses personality traits, emotional competence, social behaviour, and cognitive abilities. These dimensions evolve through continuous interaction between the child and the environment, particularly within the family. According to ecological



systems theory, the family serves as the primary context for learning emotional regulation, social norms, and adaptive behaviours (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research on personality development among only children presents mixed yet insightful findings. Some studies suggest higher levels of independence and self-esteem, while others point to possible emotional sensitivity linked to parental expectations (Falbo & Polit, 1986). Emotional competence, including the ability to understand and regulate emotions, is strongly influenced by parental warmth and communication (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2010).

Social development is not limited to sibling interaction. Only children often acquire social skills through school, peer groups, and community engagement. Empirical studies indicate that they are not socially disadvantaged and can exhibit comparable interpersonal skills when provided with adequate social exposure (Downey & Condrón, 2004).

Cognitive development is also closely associated with family environment. Research suggests that only children may benefit from enriched learning environments and greater parental involvement, leading to enhanced intellectual outcomes (Zajonc, 1976). Indian studies further emphasize that family support and educational opportunities play a crucial role in shaping cognitive and academic development (Kumar & Choudhury, 2015; Sharma & Vyas, 2017).

3. Review of Meta-Analytic Evidence

Meta-analytic research has significantly contributed to understanding the developmental outcomes of only children. The landmark study by Falbo and Polit (1986), which synthesized over 100 studies, challenged the stereotype of only children as maladjusted. The findings revealed that only children perform as well as or better than their peers with siblings in intelligence and academic achievement. They also tend to have stronger parent-child relationships, contributing to emotional security.

Subsequent research has reinforced these conclusions. Falbo (2012) demonstrated that only children are comparable to firstborns across multiple developmental domains. This suggests that



the absence of siblings does not inherently disadvantage development.

Cross-cultural studies, including research from China, also support these findings. Foreexample, Cameron et al. (2013) showed that only children exhibit comparable behavioural and cognitive outcomes. Indian research similarly highlights the positive role of parental involvement and cultural values in shaping child development (Saraswathi, 2019; Verma, 2017).

Furthermore, Downey (2001) extended the resource dilution framework, arguing that smaller family size enhances access to parental resources and improves educational outcomes. Overall, meta-analytic evidence consistently indicates that only children are not disadvantaged and often benefit from supportive family environments.

4. Personality Development among Only Children

Research on personality development among only children suggests that sibling absence does not hinder psychological growth. Only children often demonstrate higher self-confidence, independence, and academic motivation, largely due to concentrated parental attention and support (Falbo, 2012).

Falbo and Polit (1986) found that only children score higher on achievement-related traits such as persistence and goal orientation. Blake (1989) also emphasized that smaller family size allows for greater parental investment, positively influencing personality outcomes.

In India, changing family structures have further strengthened these trends. Increased parental involvement and educational focus contribute to the development of adaptive personality traits among only children (Chaudhary, 2018; Saraswathi, 2019). However, personality outcomes are not solely determined by sibling status. Parenting style plays a crucial role. Baumrind (1991) demonstrated that authoritative parenting fosters balanced personality development, while environmental exposure influences social adaptability.

Thus, personality development among only children depends more on parenting quality, emotional climate, and social opportunities than on the presence or absence of siblings.



5. Emotional Competence

Emotional competence refers to the ability to:

- Understand emotions
- Regulate emotional responses
- Cope with stress

Emotional competence is a key component of psychological development and plays an important role in shaping a child's behaviour, relationships, and overall well-being. Research suggests that only children often develop strong emotional competence due to their unique family environment. The absence of siblings allows for more frequent and meaningful interactions with parents, which can enhance emotional understanding and regulation (Denham et al., 2003).

Several factors contribute to the emotional strength of only children:

- Close parent–child relationships
- Greater emotional support
- Structured home environment

Close parent–child relationships provide a secure base from which children can explore and express their emotions. Parents in single-child families often spend more time engaging in communication and emotional guidance, which helps children learn how to identify and manage their feelings effectively. Additionally, greater emotional support from parents fosters a sense of security and confidence, enabling children to cope better with stress and challenges (Saraswathi & Ganapathy, 2002).

A structured home environment also contributes to emotional stability by providing consistency and clear expectations. This stability helps children develop self-control and resilience. Parent–child interaction plays a critical role in emotional development, as strong relationships offer both emotional security and opportunities for learning adaptive emotional responses (Eisenberg et al.,



2010).

6. Social Development

A common stereotype is that only children lack social skills due to the absence of sibling interaction. However, empirical evidence contradicts this assumption and suggests that social development is not limited by family size alone. Instead, it is shaped by the quality and extent of a child's interaction with peers, teachers, and the broader social environment.

Studies indicate that:

- Only children develop social skills through school, peers, and community interactions
- They are not more lonely or socially isolated than other children
- Social competence depends on external social exposure rather than sibling presence

Research by Downey and Condron (2004) found that only children perform equally well as children with siblings in social settings such as classrooms, where peer interaction plays a significant role in social learning. Similarly, Falbo (2012) concluded that only children are not socially disadvantaged and often display comparable levels of sociability and cooperation. These findings highlight that schools and community environments provide sufficient opportunities for children to develop interpersonal skills.

In the Indian context, Saraswathi and Ganapathy (2002) emphasized that socialization extends beyond the family to include neighbourhood, extended family, and educational institutions. Children actively engage in group activities, which help them learn cooperation, empathy, and communication. Therefore, social competence is largely influenced by the availability of diverse social experiences rather than the mere presence of siblings. Overall, contemporary research demonstrates that only children are capable of developing strong social skills when provided with adequate opportunities for interaction and participation in social settings.

7. Cross-Cultural and Indian Perspective

Cross-cultural research provides important insights into the development of only children,



especially in countries where family size has been influenced by policy and socio-economic change. In countries like China, studies conducted in the context of the one-child policy reveal that only children often demonstrate high academic achievement, strong motivation, and competitive orientation. Research by Poston and Falbo (1990) found that Chinese only children performed as well as or better than their peers with siblings in both academic and psychological domains. Similarly, Cameron et al. (2013) reported that only children in China showed comparable social and emotional outcomes, challenging earlier stereotypes.

In the Indian context, rapid urbanization, rising educational aspirations, and economic considerations have contributed to a shift toward smaller family sizes, including single-child households. This transition has led to increased parental investment in children's education, health, and overall development. Studies indicate that Indian only children often benefit from focused attention, better educational resources, and higher parental expectations, which positively influence their academic and psychological outcomes (Kumar & Choudhury, 2015).

Moreover, cultural values in India place strong emphasis on education, discipline, and family bonding. These factors create a supportive environment that enhances emotional security and motivation among children. Saraswathi and Ganapathy (2002) highlighted that close parent-child relationships and guided socialization practices in Indian families contribute significantly to balanced development. Overall, both cross-cultural and Indian research suggest that only children are not disadvantaged; rather, their development is shaped by socio-cultural context, parenting practices, and access to opportunities.

8. Role of Family Environment

The review highlights that family environment is more important than sibling status in determining a child's overall development. While the presence or absence of siblings may influence certain experiences, the quality of the home environment plays a far more decisive role in shaping psychological, emotional, and academic outcomes.



Key influencing factors include:

- Parenting style
- Emotional support
- Socio-economic status
- Educational environment

Among these, parenting style is particularly significant. Research by Baumrind (1991) shows that an authoritative parenting style - characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate discipline - promotes healthy personality and social development. Emotional support from parents also contributes to a child's sense of security and self-worth, which are essential for emotional competence and resilience (Eisenberg et al., 2010).

Socio-economic status influences access to educational resources, learning opportunities, and overall living conditions. Families with better economic stability are often able to provide enriched educational environments that enhance cognitive and academic development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In addition, a stimulating educational environment at home, including access to books, discussions, and guidance, further strengthens learning outcomes.

Meta-analytic evidence consistently suggests that the quality of parent-child relationships is a major determinant of developmental outcomes, regardless of family size. For instance, Jeynes (2012) found that parental involvement significantly improves academic performance and social behaviour. Indian studies also emphasize that supportive family interactions and parental engagement are key predictors of positive child development (Saraswathi & Ganapathy, 2002). Overall, the evidence indicates that a nurturing and resourceful family environment has a stronger impact on development than sibling status alone.

9. Discussion

The findings of this meta-analytic review clearly indicate that only children are not disadvantaged in psychological development. On the contrary, many studies suggest that



they experience several developmental advantages arising from their family environment. These advantages are largely associated with the focused investment of parental resources and the quality of parent–child interactions.

Only children often benefit from:

- Greater parental attention
- Better educational resources
- Strong emotional bonding

Greater parental attention allows for more individualized guidance, supervision, and encouragement, which positively influences both academic performance and personality development (Falbo, 2012). In addition, access to better educational resources - such as quality schooling, learning materials, and extracurricular opportunities - enhances cognitive development and achievement outcomes (Blake, 1989). Strong emotional bonding with parents also contributes to higher self-esteem, emotional security, and effective coping skills (Eisenberg et al., 2010).

These findings challenge traditional myths that portray only children as socially isolated, self-centered, or maladjusted. Instead, empirical evidence consistently shows that developmental outcomes are shaped more by environmental factors than by sibling status alone. Factors such as parenting style, emotional support, and socio-economic conditions play a more significant role in determining psychological well-being and adjustment (Jeynes, 2012).

In the Indian context, changing family structures and increased parental involvement further strengthen these positive outcomes. Studies highlight that supportive parenting and educational emphasis contribute significantly to balanced development among only children (Kumar & Choudhury, 201).

Overall, the discussion reinforces that only-child status does not inherently lead to negative outcomes. Rather, a nurturing and resource-rich environment is the key determinant of healthy



psychological development.

10. Conclusion

The present review concludes that:

- Only children are not psychologically disadvantaged
- They often perform equally well or better than children with siblings
- Personality and emotional development depend more on family environment than sibling status

The accumulated evidence from meta-analytic and empirical studies clearly challenges the long-standing belief that only children face developmental limitations. Research consistently shows that only children demonstrate comparable, and in some cases superior, outcomes in areas such as academic achievement, self-esteem, and emotional stability. These outcomes are largely influenced by the quality of parental involvement and the availability of resources rather than the presence of siblings.

Furthermore, the role of the family environment emerges as a central factor in shaping developmental trajectories. Supportive parenting, effective communication, and emotional warmth contribute significantly to healthy personality development and emotional competence. Studies also indicate that access to educational opportunities and socio-economic stability enhances cognitive and academic growth.

In the Indian context, changing family patterns and increased parental investment in fewer children have reinforced these positive outcomes. Research highlights that strong family bonds and educational emphasis play a crucial role in fostering balanced development among only children.

Thus, the concept of the only child disadvantage lacks empirical support. Instead, developmental outcomes are primarily shaped by environmental quality, parenting practices, and social exposure rather than sibling status alone.



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