

# Chinese People Believe that Only Children Are Lonely. But Chinese Youth Who Are Only Children Report Less Loneliness than their Peers with Siblings

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## INTRODUCTION

A popular stereotype about only children in China is that they are lonelier than children who grow up with siblings. But little research has attempted to document whether large numbers of people actually believe this stereotype. This research brief not only establishes the widespread existence of the only-child-as-lonely stereotype in China, but examines whether adolescent only children experience more loneliness than their peers with siblings.

With the twin goals of reducing population growth and facilitating economic development, China adopted its One-Child Policy in 1979, which limited most couples to a single child. However, the national policy was not strictly enforced in some rural areas and among ethnic minorities. The result was high percentages of one-child families in cities, with larger families more common in rural regions.

Scholars have suggested that late adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods when loneliness is more prevalent. In China, two key circumstances may intensify the loneliness experiences for youth: preparing for highly competitive college entrance exams and transitioning to college after high school graduation.

On the other hand, recent research suggests that adolescents who grow up as only children may have some advantages that protect them from feelings of loneliness. Only children spend more time with and are closer to their parents than are children who grow up with siblings and are also likely to have more frequent contact with their grandparents. In addition, being an only child is a very common experience in contemporary China. It is likely that only children, especially those in urban areas, do not expect sibling interactions and therefore do not miss them.

To explore whether a gap between beliefs and reality exists, the authors analyzed three data sources. To measure beliefs about the only-child-as-lonely stereotype, they used data gathered from young Chinese adults in six cities. To measure experiences of loneliness, they analyzed data from one sample of college freshmen and two samples of high school students.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **Belief:** Chinese young adults think that only children experience more loneliness. This belief is more prevalent among those who grew up with siblings.
- ▶ **Reality:** Chinese youth who grew up with siblings reported greater loneliness than only children. This result was consistent across a sample of college freshmen and two samples of high school students. (See figure on next page)

# In China, the only-child-as-lonely stereotype does not match reality

## BELIEF

Chinese young adults believe that **only children** experience more loneliness.



## REALITY

**Chinese youth with siblings** reported more loneliness than only children.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The gap between the only-child-as-lonely stereotype and the reality that only children are less likely to report loneliness provides important insights for youth, parents, and counseling professionals. Youth and their parents can point to this research to counter misapprehensions that only children are more vulnerable to loneliness than youth with siblings. Psychologists and other counseling professionals would benefit from awareness of stereotypes they might hold about only children as being more likely to experience problems. To be able to better serve their clients, these clinical professionals, who often work directly with children and parents on issues of social relationships, should strive to check their biases and instead focus on the reality of the issues facing their clients.

## REFERENCE

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