

One and done: Having one child by choice, circumstance or as a compromise

To become a parent, you only need to have one child. This one child will be enough pass on your genes, and to experience parenthood. Having only child is also less costly in terms of the time and money investment needed compared to having two or more children. However, in many Western countries a two-child norm still dominates as the preferred family size. There are many reasons why most people might state their preferred family size is two including a higher chance of getting one child of each sex, and an insurance strategy in case one child does not meet parental expectations; but the two-child ideal is also sustained by perceived social norms and negative stereotypes about only children being spoiled or lonely (Sobotka & Beaujouan 2014).

The percentage of parents who are ending their reproductive lives with only one child is increasing. Typically, this is assumed to be due to an increase in age at first birth. In other words, the postponement of a first birth to an advanced age leaves means there is less likelihood of having a second child, in which case having one child is more by circumstance than by choice. However, Sobotka & Beaujouan (2014) note subtle shifts towards can be observed in the percentage of women who state that one child is the ideal family size. Compared to research on childlessness there has been substantially less attention paid to those with only one child (Parr 2007) and we know little about those who have chosen to have one child only.

Data

Our data comes from a forum of parents of one child on Reddit (*r/oneanddone*). Content analysis is conducted on 500 posts submitted between July and September 2024 and their related comments. We identify the main themes regarding the decision making and reasons for having one child.

Results

We find three main reasons why users were ‘one and done’. The first was by circumstance, typically due to a higher age at first birth. This included those who had also achieved their first birth through the aid of IVF. Other circumstances included life events such as separations, or traumatic first birth experiences which prevented a transition to a second birth.

However, a significant proportion of users also had chosen to have one child as the optimal strategy for them. This strategy was chosen for several reasons including to have to only experience what they perceived as the harder parts of parenthood including pregnancy, labour, infancy only one time. Another big motivator was to be able to ‘get back’ to close to their pre-child lifestyle as quickly as possible, or to be able to do more things with their family such as travelling.

In other cases, it was also a compromise. This was the case when one partner wanted a child but the other had low desires. In such cases the low desire partner sometimes agreed to have a child on the condition that it was ‘one and done’.

References

Parr, N. (2007). Which women stop at one child in Australia?. *Journal of Population Research*, 24, 207-225.

Sobotka, T., & Beaujouan, É. (2014). Two Is best? The persistence of a two-child family ideal in Europe. *Population and Development Review*, 40(3), 391-419.