

## THE ONLY CHILD

by SHEILA FAWCETT (C.M.C.)

Even in childhood I looked forward to the time when I should have children of my own. At first I thought six sons would be an ideal family, but later I reduced my aspirations to two sons and one daughter. Things turned out otherwise, and I am the mother of one son, who is now eighteen.

I am convinced that deliberately to limit one's family to one child in order to give him the best of everything is a mistake: no material advantages can compensate for the lack of brothers and sisters; the only child will miss them all his life, perhaps most consciously when he is getting old and has no one with whom to share childhood memories. However, there will always be mothers for whom it is either impossible or inadvisable to have more than one child, and it is for them that I want to put down some of my thoughts on how to make the best of the situation.

Before I was married I taught, and for the whole of my married life I have lived in a boys' Public School, so that I have had ample opportunity to observe only children at close quarters, and I know that they are not necessarily selfish and spoiled. Parents need to exercise self-control and self-denial, and to acquire a special sensitiveness if they are to avoid two extremes: the one is to appear offhand and so deny the child the feeling of being loved and wanted, the other is to smother him with attention and emotional affection. Nothing can alter the fact that he is the sole object of the parental love; it would be artificial to pretend otherwise, but constant awareness of this may be a heavy burden for him to bear and one of which he may well become increasingly conscious as he grows up. If it presses too heavily on him, his only defence may be to break away from home, causing distress to himself and to his parents. They must never trade on this special bond between the only child and his father and mother, but should play it down as much as possible without being insincere or making him uncertain of their love, and they should take pride in his growing independence.

Now for some of the more practical pitfalls which lie in wait for the parents of an only child, perhaps more insidiously than they threaten the fathers and mothers of larger families. It is tempting to give him the best of everything that is going. This was very obvious during the period of food-rationing, when, for example, the whole family ration of butter

[p 72]

and eggs would be reserved for the child. For many mothers a child's physical well-being ranks higher than character-training, but this emphasis lays up trouble for the future. There is usually a considerable margin of safety between the physical level at which our children live and that at which they would suffer any ill-effects. It is better to take slight risks within this margin than to pamper a child to the detriment of his character.

Much the same attitude should apply to physical danger. Some risks must be allowed in order that the child may grow in independence instead of remaining tied to his mother's apron-strings. Besides, I am convinced that his greatest safety lies in training him to take care of himself, rather than in trying to protect him from all danger. A moment is sure to come when the mother is not there but the danger is; the child tries to come downstairs alone, or to climb a tree: how much better if he has been encouraged to learn the proper way to do these things

and to develop a sense of what is safe and what is not, instead of being forbidden to venture in any way. A child I know, between the ages of nine months and a year, evolved a method of getting from the top to the bottom of the steep stairs in her house in a swift, safe, controlled slither. Normally she went straight down, but she could stop herself on any step if she wished. It is only fair to say that she is not an only child, but it is perhaps significant that none of the children in this family has ever fallen downstairs.

Then there is the question of going away from home. A wise mother will arrange for her child, from a very young age, to become accustomed to being away from home for a morning or an afternoon. By the time he is four or five, he will probably be ready to enjoy going away on a visit for a few days, and when he is in his 'teens he should go off cheerfully to a camp or a holiday abroad with his contemporaries. Of course, from the age of two, he needs plenty of companions of his own age to learn to share things with. At first this may need an unusual amount of planning and may sometimes have disappointing results, but for this very reason perseverance is essential.

In many ways the only child leads a more unruffled life than his contemporaries in larger families. He learns to be happy alone, to keep his belongings as he wants them and to pursue his own interests. I cannot remember my son ever being bored or at a loss for something to do. To a great extent this was because, between the ages of eleven and seventeen, he was absorbed in making a marionette theatre and putting on increasingly ambitious plays. This seems to me an excellent hobby, costing very little and providing so many outlets for the creative instincts. In the end he had about thirty puppets, made and dressed by himself, good scenery, lighting, and several plays. The project would not have gone so smoothly if there had been small brothers and sisters to interfere with his things, though of course this would have taught him important lessons.

The only child is spared the strain of trying to keep his end up with older brothers and sisters and knows little of the squabbling which can be such a feature of family life. His parents have more time to share his play and, later, his interests, and so long as they avoid an unduly emotional relationship with him and prevent an excessive dependence on

[p 73]

them, they may enjoy a more precious link with their one child than they could have had with several. At least the mother of an only child will not find herself in the position my mother did when I was taken into her bedroom and, on being asked confidently: 'What would you like best in the world?', replied firmly: 'A puppy.' After that it must have been quite an anti-climax to reveal the much longed-for baby brother!

Although my first family ambitions have not been realised, I have had eighteen years of completely happy motherhood and now I find it difficult to imagine it richer or more satisfying even if I had had a large family.