

5 things to keep in mind about only children

By [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

May 28, 2015

Ranting about the assumptions people make about only children has been a part of my life since before I knew what the word *assumption* meant. After reading yet another comment that was likely intended to be lighthearted—but that implied that we only children are spoiled and always get our way—I thought it was time to turn this rant into a reflection. Here's what I think is worth keeping in mind in counseling or conversation with the only children in your congregation, classroom, or elsewhere:

1. The only thing all only children have in common is being the sole living child of their parents.

Our home lives and family situations growing up are as varied as anyone else's. An older, wiser only child once gently corrected me when I remarked on the burden and blessing of having a strong emotional connection to one's parents. That wasn't her experience, and of course it is the experience of many people with siblings. Some love being only children; others dislike it. Many of us are in between.

2. Being an only child can be the result of painful circumstances.

Some of our parents had [secondary infertility](#) or [pregnancy loss](#). Some had a sibling die in infancy. Whether or not parents tried to explain what they were going through, there were rocky times just the same.

3. Whatever the circumstances, being an only child means different family dynamics, and this affects us at multiple levels.

Whatever the difficult seasons were, we went through them without peers in our families. In pastoral care class, reading [Elizabeth Marquardt's](#) work on the spiritual lives of children of divorce helped me to better understand what I had observed with friends who are the only children of marriages that ended, who sometimes lack a sense of full belonging in either of their parents' homes. Studying Bowen family

systems theory in that same ministry class, I realized that my family has often excelled at triangling because my family is a [triangle](#).

In adulthood, there's no one who shares the same level of duty to care for aging parents—however unevenly that might happen in families with siblings.

4. It's true that only children often get more parental attention because they don't have to share it with siblings, but that attention isn't all positive.

As one only-child friend put it, "All of the expectations are in one basket, and you're the basket."

5. Being an only child can give a whole new meaning to church family.

The community in which I was raised taught me that being a Christian is [adoption as children of God](#), which makes us brothers and sisters to one another. They demonstrated this by showing up for my family in emergencies, by giving a wider sense of belonging, by doing the kinds of things that other adult children could do for my parents since I live at a distance. I don't think there's any other way I could have learned to see the body of Christ so powerfully.

I recently had an opportunity to pass this on to a child in the congregation I'm now part of. I was one of the adults in nursery, and she refused to share a puzzle with another child. Pieces flew. (She's a middle child—but let's make no assumptions about that, either.) The other adult and I agreed that a time out was in order, and I sat near her in the corner. She protested, "You're not my family!" I replied that I was, in fact, because in church we're all part of a big family, the family of God. She replied, with three-year-old charm, "Well, you're not part of my little family."

She's right that it's different. At least I think so—I'm guessing on that one. I'll never know what she knows, what it feels like to have siblings in your household. But I think she agreed that I was right, too. At the next couple of church gatherings, while I was sitting with her parents, she ran up to me and wanted me to pick her up. She's my little sister, after all.