Attention Seeking in Only Children Vs. Children with Siblings

Julianne McLellan

Longwood University

Abstract

Attention seeking behavior will be observed and compared between only children and children with siblings. A questionnaire will be distributed between the two groups and the results will be calculated. The only children group is predicted to have more attention seeking behavior than those who grew up with siblings. The results from the questionnaire have been calculated and the only children group scored higher, resulting in more attention seeking behavior than children who grew up with siblings.

*Keywords:* attention, behavior, only child, siblings

Attention Seeking in Only Children vs. Children with Siblings

Behavior differences between people with siblings and people without siblings have been a popular topic over the years. For example, the most common stereotype of only children being “spoiled brats” was first proposed by psychotherapist, Alfred Adler, in a 1964 book “Problems of Neurosis” (Girdhar, 2012). It is a popular belief that only children have another stereotype of being dependent on the attention of other people. Children with siblings are known to get along with other children more because they have grown up with people around the same age as them, giving them practice on interacting with other kids (Girdhar, 2012). Only children and children with siblings are raised differently, by the amount of attention given to the child growing up and the practice of interacting with kids their age, this could result in those who grew up without siblings seeking more attention from others than those who grew up with siblings when they reach adulthood.

There are many advantages to having siblings growing up. Siblings provide playmates for each other, teammates, and rivals all that help shape a person when growing up. Siblings also teach each other conflict resolution, which can be used in the workplace, marriages, and other relationships (Anonymous, 2004). Many only children will miss out on the opportunity to learn how to navigate through relationships and learn how to resolve conflict unless they are very social with other individuals (Myers, 2012). Having siblings can be very beneficial to a child because they help teach children how to interact with others at a very early age.

Like siblings, there are also advantages to being an only child. Studies have shown that only children tend to develop better verbal skills because they are read to more as a child than people with siblings (Anonymous, 2004). Only children also seem to have a "closer affectionate relationship” with their parents (Anonymous, 2004). An only child’s environment forces them to become both an introverted person, when alone they have to learn how to focus on his/her own thoughts, and an extroverted person, otherwise they would have trouble making friends (Eischens, 1998). Due to the differences in being raised as an only child and a child with siblings, scientists have conducted many studies, similar to my study, focusing on behavior differences.

An experiment done in China on only children and children with siblings had a different outcome than my prediction. The study consisted of 164 children (51 only children and 113 had siblings) (Meredith, 1989). The children completed a self-perception profile questionnaire for children (Meredith, 1989). This was a self-report test that measured the different behaviors between the two groups (Meredith, 1989). No significant differences were found on the self- perception profile (Meredith, 1989). Gender was taken into account and still the results had no support for stereotypes concerning only children and children with siblings (Meredith, 1989). This experiment showed that there is no significant difference between only children and children with siblings, but the results could differ with children in the United States.

Children in China and children in the United States grow up in two completely different cultures, which could result in different results. The questionnaire given to the participants regarding the “wanting of attention in only children vs. children with siblings”, that will be administered to the participants is very similar to the self- perception questionnaire, but I expect to find different results due to the culture differences in Chinese children and American college students. I also expect to find different results because of the age difference between the Chinese children and the College students.

A ten-year follow up study also took place in China (Tseng, 2000). In this study single child males were compared to males with siblings and single child females were compared to females with siblings. The children’s behavior was observed at four stages of development: preschool, early school, preadolescents, and adolescents (Tseng, 2000). Tseng found that boys who were single children and boys who had siblings did not have a significant difference, in behavior, throughout the stages of development (Tseng, 2000). However, girls who were single children had higher scores of total behavior problems at each stage of development more than girls with siblings (Tseng, 2000). This is similar to my hypothesis because I believe that only children will have more behavioral problems than children with siblings.

Another study focusing on the behavior differences of only children compared to children with siblings was conducted on developing preschool children aged three to five years of age. This study assessed the theory of mind and executive functioning abilities of preschool children who had siblings close in age, who had infant or adult siblings, and who were only children (McAlister, 733). The theory of mind is how well people understand others beliefs and desires. Executive functioning abilities are abilities that allow a person to control and regulate other behaviors. The children who had at least one sibling near the same age as he/she scored significantly higher on tests of false belief, appearance reality, and pretend representation than only children or children with infant or adult siblings (McAlister, 733). This is relevant to the hypothesis stated in this research proposal because it proves that having siblings or not having siblings has an effect on the behaviors of the individual, specifically in this case, the theory of mind and executive functioning ability that was assessed.

A study focusing on adults who grew up as an only child or an adult who grew up with siblings was also conducted in China. In this study 255 Chinese adults volunteered as participants (99- only children, 156 siblings) (Wang, Leichtman, & White, 1998). The participants took two questionnaires in this study. One questionnaire measured the participants’ self- attitude, and the other measured their self- description and earliest childhood memory (Wang, Leichtman, &White, 1998). The results of this study found that only children had private and fewer self-descriptions, earlier first memories, more specific and more self- focused memories (Wang, Leichtman, &Whit3, 1998). This experiment relates to the one I plan on conducting because it assesses the differences in adults who grew up with or without siblings, and it also provides a self-report questionnaire; similar to the one I plan on using.

A study, that also took place in China, investigated the manifestations and socialization processes of only children compared to children with siblings (Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1986). The participants consisted of 993 rural and urban kindergarten and primary school Chinese children (Jiao, 1986). They were tested on 7 behavioral qualities, including egocentrism, cooperation, peer prestige, persistence, and independent thinking (Jiao, 1986). The results found that only children were more egocentric and sibling children were more cooperative, had higher peer prestige, and were more persistent (Jiao, 1986). This study found that only children are more egocentric than sibling children, this means they put their own interests before others. This connects to my study because I am trying to prove that only children want to be the center of attention and being egocentric could be a quality of wanting to be the center of attention because usually those who want to be in the center will put their interests above others.

The final study involving the comparison of only children and children with siblings also took place in China among preschoolers (aged 3-6 years) (Wang, Kato, Inaba, Tango, Yoshida, Kuraka, Deguchi, Tomita, & Zhang, 2000). The personality and physical traits were measured and compared between only children and children with siblings. The results showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups regarding physical traits, but they did see a significant difference between the two groups regarding personality traits (Wang, 2000). The difference between personality traits was that only children showed more somatic complaints (Wang, 2000). This means that only children tend to complain about problems that have no medical issue. This connects to my study because somatic complaints could also be a trait of attention seeking behavior. These complaints could be a trait because wanting the attention of others could result in mentally causing a medical problem that has no medical explanation in order to receive attention from those around you. This is an example of attention seeking behavior, which is a behavior characteristic I plan on studying.

Potentially, only children could grow up always wanting the attention of others more than those who grew up with siblings, due to the way they were raised as always being the center of their guardians’ attention. The studies mentioned above are different examples of research done on the comparison of only children and children with siblings. Although not all the studies resulted in a significant behavioral difference between the two groups, some studies helped support my hypothesis about only children seeking attention from others more than children with siblings. Only children and children with siblings are known as being raised differently due to their family life, growing up. I plan on comparing behavior differences between college students who grew up as an only child and students who grew up with siblings, finding that only children want to the attention of others ore than those with siblings.

**Method**

**Participants**

Being an only child compared to being a child with siblings could affect one’s dependence level, or need, for attention of others. Around 40 students at a small, public, college in Virginia (potentially, 20 with siblings and 20 without siblings, Mage= 19.5, age range= 18-22) will be recruited from around campus using the SONA system for the students to sign up. For participating in this study the students will be offered extra credit for specific classes. The first 20 participants that are only children will be chosen and the first 20 participants with siblings will be chosen. To determine whether the participants have siblings or not the students will show up in the student union and answer a questionnaire asking that specific question about the number of siblings a person has.

**Materials**

The participants will take a survey in a room in the student union. A ten-question questionnaire will be the extent of materials used for this study. The questionnaire will include questions that will focus on the participants’ behaviors, attitudes, and personality types. For example questions like, “Would you consider yourself an outgoing person?” “Do you take on responsibility naturally?” and “Do you have a lot of different acquaintances?” will be asked to determine their dependence. These questions will allow you to see the different personality types of the participants and will allow you to place them in specific categories of needing others or being independent. The questions will ask each participant group (only children and children with siblings) to give a number (1= approve and 5= disapprove) to rate their opinions on certain questions. One question in particular will ask the participants about the number of siblings each have, this will allow me to separate the participants into two categories. When they finish the scores will then be added up and scored to determine their level of dependence a person has for the attention of others.

**Procedure**

Students will be asked to sign up for this study using the SONA system, and will be rewarded with extra credit if they attend. The first 20 students without siblings and the first 20 students with siblings will be selected for the personality questionnaire. The participants will take a seat in the student union, once all are accounted for and the surveys will be distributed. Each participant will be given time to complete the ten-question survey, targeting personality questions. Potentially, the ratings will be added up and those with high scores will be deemed as more dependent on others’ attention, those with low scores will be seen as not needing the attention of others.

**Results**

After the participants complete the ten-question survey their answers will be calculated. The participants rate each personality question on a scale of one- five (1- strongly disagree, 5- strongly agree). The results will be added up and the higher the number the more dependent on the attention of others that student is, the lower the number the more independent that person is. The appropriate test to apply her would be the T-test. Using this test will allow us to figure out the significant difference in attention seeking behavior between only children and children with siblings.

The predicted results of this study would be a difference in behavior between only children and children with siblings. As shown in the figure, the only children participants’ scores were added up and the number that resulted from these scores was significantly higher than the scores of the children with siblings added up. Based on these results only children are thought of as seeking the attention of others more than those raised with siblings. The main effect of this is because only children receive more attention from their parents more than children with siblings tend to because there are other kids that may need the attention or take the attention away from the other siblings. Due to being the only focus in their parents’ eyes only children tend to seek attention from others because they grew up always expecting to be the center of attention.

**Discussion**

The predicted results of this study means that only children want to be the center of attention more than those with siblings because of the way they were raised. This is important because parents will now be aware that giving your only child to much attention can cause them to always expect the attention in their adulthood. Using this information parents will now make parents aware of the amount of attention given to their child and they will be able to teach their child that they will not always be the center of attention in every situation.

Some study limitations could include, the amount of participants that show up to the study. The number of participants that show up are important, the more participants that show up the better chance the results will account for the majority of people. With fewer participants it is harder to account for the majority of people because there are less people to make up for he outliers in the results. Getting participants to show up could be difficult because people will not participate, usually, unless there is a benefit for them. Also not every student may know how to sign up. All of these could effect this study in a negative way. A way to get the participants to show up would be to offer extra credit or offer a reward for their participation.

Another study limitation could also include the number of only children vs. the number of children with siblings. Children with siblings are more common than only children; this could cause a problem in the results because there might not be enough only child participants to see a significant difference. One way to address this limitation is to specifically ask which students are only children and which have siblings before the study. This will allow you to make sure there is an equal amount of students that have siblings and students that do not have siblings.

My figure consists of two variables, only children and children with siblings, their attention seeking behavior is the dependent variable, the one being measured. In future experiments I would throw in a third variable, birth order. This third variable could effect the relationship between the first two variables and attention seeking behavior because the order in which you were born could also effect the amount of attention that is given to you, for example, last born children might get more attention than first born children because they are the youngest and may need more attention. With this variable added, the results of this study would allow us to see more clearly the differences in attention seeking behavior.

References

Eischens, A. D. (1998). The dilemma of the only child. *Personality Research,* 1-11. Retrieved from <http://www.personalityresearch.org/papers/eischens2.html>

Girdhar, A. (2012). Only child syndrome. *The Dartmouth,* 1-3. Retrieved from <http://thedartmouth.com/2012/10/12/mirror/only>

Jiao, S., Ji, G., Jing, Q. (1986). Comparative study of behavior qualities of only children and sibling children. *Child Development*, 57, 357-361. doi: 10.2307/1130591

McAlister, A., Peterson, C. C. (2006). Mental playmates: Siblings, executive functioning and theory of mind. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology,* 24(4), 733-751. doi: 10.1348/026151005x70094

Meredith, W. H., Abbott, D. A., & Lu, T. Z. (1989). A comparative study of only children and sibling children in the People's Republic of China. *School Psychology International*, 10, 251-256. doi: [10.1177/0143034389104002](http://psycnet.apa.org.proxy.longwood.edu/doi/10.1177/0143034389104002)

Myers, S., & Gilbert, K. (2012). Having only one child: Easier for parents, but also better for the child? *Psychology Today,*1. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-is-2020/201209/having-only-one-child-easier-parents-also-better-the-child>

Tseng, W., Tao, K., Hsu, J., QIU, J., Li, B., & Goebert, D. (2000). Longitudinal analysis of development among single and nonsingle children in Nanjing, China: Ten-Year Follow-Up Study. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease,* 188, 701-707. doi: [10.1097/00005053-200010000-00009](http://psycnet.apa.org.proxy.longwood.edu/doi/10.1097/00005053-200010000-00009)

Wang, D., Kato, N., Inaba, Y., Tango, T., Yoshida, Y., Kuraka, Y., Deguchi, Y., Tomita, F., & Zhang, Q. (2000). Physical and personality traits of preschool children in Fuzhou, China: Only child vs. sibling. *Child Care: Health Development*, 26, 49-60. doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2214.2000.00143.x

Wang, Q., Leichtman, M. D., & White, S. H. (1998). Childhood memory and self-perception in young Chinese adults: The impact of growing up an only child. *Cognition*, 69,73-103. doi: 10.1016/50010-0277(98)00061-4

Weisner, T. S. (1989). Comparing sibling relationships across cultures. *Sibling Interaction Across Cultures,* 1, 11-25. doi: 10.1007/978-1-4612-3536-1\_2

(2004). What’s better: One child or siblings? *Abcnews*,1. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/AmericanFamily/story?id=2178396&page=1#.UVMFP2hc_ww>

Level of Dependence

*Figure 1*. The mean difference between the two variables is shown above. There were behavioral differences found between only children and children with siblings between dependent and independent behaviors.

***Appendix A.***

1. Do you have siblings?
2. yes B) no
3. Do you prefer to work in a group?

1- never 2 3- sometimes 4 5- always

1. Are you outgoing or shy?

1- very outgoing 2 3- sometimes outgoing 4 5- very shy

4. Would you consider yourself a leader?

1- never 2 3- sometimes 4 5- always

5. Are you a very sociable person?

1- unsociable 2 somewhat sociable- 3 4 very sociable- 5

6. Do you get along well with others?

1- never 2 3- sometimes 4 5- always

7. Do you have a variety of friends or a small close group of friends?

8. Are you disruptive in class?

1- never 2 3- sometimes 4 5-always

9. Would you consider yourself the comedian of your friend group?

1- never funny 2 3-sometimes funny 4 5- always funny

10. Do you enjoy being in the spotlight?

1- Hate it 2 3- don’t mind it 4 5- love it