



The Consequences of Only Children on the Individual, Parents, and Society: A Review Study

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Abstract

Introduction: There is much debate in the literature about the pros and cons of being an only child. However, there is a paucity of comprehensive reviews examining the consequences of being an only child on all levels of society. The purpose of this study is to explore the disadvantages of being only children on the health of the child, parents, and society as a whole.

Methods: The study is a narrative literature review of papers published in peer-reviewed journals between the year 2000 and October 2024 that address the drawbacks of being an only child. The papers were identified via a search of PsycInfo, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Google electronic databases. In total, thirty-six studies that explored and/or discussed the issue were identified. Then, the unhealthy effects of being an only child were summarized into three domains: individual, parents, and society.

Results: The study provides insight into the key health-related adverse effects of the only child phenomenon, specifically at the individual, family, and macro levels. The evidence from the reviewed literature suggests that being an only child leads to physical, psychological, and social harms on the health of the only child and parents, and hampers social development in the form of social harms such as an increase in divorce rates, sexual deviance, and a decline in social capital.

Conclusion: This review revealed the drawbacks of having one child, and some of the significant challenges families confront were identified. Further review is required to summarize the possible benefits of having only one child.

Keywords: Only children, Sociology, Psychology, Family

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Introduction

Evidence in the United States and Western Europe shows that approximately one-quarter to one-half of Western families have only one child, and this trend is on the rise. There are at least two main reasons to explain this phenomenon: delay in childbearing and financial aspects. Families do not have enough information about the problems and consequences of the decision to have only one child.

A rapid increase in only-child families has become a concern for many experts. The complications of having one child from individual, social, and demographic perspectives caused the Chinese government to change the one-child policy to a two-child policy in 2016. After that, considering the depth of this country's problems, the Chinese government officially announced the three-child policy despite having a population of 1.4 billion in 2021 (1).

According to the *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development*, "The sibling relationship is a natural laboratory for young children to learn about their world" (2). In this laboratory, children learn how to communicate

with their peers, deal with conflicts, and understand the feelings and thoughts of others. Siblings provide a safe platform where children naturally learn how to express their agreement or disagreement and regulate their positive and negative emotions. Entering adulthood without passing through this natural laboratory takes away important opportunities from children (3).

Experts clearly state that cousins and kindergarten and school classmates will never fill the sibling gap, even if there is regular contact (3). The behavior of Chinese people has been predicted to change in the near future – a possibility referred to as the "behavioral time bomb" (4).

Most studies of only children have been conducted in China and Western Europe. These studies have primarily discussed the disadvantages and risks. Although some studies do not consider the only child to be different from others, the studies that have examined all aspects of an only child's life admit that the disadvantages of being an only child outweigh its benefits (5). In addition, the only child suffers complications that will stay with them throughout their life (6).



Policymakers must prioritize this issue given the persistently declining fertility rates and the growing preference of families to have one child (7). The consequences of this trend extend beyond individual or familial choices, presenting profound societal implications. Long-term consequences include shifts in demographic structures, heightened economic pressures on smaller family units, and the potential weakening of intergenerational support systems. Through this narrative literature review, which synthesizes findings from recent studies and scientific sources, we aim to examine the potential consequences of only children for the individual, the parents, and society at large.

Considering the persistent decline of fertility rates and the preference for only-child families, policymakers should give greater attention to the only-child phenomenon (7). The rising trend of only-child families poses several demographic challenges for governments. Over time, reduced fertility rates contribute to population aging, with a shrinking workforce and a growing elderly population. This shift increases the dependency ratio, placing heavier economic pressure on pension schemes, healthcare systems, and social services. This narrative literature review synthesizes evidence from recent studies and scientific sources to explore the potential adverse effects of only children on individuals, their parents, and society as a whole.

Methods

Study design

A narrative literature review approach was employed to address the abundance of information, divergent views, and the lack of consensus about the topic (8, 9). Literature reviews intend to assess what is already published, and to identify the best currently available evidence (10-12). The narrative literature review provides a synthesis of published literature on the topic and describes its current state (11).

Search strategy

To avoid duplication, a broad initial search of the Cochrane library with keywords “disadvantages,” “drawbacks,” “consequences,” “harmful effects,” “adverse effects,” and “challenges” revealed no existing systematic or narrative reviews on the harmful effects of the only child phenomenon on the health of the family and society. In this study, papers published in peer-reviewed journals between the year 2000 and October 2024 that address the drawbacks of only children on the health of children, parents, and society as a whole were searched. Considering the scope of our study and the availability of relevant literature, to achieve an optimal accuracy, we selected a specific time period (i.e., about 20 years) to retrieve the most relevant published articles (13). We included all three dimensions of health defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) (14). Electronic databases including Psych Info, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Google were systematically examined by one reviewer using the keywords “single child,” “only child,” “only born,” “birth order,” “only sibling,” “sibling

number,” “family,” “parent(s),” “society,” “community,” “impact,” “effect,” “disadvantages,” “drawbacks,” “harmful,” “consequences,” “negative,” and “cons,” which identified 260 potentially relevant studies.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Titles and abstracts were examined, and the following inclusion criteria were considered:

- Peer-reviewed publications
- Published in English between 2000 and October 2024
- Investigated and/or discussed the consequences and harmful effects of the only child phenomenon on parents, the child, and society;

Articles not discussing or not investigating the harmful effects of the only child phenomenon, or those simply mentioning the “single children” or “only children” keywords but containing no substantive discussion, were excluded. Articles dealing solely with either only children or adverse/harmful effects were excluded.

Screening and quality assessment

One author with expertise in family, social, and population health searched and screened studies according to the inclusion criteria, consulting the co-author to resolve any uncertainties. In total, 260 articles were retrieved and imported into EndNote X8. After removing one duplicate, 193 titles and abstracts were screened, and 68 articles were selected for full-text review. We evaluated the eligibility of these articles and, finally, 36 studies were included. Any disagreements between the authors were discussed until a consensus was reached. [Table S1](#) provides information about the included studies. In total, 36 studies that investigated and/or discussed both the harmful effects of the only child phenomenon on the health of family members (the child himself/herself and parents) and society were identified ([Table S1](#)). The review was conducted in late October 2024 and verified by a second reviewer ([Figure 1](#)). Considering that this study is a narrative literature review and may or may not include quality assessment (12), no quality assessment tool was employed. However, the type of study design, adequate sample size, and quality of the analysis were considered in the full-text screening of the studies to ensure the inclusion of the most valid and relevant studies fitting the research question.

Data extraction

The following items were extracted from the included studies: author's name, year of publication, country, study design, sample size, statistical analysis method, and primary results (adverse effects of only children).

Results

Thirty-six studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The characteristics of the included studies are shown in [Table S1](#). ([table S1](#) is in supplementary file)

The studies included had different study designs, had different follow-up periods, and were conducted on different age groups. Most studies (15 out of 33) had

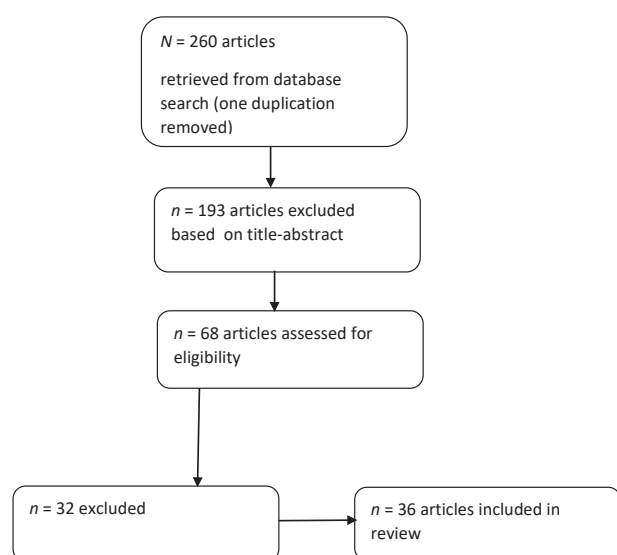


Figure 1. Database search – simple PRISMA flow diagram

a cross-sectional descriptive or observational design. In a later rank, a total of 10 studies had a prospective/retrospective longitudinal cohort with a follow-up period. Three studies had a case-control design. One study had an experimental design. Two studies followed a qualitative study design. The design of three studies was a secondary analysis of available national/regional data. One study had a systematic review and meta-analysis design. The included studies varied in design, follow-up duration, and participant age groups. Of the 33 studies, 15 employed a cross-sectional descriptive or observational design, and 10 were prospective or retrospective longitudinal cohort studies with defined follow-up periods. Three studies used a case-control design, one was experimental, and two employed qualitative methodologies. Three studies involved secondary analyses of existing national or regional datasets, and one study was a systematic review with meta-analysis.

The included studies were conducted in 12 countries across four continents: the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania; no studies originated from Africa. The majority (21 of 33) were carried out in Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Iran. Nine studies were conducted in European countries, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Greece. Four studies were based in the Americas (the United States and Brazil), and one originated from Australia in Oceania. As shown in Table 1, over half of the studies were published between 2021 and 2023 (18 of 33), followed by 13 studies published between 2011 and 2020. Only four studies were published during the 2000–2010 period. Table 1 summarizes the general characteristics of the included studies.

The following findings are separately described based on the harmful effects of the only child phenomenon on three levels, including: the only child, parents, and social/society aspects. The findings are presented separately according to the potential harmful effects of the only child phenomenon at three levels: the individual, the parents, and the broader societal context.

Table 1. A brief of general characteristics of included studies (n = 36)

Variable	Frequency (%)
Study regions	
Africa	0 (0)
America	5 (13.9)
Asia	21 (58.3)
Europe	9 (25.0)
Oceania	1 (2.8)
Study's publication time	
2000–2010	4 (11.1)
2011–2020	13 (36.1)
2021–2024	19 (52.8)
Study design	
Cross-sectional/descriptive/observational	15 (41.7)
Case-control	3 (8.3)
Prospective/retrospective longitudinal cohort	11 (30.6)
Experimental	1 (2.8)
Secondary analysis	3 (8.3)
Systematic review/meta-analysis	1 (2.8)
Qualitative	2 (5.5)

Harmful effects on the only child's health

Increased risk of diabetes, heart attack, stroke, and asthma

Metabolic syndrome is defined as the presence of at least three of the following five criteria: abdominal obesity, elevated blood pressure, hyperglycemia, hypertriglyceridemia, and reduced high-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels. Individuals with metabolic syndrome have an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cerebrovascular events.

A study of 11,784 children and adolescents in China observed that the prevalence of metabolic syndrome and each of its components is higher in only children than in those with siblings (15). A study in Finland also showed that only children are more likely to develop hypertension in adulthood. (16). Another study of 7311 adolescents aged between 11 and 17 years in Germany concluded that only children had the highest mean arterial blood pressure as compared to firstborn, middle-born, and youngest-born siblings, and the only-child status was an independent predictor of a higher diastolic blood pressure and mean arterial blood pressure (47). Moreover, a nationwide cross-sectional survey of 38,211 middle and high school students in South Korea showed that asthma was significantly associated with only-child status (48). The findings suggest that being an only child is associated with an elevated likelihood of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and asthma in adulthood, underscoring the need for further longitudinal research to clarify causal pathways.

Increased risk of physical/mobility impairments

Assuming that only children have reduced at-home opportunities for physical play in the absence of siblings, a cross-sectional study of 161 Portuguese preschoolers compared motor development and motor skills between only children and those with siblings (17). The authors

reported that only children exhibited relatively weaker performance on motor tasks—particularly agility, jumping, and ball-related skills—and suggested these deficits may become more pronounced with increasing age.

Increased risk of rheumatism in only children and youth

Juvenile idiopathic arthritis is the most common rheumatic disease of children and adolescents that occurs before age 16, with pain and arthritis, and may last for years. A study of 978 Australian children showed that the probability of this disease occurring in only children is 1.6 times that of others (18). The possible reason is that only children (due to the small number of people in the house) are less exposed to germs, which causes their immune systems not to have the necessary strength against some autoimmune diseases (49).

Increased risk of short stature

In a study conducted in the Netherlands on 389,287 18-year-old German teenagers who were ready for the military, the height data of these people were analyzed. The researchers concluded that only-child boys were shorter when they entered the military than boys with siblings (50). Similar results were obtained in a similar study conducted in Sweden (19).

Shorter lifespan

In a data study of Swedish residents who died between 1960 and 2017, all those who died after the age of 50 were statistically analyzed in terms of the probability of surviving after the age of 50. The data of 1,910,000 people were included in the statistical analysis. The results showed that if people who are only children, whether male or female, reach the age of 50, their remaining life expectancy is shorter. In other words, they are more likely to die after the age of 50 than those who have siblings (19).

Increased risk of obesity

In a study with a large sample size (more than 40,000 people) in England, newborns right after birth were evaluated over time in terms of body mass index. Body mass index, which results from dividing weight (in kilograms) by height (in square meters), is an indirect measure of body fat and obesity. This study showed that in school and youth, only children have a higher body mass index, or in other words, they have more weight (20). Researchers suggest that obesity is the root of other diseases, so its consequences should also be investigated in only children. This issue has also been proven in review studies (21).

Increased risk of diseases such as fever, cold, and diarrhea

Researchers in China assessed morbidity among 197 only children (aged 3–6 years) and 367 children with siblings and observed an increased incidence of common infectious conditions, specifically fever, colds, and diarrheal illness, among only children. (22).

Increased risk of personality disorders

In a longitudinal study at two points in time on 1588 children that was conducted from birth to adulthood in Finland, researchers concluded that the probability of personality disorders in only children was 2.4 times that of others, with 14.3% of the only children showing personality disorders (23). Personality disorders are “pervasive, maladaptive, and chronic patterns of behavior, thinking, and feeling, ultimately leading to distress and dysfunction” (51). Such behaviors adversely affect individuals by impairing their ability to adapt to the demands of daily life and by disrupting interpersonal relationships.

Increased risk of speech disorders in children

One study aimed to determine the risk factors of speech disorders in 238 children and their parents in Brazil. The researchers concluded that being an only child, along with factors such as being premature, being shy, using drugs during pregnancy, and having a positive family history, increased the possibility of speech disorders in childhood (24). A study conducted in the United States concluded that, in terms of cognitive performance, only children tended to underperform or have inferior cognitive performance compared to their peers with siblings (7).

Less physical fitness

A study of 542 children aged 7 to 15 years in Portugal showed that the indicators of physical fitness in children with siblings were better compared to only children (25).

Higher risk of mental health problems and less resilience in only children

In a study conducted on 3744 fourth-grade students in Japan, researchers concluded that communication problems and some mental health problems were more likely in only children than in children with siblings. Also, only children showed less resilience. In the sense that their endurance score against difficulties and problems was low (26).

Increased risk of depression and anxiety symptoms in only-child students

Researchers in a study in China concluded that it was more likely that only-child students would experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, or a combination of both than students who had siblings (27). In a research conducted in Iran on primary school girls aged 7 to 11 years during the coronavirus epidemic, the fear and anxiety caused by the coronavirus were higher in only-child girls (28).

Increased risk of emotional and behavioral problems in only-child elementary school children

In a study conducted in China on 1,155 elementary school-aged children, researchers compared the behaviors of only children and the oldest children in families with multiple children. In this study, it was observed that there was a greater risk of emotional and behavioral problems such as withdrawal, depression, anxiety, aggression, and fighting

in only children (29). A study conducted using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 Child and Young Adult (NLSCYA) in the United States aimed to explore whether being an only child leads to disadvantages compared to those with siblings. They concluded that only children are more likely to get angry and often exhibit lower self-esteem and confidence. The study also found that only children were more likely to form insecure attachments, making themselves more emotionally dependent on others (7).

The lower score of indicators of childhood development and school readiness

In a longitudinal study on 15,564 kindergarten children in Shanghai, China, using valid questionnaires, the index of childhood abilities, the degree of readiness to go to school, and behavioral problems were examined at three time points. According to the results, if children have older siblings – regardless of the age difference between them – compared to only children, they are in better conditions regarding their readiness to go to school and their score for social and behavioral problems (30).

The risk of increased axial length of the eye and myopia

A study on primary school children in China showed that the risk of increased axial length of the eye was higher in only children than in other students. As the axial length of the student's eye is higher than 24 mm, the risk of myopia in the future increases. In other similar studies, it has been shown that only-child students have 15% more myopia than other students (31). In this study, it was seen that only-child elementary school students studied more hours on weekends. Also, their parents enrolled them in more extracurricular classes. They consider the academic pressure of the family on the only child as one of the main reasons for the increased risk of myopia (32).

Harmful effects of the only child phenomenon on parents' health

Increased possibility of chronic physical and mental diseases in parents who have lost their only child.

A study compared physical and mental health indicators among parents who lost their only child and parents who did not experience the pain of losing a child. The researchers concluded that bereaved fathers and mothers suffered from more physical and mental illnesses (33), especially the severity of these symptoms was seen more in parents whose lost only child was a boy; Symptoms such as sleep disorder, suicidal thoughts, and depression (42) have even been seen in imaging studies (fMRI) of these parents' brains, which show that brain's connections are disturbed (35).

Continuous apprehension and worry about the possibility of the death of an only child during the lifetime of the parents

Most of the studies related to the harms of the only child phenomenon have been done in China because, in this country, due to the only-child policy (although it has now

been changed to three children), 90% of children in cities and 70% of children in villages have no siblings. In the follow-up studies carried out in Chinese families with only one child, it is estimated that a mother has a 15% chance of witnessing the death of her only son and a 12% chance of witnessing the death of her only daughter (52). It should be noted that parents of only children are afraid and worried about their only child getting hurt throughout their lives (42).

Limitations caused by the only-child phenomenon in the care of elderly parents

In a qualitative study, interviews with only-child Chinese people living in Canada were conducted. The results expressed concern about the inability of only children to care for their elderly parents. This may have at least two reasons. First, due to growing individualism, there is stronger emphasis on personal goals and self-interests over collective family responsibilities, which can diminish the priority given to caring for aging parents. Second, considering the shrinking family size, only children lack siblings to share elder care responsibilities with. The result is an increase in the burden on one individual or a reduction in overall care capacity (37). A generation consisting of only-child girls and boys who have married each other is called generation 4-2-1. The only child resulting from this marriage has a father, a mother, and four grandparents, a pattern that differs entirely from the common patterns of families a few years ago, when the number of grandchildren was several times the number of grandparents. Such a situation would definitely have important economic and social consequences (53).

Social harms and other social problems arising from only children

Increased likelihood of divorce at older ages

A wide-ranging study in the US state of Ohio examined the social data of 57,000 people over 40 years. The results of this study showed that only children were less likely to marry and more likely to divorce than those with siblings. The reason for this finding is that the existence of siblings causes people to learn to interact and talk with other people in practice from childhood, a skill that only children are deprived of (38). A study conducted in Greece concluded that divorce is three times more likely in only-child men than in men with siblings (39).

Increased likelihood of committing violent crimes in only-child boys

In a study published in one of the world's most prestigious psychiatric journals, 5,587 men in Finland were surveyed for 31 years (40). The study utilized data from the *Northern Finland 1966 Birth Cohort*, an unselected, prospectively compiled population-based dataset. The analysis included male participants whose information on criminal records was obtained through linkage with national crime registers. The primary exposure variable was being an only child. Being an only child was associated with a 1.8-fold increase

in odds of violent offending; when combined with perinatal or parental psychosocial risks, the odds rose to four- to eight-fold.

Higher probability of moral and sexual deviations

In a study of 49,569 students studying at 1764 Chinese universities, researchers concluded that only-child students were more likely to be involved in searching and observing adult material, masturbating, and sexual relationships outside the family framework due to greater financial ability and access, as well as excessive loneliness (41). Also, in the study of 4769 female students from 16 universities in China, it was found that only-child female students were more likely to have boyfriends or sexual experiences during singlehood and had a more positive view of homosexuality (34). A study conducted on Korean middle- and high-school students reached similar results about the significant association between the only-child status and sexual activity (48).

Increased likelihood of smartphone addiction

In the study of 450 medical students in China, the frequency of problematic smartphone use and depression and their relationship with each other were investigated using a questionnaire. The results showed that the probability of mobile addiction was higher in only-child students, and mobile addiction was recognized as one of the predisposing factors of depression. Only children had a higher susceptibility to mobile addiction-induced depression (43). Another study on male high school students from low-income families in South Korea who had had a mobile addiction during the coronavirus outbreak observed that the more hours they used mobile phones, the more likely they were to develop depression. The severity of this association was higher in only-child students. In other words, only-child students were more vulnerable to the psychological damage caused by mobile addiction (44).

Poor academic performance

Although some studies suggest that only children may perform better academically, a recent large-scale study of 20,000 students published in a leading international scientific journal reported that, overall, students with siblings achieved higher academic performance and better grades than their only-child counterparts (45). Furthermore, only-child students demonstrated lower academic motivation.

Changes in some behavioral indicators in the community

In a study conducted on the behavior of Chinese people before and after the adoption of the one-child policy, Australian researchers concluded that only children (as researchers say, little emperors!) are more pessimistic, less reliable, less competitive, and less risk-taking, and are less conscientious. They ultimately concluded that these behavioral indicators, lower reliability, lower competitiveness, less risk-taking, and lower conscientiousness, could affect the Chinese economy in

the future (4). Anxious about the social problems caused by the multiplicity of only children in the community, some representatives of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in 2007, announced that the increase in the number of only children in the Chinese society would cause irreparable problems and consequences, and thus called for the abolition of the one-child law in the country (36).

Probable decrease in the average IQ of the society

The only-child phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent following the industrialization of societies. Studies have shown that the probability of having only one child in women with a university education is 7 to 10 times higher than in women who do not have higher education. Since only-child adoption is more likely in educated families, the expansion of this issue may cause the share of children with high IQ in society to decrease and gradually reduce the average IQ of society, which is called the decline of the generation (54).

Negative impact of only children on social capital

A study in Japan showed that social capital in only-child families is less than in those with two to four children in their families. The underlying explanation for this finding is that the presence of siblings provides children with opportunities to practice social interaction within the family context, thereby enhancing their understanding of support and social coordination. Experts regard social capital as a remedy for the challenges of modern society and as a spiritual dimension of communal life, fostering the crystallization of qualities such as empathy, altruism, trust, and social vitality in everyday interactions (46).

Discussion

The prevalence of only-child families is on the rise, and numerous studies have been conducted on this phenomenon. Given the availability of multiple high-quality publications examining the consequences of being an only child, we decided to review and synthesize their findings.

Although the advantages and disadvantages of being an only child remain a subject of debate, few studies have comprehensively investigated or reviewed its implications for the child, the family, and society as a whole. A narrative review of the evidence helps to identify the drawbacks and consequences of being an only child more deeply, to inform ongoing research, and provide evidence for policymakers to adopt or adjust context-sensitive policies for children with and without siblings. The only-child phenomenon may lead to a wide range of physical, psychological, and social consequences and unhealthy behaviors in the only child and the parents, and consequently, predispose society to social harms such as an increase in divorce rate, sexual deviances, and declining social capital. This review highlighted the drawbacks of having only one child and identified several significant challenges faced by families; however, further research is needed to investigate its potential benefits.

The only child phenomenon has been a matter of

debate since the early 20th century, when the pioneer and influential psychologist G. Stanley Hall stated that “being an only child is a disease in itself” (55). Any phenomenon, including being an only child in this world, can have both advantages and disadvantages. If a family wants to plan whether to have an only child or not, it is logical to be familiar with both the negative and positive consequences of having only one child. In this study, we only reviewed the disadvantages of being an only child. In the 20th century, studies mainly focused on the short-term effects on only children (19). In the last two decades, we have seen that studies look at the issue with a larger sample size (19, 30, 32, 38, 41) and a more comprehensive view (21, 54). Only children are missing the valuable opportunity to interact with siblings, and as a result, endure a poorer quality of living that severely affects them as they age. Lo (7) points out that only children are deprived of sibling interactions that can help develop social skills and competitiveness—traits that are advantageous for career advancement (7).

This study also has certain limitations. The first pertains to the use of a narrative literature review, which, in the absence of a predefined and systematic protocol for source selection and evaluation, may lead to inconsistencies in article inclusion and potential selection bias. To minimize this limitation, we adopted a rigorous screening process, carefully selecting relevant studies based on their alignment with our research objectives and ensuring transparency in the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Another limitation was the potential bias in language selection, as we focused only on English-language articles. This could have restricted the diversity and range of included studies. To address this, we used multiple academic databases to maximize the range of articles available, and we also acknowledged that non-English studies may be an area for future research.

Furthermore, while we made efforts to include articles from 2000 to 2024, some publications may have been missed due to search constraints or database limitations. We aimed to reduce this limitation by selecting a wide range of databases and using comprehensive search terms.

A key strength of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of the adverse effects of being an only child across three levels: parents, the only child, and society, and within three health domains: physical, psychological, and social. We included studies that addressed one or more of these aspects, avoiding the restriction of requiring all dimensions to be examined together. This approach allowed us to gather a broader range of insights, offering a more holistic understanding of the effects of being an only child. By synthesizing research from diverse studies across multiple countries, the review provides a global perspective on the topic. Furthermore, including literature published up until October 2024 ensures the timeliness and relevance of the findings. Adopting a multidimensional approach, the study classifies the adverse effects into three domains: individual, parental, and societal health, thereby illustrating their broad and far-reaching impacts. Despite being a narrative review, we applied systematic methods to select high-quality, peer-reviewed studies, enhancing the

validity of our findings.

Conclusion

Being an only child can influence multiple dimensions of health—for both the child and their parents—across physical, mental, and social domains. Childhood is a formative stage that should be fully experienced rather than rushed through, and every child has the right to progress through this stage at their own pace. Humans are inherently social beings, and no one in childhood can fully substitute the role of siblings in learning to live socially. A child deprived of siblings—especially in the current digital generation where smartphones replace human interaction—may fail to follow the natural course of social development. Consequently, being an only child may limit opportunities for a rich and varied childhood, which in turn can contribute to poorer physical, mental, and social health outcomes in adulthood.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, with registration ID number IR.KMU.REC.1400.597.

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Supplementary Files

Table S1. Information on included studies

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