Sticking Up For Siblings
Who's Deciding the Size of Britain's Families?

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Colin Brazier

with additional research by Therese Wallin

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email: books@civitas.org.uk

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Contents

	page
Author	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	viii
1. The New Science of Siblings	1
2. Churchill on Childcare	7
3. Well-rounded Children	32
4. Saviour Siblings	48
5. Sibling Germ Swap	62
6. The Play's The Thing	73
7. The Unknown Unknowns of Parenting	88
8. The Sibling Society	101

Author

Colin Brazier is a presenter with Sky News. He began his career in newspapers, working for the *Yorkshire Post* and *Observer*, before moving into broadcasting. He was with the BBC and ITN prior to a switch to Sky in 1997, reporting for the channel as a political correspondent and Brussels correspondent. He was awarded a Gold Medal from the New York TV Festival in 2001 for his dispatches from Afghanistan. He was the first European reporter to reach Baghdad during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. His documentary on the fall of the city was short-listed in the Monte Carlo TV Awards. In 2008 Civitas published his paper assessing arguments for family expansion. The *Daily Telegraph* said the report was so counter-cultural that its author would need to wear a flak vest.

Therese Wallin (researcher)

Before joining Civitas as a research assistant, Therese studied law and has since returned to the legal sector. Therese continues to have a keen interest in family policy and has written a number of analyses in the subject area.

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Introduction

In 1972 the proportion of only children as a percentage of all dependent children in Britain was 18 per cent. By 2007 it had climbed to 26 per cent.

Source: Office for National Statistics

I met Amy Chua as she was heading to Heathrow. The Harvard law professor was on the last lap of a tour promoting her best-selling and, at times, eye-popping book. *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* caused a sensation when it was published. Its philosophy is pithily summed up on the dust-jacket: '[The] Chinese mother believes that... A-minus is a bad grade. Your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in maths. The only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal. That medal must be gold.'

As the child of Chinese immigrant parents, Chua cleaves to their parental approach – relentless aspiration married to an unquenchable appetite for success. But unlike many Chinese, and indeed China itself, she is not pursuing a one-child policy. I asked her, as the poster-girl for pushy parents the world over, why she had not concentrated all her efforts in one stellar child (she has two daughters). She told me: 'There is a danger of suffocating a child with too much pressure and expectation. I had four sisters. I happen to be a big fan of siblings because I think they're important for socialisation.'

This book, in one sense, is an attempt to prove that Chua – or indeed any parent like her who takes the view that a brother or sister comes with formative benefits – is right about siblings. In fact, I will argue, that such cheerleading understates the case for siblings as sources of happiness, health and success.

But there are obvious caveats and Chua exemplifies some of them. She is a publishing phenomenon and, as such, a

INTRODUCTION

wealthy woman. She has had the financial wherewithal to underwrite her conviction that children need siblings. But in Britain thousands of parents are not so blessed. Some face heart-breaking and insurmountable medical obstacles to a second child. Many more couples simply cannot afford, or feel they cannot afford, the sibling penalty; in lost earnings, a career interrupted for a second time and childcare costs which might oblige one of them to give up work permanently. Others look at an already unaffordable two-bed flat and shake their heads despondently.

In February 2011 one report¹ found that almost two thirds of parents who have one child feel too poor to have another. By 2012, with the country in the grip of a double-dip recession, another survey showed the figure to be as high as 70 per cent.² If these respondents are being realistic, that is a staggeringly commonplace denial of the desire to have the size of family parents want.

Are these respondents answering faithfully? Perhaps a better question is: are they in command of the facts? Both the studies quoted above were commissioned, not by a university journal, Government department or independent think-tank, but by corporate press officers from some of our biggest financial companies. Having a second child will not save a couple money, but it need not be as ruinous as the financial services sector suggests. Annually, there is now a merry-go-round of media releases from banks, building societies and insurers, aimed at putting a figure on the cost of children.

Typical was a story put out by the HSBC media relations team in May 2012.³ It claimed parents under-estimated the average cost of raising their first child by £92,000 and suggested prudent couples needed to save more money (presumably with HSBC) by way of preparation. Since the object here is to win headlines rather than prizes for empirical disinterestedness, these figures frequently tell only half a story. They fail to take account of the economies of

scale produced by siblings; the handed-down buggies, clothes and cots, the shared holidays, heating and bathwater.

Perhaps it is too much to expect a press officer chasing media coverage to factor in the savings made when a child is considered – not as an individual big-ticket item, but in the group context of several siblings. Such savings can only be guessed at. How much will be saved on play-dates if an only child has a sibling for entertainment? What about the money some parents will save on private education because a younger child secures a place at a good state school thanks to the presence there of a big brother and the so-called 'sibling rule'.

Clearly, many parents do not rely on media scare-stories to form opinions on the economic viability of family expansion. Yet, it is strange to report that one of the most important and immutable decisions individuals make is informed by a niche area of social science that has been more or less colonised by PR execs from the City.

More importantly, I suspect that siblings are in need of some public relations of their own. The decision to have children is now seen as a lifestyle choice in which all choices are relative and where all sizes of family, including those without children, are of equal worth (if anything larger families are in the doghouse because of environmental concerns). The notion that siblings can contribute to the happiness and health of children, couples and society at large is seen, in so far as it is considered at all, as an anachronism.

However, there is a substantial body of research which rarely features in the framing of the debate about family size as experienced by parents. Some of this research is of varying quality and oftentimes downright contradictory. But the very fact that it exists at all will come as a surprise to those parents who feel in their marrow that, in spite of the apparent cost, they want a second child, while having few reasons for so doing and many tangible reasons not to.

INTRODUCTION

There are certainly disadvantages to having siblings, and I try to acknowledge some of them. However, to maintain, as many are keen to, that there is no difference, only uniformity amongst children regardless of sibship (the number of siblings) I believe to be disingenuous. Siblings do make a difference, for better or worse.

Much of my evidence comes from the United States, where interest in the paramount influence of siblings has been running-hot for a decade. I also call upon my own experience as a parent. I do so with this qualification. I am a relatively well-paid TV journalist who can afford the cash to support a non-working spouse and the time to be a hands-on parent myself (an option denied to a growing number of couples who, having had their first child, baulk at the impracticality of another).

These first and, in many instances, only-time parents, live in a country where siblings are far from encouraged. The latest disincentive has been provided by the state. Child benefit – a payment pegged to the number of children in a family and as such Britain's longest-paid sibling subsidy – is currently being frozen or cut altogether.

In view of these obstacles, it is not always easy for struggling couples to articulate a deeply felt urge to furnish their child with a brother or sister. That may be where the themes explored in this book come in. Certainly, many of these defeated parents cannot see how it is possible to have a multi-child family without suffering a sharp reduction in their standard of living. Put simply, this is my stab at recalibrating that cost/benefit analysis.

What is this pamphlet for? My aim is to provoke a discussion, rather than a parenting manual or demographic study. It is certainly not restricted to babies or youngsters. A sibling is for life, not just for childhood (a fact with potentially important ramifications for the raging debate about eldercare in this country).

I certainly shy away from prescribing an optimal family size. From my financially secure ivory tower it would seem like folly indeed to exhort parents to leverage their commitments in the face of tough economic times.

And yet I find myself falling back on that inevitable trope: can parents afford not to give their child a sibling? That is for themselves, as much as for their offspring. Some readers may feel that question is invalidated by my personal situation. I have an established career, a modest mortgage, a partner who does not wish or need to rush back to the coal-face. But that is not to say that my wife and I are pampered. We cannot afford a nanny. There are no foreign holidays. There is an awful lot of domestic drudgery. We have made a choice based on our firm conviction that the multi-child family is a treasure unto itself. I have a hunch that many couples feel such a choice is denied to them, or that the advantages of siblings, as currently envisaged, simply do not warrant the sacrifices entailed.

So my book is aimed squarely at parents who feel that a sibling for their only child constitutes an irrecoverable expense; who cannot imagine a calculation where the ledger tilts in favour of another pregnancy. I do not attempt anything as crass as trying to put a cash value on a sibling and am emphatically not trying to make policy recommendations. I am, after all, a hack not a wonk; a Dad not a SpAd.⁴

Instead, I have sought to reclaim some lost territory, to revive some of what was once received wisdom about siblings, to remind parents about the seemingly forgotten plusses of having a brother or sister for their offspring (advantages which may have been obscured by some of those ever-climbing cost projections presented by the spin doctors of big banks). And to do this all without, I hope, falling foul of the idle animus which was once directed towards only children and those who raised them.

1

The New Science of Siblings

Like many women of her generation, the idea of having children in her 20s was anathema to my wife Jo. She was 36 when we had our first child. Compared to our friends in the media, that did not make her an antique. We both found it funny that she was officially designated a 'geriatric' mother by the antenatal clinic.

As she neared 40, however, the joke was on us. Jo had seemingly succumbed to secondary infertility. After conceiving our first quickly, a second was slow in coming. We reconciled ourselves to the idea that our daughter would never have the siblings that her parents had taken for granted. At least two couples we counted amongst our dearest friends were in precisely the same situation. We were part of a growing cohort – older parents, for whom an only child seems to be an unforeseen consequence of delayed child-bearing.

In 2002 I was posted abroad. Jo quit her stressful job to live the lower-octane life of the expat spouse. Within weeks of resigning, she was pregnant. Our only child soon had a sibling. Our friends were not so lucky.

Their experience and ours was influential. Like many parents who have struggled to have a baby, my wife and I have found it hard to escape a mind-set which sees pregnancy and children as anything other than a colossal blessing. If this has been the cause of a blinkered belief in the power of siblings then I can only say it is a bias I am relieved to have.

After all, nobody comes immaculately to the debate about family size. Its study can never be abstract in the way of the natural sciences. I can say that much of my thinking about siblings certainly took flight somewhere in the family home I share with my young children. This is not, however,

a book of personal reminiscences, although I do occasionally draw from the well of my own family experience to embellish the theoretical. It is, instead, an attempt to make a modest – and very definitely subjective contribution – to what *Time* called, in 2006, 'The New Science of Siblings'. The magazine presented the study of brothers and sisters as the culmination of a long chain of thinking from social scientists, psychologists, sociologists and geneticists. Siblings represented a 'temperamental dark matter' whose invisible gravitational pull was now, finally, getting the scrutiny it deserved.¹

News magazines, even the most august, cannot be the ultimate arbiters of big shifts in thinking. *Time*, however, had sniffed out the zeitgeist. Even a cursory look at the electronic book-shelves reveals an academic back-catalogue now groaning under the weight of new sibling science. A 2009 collection of papers assessing the rising importance of sibling scholarship is typical.² Its editors express bafflement that, for so long, the formative role of parents and peers was considered so much more important for children than siblings.

Mine is a short book, partly because running a sibling laboratory of half a dozen children takes its toll, but also because of self-imposed brevity. A study of siblings would be a major enterprise. This is not an assessment of siblings; rather a discussion around their possible merits.

Sibling is an old word and etymology tells us it may have roots in Old English or German. We may not know where the word comes from, but we know where it is going. Increasingly, 'sibling' cannot appear in a sentence without hyphenation. Nowadays we talk of 'half', 'full' or 'step'-siblings to distinguish the biological identity of children within families which are blended, reconstituted or sometimes simply 'modern'.

For this reason I prefer, where grammatically possible, a different noun. 'Sibship' refers to the group or number of

children born to the same pair of parents. Since this book assesses the specific choice faced by couples who currently have one child, 'sibship' is a useful way of denuding the debate to its bare essentials. I am attempting to calculate the usefulness of an additional brother or sister, without addressing the layers of complexity added by children who join a family at different times with different histories and biological parents. Similarly, because 'sibship' relates to the social or medical science of sibling interaction, it cannot apply to only children. Sibship, in and of itself, means at least a 'dyad' – two children – and sometimes more.

Why so fastidious? There are two strands to the study of sibship and I want to be on the side of the angels, or at least the academics. Their largely good-natured debate is characterised by scientific method and temperate conclusions. The other side of the debate is not. It belongs to the polemicists, the columnists and the fundamentalists. They see the number of children in a family as a key battleground in a culture war which has politicised the very act of parenting.

They fire broadsides at each other from websites and blogs which are frequently self-reinforcing if rarely balanced. There are childless-by-choice militants who denigrate parents – or 'breeders' – bent on vandalising the planet by producing resource-sapping infants. There are religious activists – 'quiverfullers' – who assail the evils of any birth control, natural or otherwise.

For the more mainstream political classes, sibship size requires careful footwork, which is one reason why few tread there. A thoughtfully phrased pamphlet⁴ by the left-leaning Institute for Public Policy Research identified and – to some degree – lamented a 90,000-strong 'baby-gap' between the number of children working parents want and the number they are actually having. When the right-leaning peer, Howard Flight, struck into similar territory, he was publicly dressed down by his party leader.⁵

In the media, where I make a living, the academic study of siblings has limited appeal. The question of family size, however, sets pulses racing. Apparent inconsistency abounds. Are siblings a good or bad thing? More importantly, can you have too much of a good thing? Commentators seem to have decided that the answer to this question depends on who is having them and why – rather than whether multiples of siblings are, in and of themselves, a good thing. They excoriate the sexual incontinence of 'feckless dads' like Keith Macdonald, an unemployed father of 15, who has "cost the taxpayer £1.5m". Simultaneously, the same writers dub senior female boardroom executives, like mother-of-nine Helena Morrissey, as 'superwomen'.

Of these two narratives – the academic or the angry – which one reaches the ears of those who need, most immediately, to form a judgement about sibship size? The couple agonising over whether they can afford a sibling for their toddler are ill-served by this enfeebled debate. They need to hear more about the new science of siblings – with its extraordinary revelations about the health and happiness benefits of a brother or sister – and less of the old saws about family size and bogus distinctions between deserving and undeserving parents.

When you ask would-be parents how many children they want, a single-digit minority aspire to a sibling-free family. Once reality bites – and they have their first child – the number balloons. Couples have been masters of their own fertility – thanks to reliable contraception – for decades. Yet, it seems to many observers that there has never been a time when to give our offspring a sibling has been a lifestyle-choice to the extent which it is now. I know of several couples who feel they have experienced parenting having had one child, and that being the case, they feel no need to repeat the experiment.

Often, there is no decision-making process. Many

parents have a first child and set about coping with the enormous change wrought by the new arrival. There is a vague ambition to give Junior a sibling. But dither leads to delay and, delay for long enough, and the choice disappears.

Those who do set about forging a coherent approach to the subject face no shortage of disincentives. So many factors militate against the decision to have a second baby – to give an existing child a sibling. I have heard couples justify their decision to stick-on-one from a long menu of arguments running from the global to the parochial. Some say the world already has a problem with overpopulation and does not need them to provide it with another mouth to feed. In truth, a few of these latter-day Malthusians might have misgivings which are as much financial as they are environmental. I know at least one couple who embraced a sibling-free lifestyle for their child rather than face up to the cost of putting another kid through private school.

I am not saying have children and hang the expense. I am a cheerleader for siblings, but I am neither quixotic nor an absolutist on the subject. The last thing a parent struggling to cope on the 12th floor of a council tower block needs is another child (although there is strong evidence that sometimes an older sibling is the only thing keeping some chaotic families from imploding).⁷

The experience of having siblings varies according to the number of siblings, the gender mix, the birth order and, inevitably, the socioeconomic status or aspirations of parents. However, some of the advantages of sibship – many of the physical and mental health benefits for instance – appear to be virtually irreducible.

Of course, background does have a bearing. How could it not? The evidence shows that siblings can be bad for one another in some respects. They can accentuate the positive and exacerbate the negative. It depends on how dysfunctional the family setting is. An older sister can talk

frankly and regularly about sex to a younger sister, helping her avoid inappropriate encounters. Yet an older sister who is a teen-mother has been found to be much more likely to lead her younger sibling astray, even matchmaking her with older – and unsuitable – partners in some instances.⁸ With smoking and alcohol the same pattern applies. Siblings emerge as strong predictors – stronger than peers in some studies – of 'risky behaviour'. An older brother who smokes cannabis is the person most likely to supply his younger brother with dope.⁹

Sibling science has confirmed what common sense might already suggest. Brothers or sisters are likely to be a vector, not a brake, on a child's happiness and life satisfaction provided there is a family setting in which there exists marital stability, loving and emphatic parents, as well as supportive extended family networks. ¹⁰ Put simply, if the culture at home is abusive and unsupportive, the sibling relationships within it will be commensurately feral. However – and here's the key point for me – if the vibe at home is good, then siblings will deliver a range of fantastic outcomes; for brothers and sisters, for parents and, as I contest elsewhere, society at large.

2

Churchill on Childcare

The birth of a child is often accompanied by that most existential of parental questions – can I possibly face that again? The sheer pain of childbirth is bad enough. My wife, with memorable directness hours after the birth of Edith, our eldest child, gave short shrift to my observation that things had not been so excruciatingly painful after all. Delivering a fruity simile, which has not left me since, she forcefully demurred: 'It was like passing a melon!'

For all the improvements in pain relief, the agony of labour exposes many pregnant women to unprecedented levels of discomfort. Elective caesarean operations may be increasingly popular, but they are not without complications (and cost). Either way, it is hard to recount faithfully what really happens in the delivery suite to those who have not witnessed its primeval chronology first hand. Those who have frequently gloss over the gore. My wife simply says she is thankful that the body has no memory of pain.

It is no surprise then that, having done it once, some mothers cannot face maternity again. It can hardly be a coincidence that half of all one-child mothers are said to have been through a difficult birth or post-natal depression. Every mother who returns home with a baby in a carry-crib and a body pumped full of hormones deserves much more than the cards and flowers which ritual demands she receives. For, once those congratulations have abated, life with a newborn is no Pampers advertisement, full of plump, smiling babies whose nappies are already attached.

The let-down can be profound for parents. It has been estimated that anything up to 80 per cent of new mums suffer from 'baby blues' during the first few hours or days of giving birth. About 10 per cent suffer from post-natal

depression, a serious illness.² The discomfiture is not confined to mothers. Fathers sometimes feel squeezed out by the new arrival, as can older siblings, who may initially manifest physical signs of displacement, like bed-wetting. These first few weeks and months are frequently an extraordinarily trying time for mothers and fathers. However, the majority accept that the short-term pain is worth it for the perceived long-term gain. Their numbers may be declining, but the majority of couples are still willing to go through it all again.

The advantages, or otherwise, of providing a child with a sibling are discussed elsewhere in this book, as are the potential benefits of sibship to society at large. Here, I specifically want to investigate what advantages accrue to couples who put themselves through parenthood more than once. What drives the decision, where it is possible to exercise one, to have a multi-child family? Why do parents choose to go through so much more than once? What motivates the act of repeated reproduction, an act which condemns couples to a further extension of what one social scientist evocatively talks of as 'the parenting emergency'?3

Before the pill, the principal answer to that question was obvious. Siblings were the frequently unwanted byproducts of carnal desire. Yet by the turn of the last century, prophylactics, and later the pill, meant that children were no longer divinely begotten. Increasingly, they were chosen. For women of my grandmother's generation, this choice came too late. Both my maternal and paternal grandmothers had nine children apiece (co-incidentally both lost one in childbirth and another to diseases of infancy: polio and spina bifida). For women of my mother's generation though, born just after the war, birth control was revolutionary. It allowed couples to ask: 'How many children shall we have?' Nowadays, a mutual desire for children, or indeed a determination to have none, is a conversation which is likely to help a putative couple

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

discern their compatibility. Many will arrive at a consensus about future sibship-size long before they have any children. Only a few decades ago such a dialogue would have been as rare as it was pointless.

Fantastic Four

Britain's wartime leader, Winston Churchill, was emphatic about a great many things, including, most readers would be educated to learn, his fertility intentions. 'One for mother, one for father, one for accidents, one for increase,' was his reported prescription for an ideal family unit. Sir Winston lived out his rationale. He and his saintly wife, Clementine, had four children.

It can never be easy to know to what extent parents, even one so firm-minded as Winnie, indulge in *ex post facto* justification. Do parents tailor family size to their wishes, or, having had all the children they can, insist that was the number they had in mind all along? Churchill, I think it is fair to say, does not qualify as a noted dispenser of parenting advice. However, his analysis was axiomatically of its time, given child mortality and the loss of life from two world wars. Many Britons felt the need for a child to guard against the risk of childhood diseases ('one for accidents'). Others felt it was their duty to repopulate communities eviscerated by the trenches and the Blitz ('one for increase').

In truth, Churchill's views make for pretty crude listening when it comes to the sensibilities of the modern ear. However, in the year he stood down as Britain's Prime Minister (1955), a rather more nuanced piece of social science was emerging in America, which also sought to address the question of family size. It involved a study from Indianapolis of 239 couples with one living child who deliberately interrupted contraception to conceive another child. These parents, clearly, belong to a different era. However, their situation is precisely the one faced by

couples at whom this pamphlet is firmly directed. Namely, couples who already have one child, who now find themselves on the horns of a dilemma about whether to have another. As such, though whiskery, the Indianapolis study is useful. I can certainly find nothing else which comes close to the manner in which it orders fertility intentions and drills down into why parents want a second, or indeed further, children. The respondents were asked to rank, in order of priority, why they wanted their existing child to have a sibling. Below, is how the authors tabulated their respondents' answers. I have not changed the language used in the original questions.

- 1. Not wanting an only child
- 2. A strong liking for children
- 3. A feeling that children bring husband and wife closer together
- 4. The desire of children for more brothers and sisters
- 5. Not to be left childless in the case of death of only child
- 6. Wanting a girl if only had boys, or a boy if only had girls
- 7. The traditional belief that married couples ought to have children
- 8. A desire to see what own children would be like
- 9. A belief that it is a religious duty to have a family
- 10. A feeling that it is important to carry on the family name⁴

Clearly, this list reflects the post-war zeitgeist in America. Obvious motives which are 'missing' might include, for instance, the desire of parents to provide their own parents with grandchildren. The list does not delve into why parents choose a certain sibship; why some think, for instance, that four is more optimal than three. Several motivations overlap. Nonetheless, this list is as good a place as any from which to assess what prompted parents to give their child a sibling, and how those motives might be evolving and,

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

indeed, thwarted, in the present day. In some instances the items are simply a useful starting point for my own reflections on sibship size and the benefits, or otherwise, to couples of a multi-child family. I will take each point in turn and, in the interests of suspense, in reverse order.

Family name

Last on the list was 'a feeling that it is important to carry on the family name'. Let me invoke the memory of Churchill again. For landed parents of his vintage, maintaining the family name was bound up with the enshrinement and enforcement of property rights. It was not so much about keeping the name going as having 'an heir and a spare' to ensure a smooth bequest to the next generation. This is now less important for two reasons. One, child mortality is declining and there is less chance of the 'spare' getting a look in. Second, in the Autumn of 2011 the royal family announced that succession by male primogeniture would be abolished. It is becoming less significant, legally, for even the most blue-blooded families to keep an estate intact through the male line.

Inheritance aside, the old aristocracy already had a way of keeping the family name going. They spliced surnames together; creating so-called 'double-barrelled names' (Churchill was, to give him his full name, a Spencer-Churchill). That way, a child without siblings could keep an ancient family name extant – even if the child was female – by simply joining together the names of father and mother. This was, apparently, more often done if the woman in question was 'marrying down' i.e. her husband came from a position of lower social status.

In modern Britain, of course, things are different. Double-barrelled names, once the preserve of the gentry, are newly popular among couples who now use them to signify an equal share in a child. For that reason they are widely used by same-sex parents. When Elton John and his

civil partner David Furnish named their surrogate child, they included both their surnames. Double-barrelled names have become a mark of modernity, to the disgust of those who jealously guard ancient distinctions.⁵

I think it is reasonable to guess that if the Indianapolis list were compiled today, the idea of 'carrying on the family name' would be a far less likely candidate for inclusion. The growth in parental separation means a child can carry forward what previous generations would have viewed as the mother's maiden-name and they do so without the stigma which would once have accompanied such an action. Indeed, increasingly, blended families include half-or step-siblings who have different surnames.

It certainly feels, although I can produce no evidence to support the idea, that the dynastic urge has waned in many modern Britons. The celebrity culture may mean people crave instant fame and transient name recognition more than ever before, even as they are less anguished about posterity and handing their name on to the next generation.

Religious duty

'A belief that it is a religious duty to have a family' is no longer a commonly held belief in many parts of the world. Going forth to multiply, the idea of high sibship as a sacramental duty, holds little water in Western societies where churchgoing has become a minority pursuit. Socalled 'lowest-low' birth-rates, well below replacement level, are often to be found in countries where, until recently, clergymen had popular morality in an arm-lock. Even in states where faith has helped put children in a position of reverence, the decline of multi-child families has been marked. Roman Catholic countries, like Italy, now have some of the world's lowest birth rates. (I once took a film crew to report on an Italian town, Laviano near Naples, where the Mayor was offering new mums 1,000 Euros to have a second child. The policy was not a great success.)

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

The Vatican is certainly aware of which way the demographic wind in Italy is blowing. Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly stated the importance of having children. While stopping short of insisting that a large family is a matter of Christian duty, he says 'families with many children represent a testimony of faith, courage and optimism'. His words, in the developed world, are largely falling on deaf ears. Catholic birth rates, once significantly higher than those of Protestants – or indeed atheists – are now broadly similar.

However, orthodox adherents of religious communities – Catholics included – continue to buck demographic trends. Eric Kaufmann, from London University's Birkbeck College, published a book in 2010 which showed how the devout are out-breeding the Godless in Western countries with potentially significant political repercussions. He demonstrates how the number of Mormons in Utah, for instance, continues to grow by 40 per cent every decade and how the ultra-Orthodox account for 17 per cent of British Jewry, but 75 per cent of children. Both traditions, along with much larger groups of Evangelical Christians and Salafist Muslims, are able to exert greater influence over the democratic process in states and countries where they are increasingly well represented.

Curiosity

Over the last fifty years, society has not grown less narcissistic. That being the case, I have a hunch that 'A desire to see what own children would be like' would still feature in an updated version of the Indianapolis study. I fancy it might now, in fact, enjoy a higher priority if we asked couples today why they wanted a second child.

Let me begin an examination of this subject from the vantage point of my own experience. Let me also be charitable to myself and assume that my own family expansion has not been driven by any emotion as shallow

as narcissism. I would like to think it has been sustained, not by self-regard, but by an interest in others. In fact, I believe there is a deep anthropological dimension to having a multi-child family. Watching my offspring navigate their way through the milestones of life has been one of the most rewarding aspects of parenthood. Of course, it did not require me to have six children to enjoy those red-letter days. Once you have seen one First Day At School you have, sort of, seen them all.

Except that there is much more to parenting and childhood than those memorable occasions. The first time your child rides a bicycle stays with you as a parent, but it represents only a fraction of the time you invest in that child's infancy. Childhood is the sum of many quotidian and humdrum actions. It is nice to watch our child do well at the school prize-giving, yet it is in chaperoning our children through the Everyday that we really get to understand their characters. For better or worse, I find that their true natures are revealed, not by the 'public' face they present to me (or to the school head on sports' day), but by how they interact, unselfconsciously, with a sibling. In my life, the anthropology of parenting was altered immensely with the introduction of a second child. It became much more of a spectator sport, albeit one played out every day in the family home. That is where I see most clearly 'how they turned out'.

A friend of mine thinks that the parents of siblinged children become the directors of their own reality TV show. It is the children, however, who are very much the subjects. Some parents cannot help but add to the cast. Lady Longford, the late historian and mother-of-eight, was once asked by an interviewer why she had so many children. Her reply neatly encapsulates the essential curiosity which underlines this point on the Indianapolis list. She said: 'I just wanted to see how the next one turned out.'

My wife and I only have a paltry six children but we are

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

both fond of quoting Longford when it comes to justifying our relatively unusual fecundity. Like her we derive a lot of harmless fun from guessing how the nascent character traits (and flaws) we see in our children might manifest themselves in adulthood. Will the carefree daughter always be so nonchalant? Will the clumsy child grow into a refined adult? In time, the same questions will apply to the next generation. One day, I hope to wile away the hours in fruitless speculation about the future of my grandchildren. An interest in their lives might, as many grandparents testify, 'keep you young'. Of course, parents of a child without siblings also gaze into the crystal ball and wonder what will befall their child. It is simply that with more offspring come more opportunities for wonderment. As Lady Longford might have added, high sibship reminds parents just how much genetic variety can be imparted from the same parental DNA.

From genetics and anthropology to – arithmetic. It has appeared to some parents that the permutations of interaction increase exponentially (literally) with the introduction of each additional sibling. Maureen Freely, a mother of four and a journalist, wrote about this relationship matrix in the *Guardian*. She calculated that the 'buzz' in her home was the product of 'the number of relationships that are going on at the same time. If you include two parents in the equation, the total is 15: five plus four plus three plus two plus one. Because each child has such a distinct personality and interacts in such a different way with each of the other children, you never quite know what's going to happen next. The idea that you can shape your children in your image goes right out of the window.'⁸

That final sentence is, arguably, the most arresting; namely the idea that higher sibship introduces an abnegation of parents' ability to mould the personality of their children. It is a notion which I will examine elsewhere. I do so in the context of how a multi-child family can be a

powerful antidote to so-called Helicopter Parenting; the desire many parents feel to hover anxiously over their 'hurried' or 'over-scheduled' and, often, only child. I would simply say, at this juncture, that one of the features of the helicopter phenomenon is that it is, in terms of sibship size, self-fuelling. 'Hovering' takes effort. It is hard work making all those appointments for extra piano lessons, or to make sure your only child does not walk home from ballet class alone. So hard, in fact, that the prospect of giving that child a sibling can be intimidating if not exhausting.

The Done Thing

Even without the thumb-screws of organised religion, many parents held on to 'the traditional belief that married couples ought to have children'; that such behaviour was the done thing. This has often been vigorously encouraged by secular or atheist regimes. Indeed, the least Godbothering governments frequently demanded the greatest fecundity. From Napoleon's French Republic, to the communism of Stalin and the Nazism of Hitler, autocratic leaders have sought to boost birth-rates to fill the lands of vanquished foes. Patriotic pro-natalism and *lebensraum* have routinely gone hand in hand.

Today's rulers are less ambitious. They simply want their existing real estate to remain populated. The latest world leader to offer inducements to those who are reluctant to breed with sufficient gusto was Vladimir Putin. In the spring of 2011, he announced plans to spend an astonishing £33 billion over four years to halt Russia's demographic nosedive. So far at least, in spite of mounting interest from South Korea to Southern Italy, government initiatives to arrest falling fertility levels have failed to produce substantial gains.

It feels like the 'traditional belief that married couples ought to have children' is a nostrum very much in flux; at least in the sense of 'children' – plural. I cannot help

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

thinking that in recent decades couples in many developed countries have seen the stigma attached to the only child dissipate. Only children have become normative, even fashionable in some parental circles, particularly where environmental concerns are paramount and large families are seen as heavy or selfish consumers of natural resources.

Fashion, of course, does not extirpate traditions *per se*; it simply ushers in new ones. Where sibship size is concerned the 'traditional belief' in children (plural) may be making way for a new orthodoxy. Many Western nations, according to *The Economist*, have arrived at a *de facto* 'one-child policy' by example, not coercion.⁹

Why should that be? We know, because the statistics show us, that siblings are less favoured by parents in Western countries than they once were. But what cultural currents swirl around the data? This author does not have the scope to examine, to any depth, the reasons why British couples do not have the second child many of them profess to want. The cost of parental living – day-care, bigger homes and cars – is certainly not declining. There is much talk about family-friendly hours at work, but few women associate a second child with a rapid acceleration in their career prospects.

So what is it within our culture that is challenging the traditional notion that couples ought to have children who are siblings? If I had to boil it down to one essential point, I think many couples are now prepared to act on the belief that with one child it is possible to maintain a lifestyle precluded by higher sibship.

That critical adult/child ratio of 2:1 means there is usually a spare pair of hands to fill the dishwasher. Couples are not *Outnumbered* as they are in the eponymous BBC TV comedy. Having a second child, once the 'traditional' choice for married parents, now presents a stark choice to parents; a life of relatively unflustered parenting with one set of university tuition fees and no need for a people carrier, or –

even with just two children – a protracted period of anarchy in the home and years of umpiring the squabbles of siblings.

For many first- and only-time parents, this must seem like a fertility no-brainer. From their perspective, a single-child family permits the most rapid reconnection with a pre-natal lifestyle; at work, at home, socially. The modern appetite for self-realisation and individualism means that the 'done thing' is what they want to do, not what society may have once expected.

One final point on the evolving nature of what is 'traditional' for parents contemplating sibship size. Human experience suggests that minority choices which become majority choices do so slowly but powerfully. What may have once been a radical decision – to have a child without siblings – can become a conservative option over time. That runs the risk of isolating those who are left behind by the trend. I worry, and this is a statement based partly on my vantage point as a newsreader immersed in the daily grind of current affairs, that the 'gold standard' of parenting is, increasingly, based on what the parents of children without siblings can provide. This is a process, in so far as it exists at all, which is as glacial as it is nebulous. I shall try to distill it with one example.

Mark McCullough made the headlines in 2010 when he was reported to social services by his local bus company. Newspaper reports suggested that Mr McCullough let one of his children, seven-year-old Isabelle, walk unattended to a bus stop 25 metres from his front door. This was deemed to be irresponsible parenting by the local authority concerned. As a father with several children, Mr McCullough protested, not unreasonably, that he was unable to be in two places at once. My hunch is that in certain walks of life that is a defence which holds less water than once it might. Best-practice, in so far as it can be applied to parenting, might increasingly be calibrated by the benchmark of bringing up a child without siblings.

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

What do I mean by that? For instance, in a litigious culture, best practice is that which involves the least legal risk. It is easier for the owners of a public swimming pool to insist that a parent is accompanied by just one child, rather than say, three. That will help municipal actuaries sleep more easily. Repeated in different walks of life, it starts to make life – practically – very difficult for multichild parents.

Gender disappointment

In 1950s America parents had no compunction in admitting that one of their motives for having another child was, as the clunky language of the Indianapolis study had it, 'wanting a girl if only had boys, or a boy if only had girls'. Gender Disappointment, as some commentators have subsequently termed this apparent mindset, is still much discussed in the media and on parenting websites.

Mumsnet is credited with coining a new acronym to reflect the growth in partiality for children of one gender or the other, particularly female children. SMOGs – Smug Mothers Of Girls – are said to recoil from the violence, noise and untidiness often associated with boys. 10

There is some reported evidence that women undergoing IVF have sought to use embryo-screening to guarantee that their child is a girl. Of course, in many parts of the world, the reverse is true. In some countries like India, where a baby girl is often seen as a social and financial burden, infanticide and gender-specific abortion have perpetrated large discrepancies between male and female birth-rates. The repercussions, massive and unpredictable, are yet to be felt.

As a father who had several – five – girls, followed by a son, I have earned some pin money by writing about the gender politics of childbirth. In 2009 I was commissioned to write an article for the *Times* after it emerged that Jamie Oliver's wife was expecting her third child. The celebrity

chef, who already had two daughters, had caused a little light controversy by expressing the hope that the latest pregnancy would result in the birth of a boy. The critical reaction to his comments highlighted a sense that the idea of 'carrying on until we get a boy' had passed its sell-by date and that Oliver was guilty of being a dinosaur. Most fathers do not want to be thought misogynistic, nor mothers the reverse. They prefer, at least the appearance of, gender neutrality.

I suspect this motive – of carrying on until a child of another gender arrives – would not therefore enjoy such a high ranking in an updated version of the Indianapolis study.

The flipside to the Jamie Oliver problem is one I have witnessed among two sets of parents known to me. One couple had four boys, the other three daughters. Both would have liked another child, but gave up because they felt fated to have another child of the same gender.

Ironically, the scientific evidence seems to be on the side of those who persist in their quest for a child of a different sex. One large-scale piece of American research suggested that the genetic predisposition towards giving birth to a child of one gender or another was marginal; a few percentage points in either direction. The authors likened the emergence of a child's gender in the womb to the tossing of a coin, albeit with Y and X chromosomes. A sunlucky football or cricket captains know, sometimes there will be puzzlingly long runs of heads or tails. A question of probability, not inevitability.

Of course, as every parent who has considered carrying on having children in pursuit of a different gender also knows, not everyone has the means of a millionaire like Jamie Oliver. Most parents feel they lack the financial wherewithal to keep on having children until one with the 'right' gender turns up.

One for accidents

Churchill's unvarnished dictum about family size incorporates an insurance policy against the loss of a child. He was certainly articulating a common fear when he suggested that parents should have a child as protection 'for accidents'. The Indianapolis study found that his views were far from eccentric. A third of the mothers and a quarter of the fathers interviewed said that 'Not to be left childless in the case of death of only child' was their chief motivation in countenancing the conception of a second child. Only 15 per cent 'very seldom' considered it a good reason to have another baby.

Of all the items on this half-century-old list, having a second child to ward off childlessness in the event of one child's death is probably the most obsolete. Rates of child mortality have fallen like a stone since the 1950s, at least in developed societies. Antenatal care is vastly improved and birth complications more survivable. Children are no longer 'taken off' by a whole range of paediatric conditions. For instance polio claimed the lives of thousands of British children at its height in the 20th century. Indeed, the respondents of the Indianapolis study would, almost certainly, have been aware of and - quite possibly influenced by the spread of polio around them. America's polio epidemic reached its zenith in 1952. That year there were nearly 60,000 cases and more than 3,000 deaths reported in the US alone. The polio vaccine, created by Jonas Salk, became widely available in 1955, as the Indianapolis study was presumably being prepared for publication a year later.12

All that said, the death of a child still exerts a uniquely powerful hold on parents and society at large. Indeed, as infant mortality rates have plunged, fatal incidents involving children incite a very strong reaction, at least within the media. The abduction of Holly Chapman and

Jessica Wells in Soham and the Moors Murders are two awful examples.

Likely related to the scrutiny of such awful cases, the fear of the loss of a child has been magnified beyond any connection with the risk, according to books like Frank Furedi's seminal Paranoid Parenting and Lenore Skenazy's more recent Free Range Kids. However, the ice-cold terror which has coursed through the veins of every parent at one time or another is not wholly without a positive purpose. It helps keep our children safe from harm. I do not see paedophiles lurking in the bushes of every public park, but I do try to recognise legitimate risk where it exists. I am swivel-eyed when walking near heavy traffic with a toddler. Similarly, I cannot have a proper conversation with another adult when my children are near a paddling pool. This is not paranoia. Drowning in such circumstances is now one of the biggest causes of infant mortality in modern societies.13

From my professional position as a heavy consumer of news, I have noticed several stories in recent years where parents have been so grief-stricken by the loss of their child that they have actually taken their own lives. In one of the high-profile cases I can immediately call to mind, the parents had lost their only child and this seemed to impede their ability to carry on through and beyond their grief. The couple threw themselves from Beachy Head, with the body of their dead toddler – their only child – carried in a backpack worn by the father. In another recent case a mother, whose only child had thrown herself in front of a train, committed suicide in the same way in the same place on the first anniversary of her daughter's death.

The question we must ask is whether such bleak accounts of human disintegration are part of any meaningful trend. After all, many of the stories I present as a newsreader are in the news precisely because they are not representative. Perhaps because mortality is one of the bedrock figures in

the statistical corpus maintained by any advanced society, there is no shortage of data on this subject.

One report from Denmark, for instance, showed that when a child died, parents were significantly more likely to die themselves from unnatural causes; accidents and suicide. A 2005 study showed that parents who lose a child are at greater risk of 'extreme emotional loneliness and severe depressive symptoms', including suicide. The risk of hospitalisation, especially for mothers, remains elevated five years after the child's death.

The grief felt by parents is complicated by a belief that they should 'have been there' to protect their child.¹⁷ Since the death of a child overturns 'the expected order of life events, many parents experience the event as a challenge to basic existential assumptions'.¹⁸ The effect is often dramatic on couples. One (disputed) study showed that divorce rates among bereaved parents are up to eight times the norm.¹⁹

Obviously, the death of a child is utterly devastating for a parent. That is not a new finding. Keeping offspring from harm has been the central pre-occupation of parents since the dawn of human history. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is one of the most potent and celebrated stories in the holy books of all three monotheistic religions. However, the question posed by the authors of the Indianapolis study is more specific than a generalised fear of child loss. Respondents were asked to rate whether they felt they needed a second child in response to the fear of being 'left childless in the case of death of only child'.

Clearly, the reduction in infant mortality suggests that fear 'of being left childless' should have somewhat abated. Indeed, the increase in the number of only children suggests it is not a 'deal-breaker' when couples are negotiating, as many do, over whether to have a second child.

So what evidence is there that surviving children do help parents cope with the loss of a child? Both Kate McCann, the mother of the young girl who disappeared in Portugal in 2007, and Sarah Brown, the wife of the former prime minister who lost a young child to illness, have written openly about how they were impelled to 'keep going' for the sake of their surviving children. These are personal accounts, set down in memoir form, by two high-profile parents. There is nothing to suggest they are speaking from any place other than the heart. The question is whether their views are supported by any empirical evidence.

The answer from several studies at least is a simple affirmative. The biggest sample involves the records of the 50,000 children who die every year in America, a third of whom die before their first birthday. The report's authors conclude that couples were less likely to split up if they had older children living at the time of death and those children 'can be regarded as a way of finding meaning through important life tasks'.²⁰

Of course the 'loss' of a child need not necessarily be so devastatingly terminal. Rising rates of divorce also mean that more parents 'lose' contact with their children following parental separation. Estrangement can also have an economic dimension. Through globalisation modern children increasingly see the world as their oyster and, having seen it, may prefer not to return to the country of their birth. Migration can, obviously, result in the erosion of a child-parent relationship. If a grown-up child moves to Australia in search of a better quality of life, keeping in touch, even with Skype and cheap flights, is difficult. In recent years levels of graduate emigration have reached record levels and are not likely to be reduced by the imposition of tuition fees which may compel students to study (and sometimes stay) abroad.

In short, modern children, in societies like Britain's, are less likely to die early. However, given the increase in the number of only children, where child mortality becomes a reality, its effects will often be far reaching. The evidence is clear that the death of a child can destroy parental

happiness. The damage is more irrevocable if parents have no surviving child left to care for. There are also other types of 'loss'. An only child who responds to the opportunities of globalisation by moving abroad, will leave parents with no proximate offspring. The dilemma for the parents of a child without siblings still hinges on one fundamental metaphor. Can I, as a parent, put all my eggs into one fragile human basket?

A child's right to a sibling

If a child persists in pestering its parents for a sibling, are mum and dad likely to take heed? The 1956 Indianapolis cohort put the 'Desire of children for more brothers and sisters' close to the top of their league table. Yet the study's authors expressed scepticism about their sincerity. They wrote: '[The] desire of children for brothers and sisters ranked only sixth and seventh for husbands and wives as a first most important reason for having the last child... there is little evidence of this factor exerting much influence on parents to have [another] child'. They concluded that a child's desire for siblings was 'inconsequential in its effect upon fertility behaviour'.

There is not much to suggest that this has changed. If some children are succeeding in persuading parents to provide them with a sibling it is certainly exercising no brake on the rapid growth of one-child families. On one level, this seems ironic. Children are, increasingly, very good at getting what they want, aided and abetted by a vast expansion in the advocacy of children's interests (including advertisers) since the days of the Indianapolis study. My own children recently brought home in their schoolbags a glossy pamphlet summarising the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Recent decades have seen a concomitant growth in charities and lobby groups working to promote the rights of children. None of them take a view on whether a child has the right to a sibling,

even if that is something which the child makes clear he or she earnestly favours.

This is not to be underestimated. As my family of daughters grew, so did the petitioning for a baby brother. Kids may sometimes struggle with the reality of a younger sibling, but in my experience at least, they like the idea enough to lobby for it to happen.

Let's stick together

Are children an adhesive that helps couples stick together or a repellent which forces them asunder? Are a couple with lots of children in a loving relationship, or in one where another baby is used to paper over marital cracks? Is 'A feeling that children bring husband and wife closer together' prompted by love or, if not loathing, then a fear of parental separation? Certainly, the idea of 'staying together for the children' seems to belong to a bygone pre-feminist era of duty and sacrifice.

Some would say that marriage is an institution in trouble, but the extent to which children help or hinder it is not obvious. There is comparatively little data available to answer these questions. There are many studies about divorce, and the effect of divorce on children. The nexus between children and divorce, whether kids bind couples together or wedge them apart, seems to have enjoyed less scrutiny.

One finding does crop up repeatedly. Couples are more susceptible to divorce if they do not have children. This may, of course, be a case of self-selection. A woman who does not fully trust a man to be a reliable long-term bet might be less likely to enter into the lifelong commitment required by having children with him. After all, a marriage is often easier to discard than shared offspring.

However, the impact of sibship size on the parental relationship is not definitive. More than one study has indicated that the adhesive quality of children wanes as the

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

family grows in size.²¹ Others have shown high sibship to be neutral or even helpful. One American study in the 1970s showed that rates of divorce among only-child mothers were twice that of women who had two to four children.²²

At a brute level, the mechanisms behind that statistic seem entirely explicable; a woman with several children by her husband is more likely to be economically dependent on her spouse than a woman with an only child who is still working. However, things need not be quite so Hobbesian. Children in the context of partnership bind with ties that are not only measured by money. They may be tangible proof of mutual parental attraction. At one extended family gathering, a young nephew of mine, only recently instructed in the science of reproduction, publicly concluded that my half dozen children were proof that my wife and I were sexual athletes. He was disabused of this. The truth is less priapic and more prosaic. Children can provide partners with shared goals and interests which can keep them united down the years. Indeed, when children leave home there is mounting evidence that the response of some parents to empty nest syndrome is to initiate divorce proceedings, leading to a growth in so-called 'silver separations'.23 Children can also pose a problem for younger couples who show favouritism towards one child over another.²⁴

Would modern couples share the view of the Indianapolis respondents that 'children bring a husband and wife closer together'? I imagine far fewer parents would now cite this as a reason for having a second child. Many couples are now candid about the deleterious impact of children on the quality of their own relationship. It has become socially acceptable for couples to announce that their union will never be 'blessed' by children. The childless-by-choice movement, as discussed next, is booming.

A strong liking for children

I have already touched on the changing nature of traditional beliefs about children and the shift towards a one-child policy, by example, in particular the idea of a 'gold standard' of parenting set by the parents of only children. Running parallel to this evolution has been a divergence of opinion about what children are and what they are for. On one level they are 'sacralised' – turned into sacred objects who must be given rights to survive the predations of an austere adult world. On the other hand they are, in practice, often held up as objects, if not of scorn, then as entities to be avoided or 'ghettoised'.

I am certainly not convinced that if you questioned 239 British couples today about their reasons for wanting a second child, 'A strong liking for children' might appear quite so high up the list. As a former Brussels correspondent who worked on news stories across Europe, I can confirm that the British are known throughout the continent as a pretty child-phobic lot. Across all social classes, there appears to have been a strong sense that parenthood in the UK was an activity driven as much by convention as any powerful natalistic urge. I doubt that the Italians or Spanish, for instance, would have quite so cheerfully coined popular dictums like 'children should be seen and not heard'.

Surely all that 'spare the rod and spoil the child' stuff went out with the Victorians? I wonder. As median family size shrivels in Britain, the patience of non-parents may be diminishing accordingly. Fewer people, arguably, are agnostic about children. People take a view. There is, again in my personal opinion, a willingness now actively to articulate a disdain for kids and the inconvenience they usher in. Witness the growth of the child-free movement. This is not to be confused with those who are childless by circumstance or, indeed, against their wishes. Whether by accident or design, the number of adults who will never

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

have children has risen sharply in recent decades. The increase is greatest among graduates. A study in 2007, by the Institute of Education in London, showed that at least a quarter of all female graduates in the UK will not become mothers.²⁵

To reiterate; the majority of those adults who remain childless find that the experience 'passes them by'. They would like children but are denied by medical obstacles, the objections or absence of a partner, or the demands of a career or their building society. However, the last few decades have also seen the emergence of a philosophical position which is not motivated by a Malthusian determination to improve society, rather a desire to achieve a version of what is regarded as personal fulfilment.

Take, for instance, a survey from the US and Canada of 171 childless-by-choice couples published by a group which champions the child-free philosophy.²⁶ The research provides a counterpoint to the Indianapolis motive list of 1956. It is shorter, but worth repeating below. The respondents were asked to rank the reasons they had chosen to remain childless. Again, the language is that of the authors, not mine.

- 1. I love our life, our relationship, as it is, and having a child won't enhance it
- 2. I value freedom and independence
- 3. I do not want to take on the responsibility of raising a child
- 4. I have no desire to have a child, no maternal/paternal instinct
- 5. I want to accomplish/experience things in life that would be difficult to do if I was a parent
- 6. I want to focus my time and energy on my own interests, needs, or goals

The childless-by-choice movement has evolved rapidly since it was pioneered by a slightly comical bunch of Californian feminists in the 1970s. Their National Organisation for Non-Parents argued for the calendar to feature a 'Non-Parents Day' to balance out the celebration of parenthood implied by Mother's Day or Father's Day. This hailed from the wilder shores of activism. However, a generation later, articulating an active desire not to have children is more mainstream than cranky.

Opposition to children has a commercial edge too. In the last year I have blogged about retirement homes, cruises, aircraft (lounges and flights), holiday destinations and restaurants where children are prohibited. To be clear, many of those demanding such inter-generational segregation are parents. Some of them 'want a break' from parenting. Others have 'done their bit' and want to enjoy a child-free old age. The effect is the same. Tolerance of the noise and anarchy which come with children appears to be waning. Against such a hostile backdrop it is reasonable to suggest that people – who usually incline towards the line of least resistance – will feel pressurised to keep the amount of disruption they introduce into the world around them to a minimum. Seen this way, having an only child is a natural response to an increasingly child-phobic society.

Lonely onlies

Those parents who participated in the Indianapolis study of 1956 were pretty candid about what chiefly motivated their desire for a second child. They did not want their existing offspring to be an only child. Would a majority of today's parents with one child still put 'Not wanting an only child' at the top of their list for having another? Whether they would or not, and more importantly, whether they had any grounds for so doing, is a central preoccupation of this book. Many of the reasons already examined in this chapter overlap onto this territory.

There are many reasons parents elect to have a second child, most of them rooted in a positive desire to expand a

CHURCHILL ON CHILDCARE

family, rather than antipathy for the idea of an only child. I do not propose to tackle such a big question quite yet, other than to share this vignette.

As I waited to go on-air recently I asked one of the makeup artists – a mother of three – for the adjectives she would use to describe children who grow up without siblings. I wanted to gauge, in an extremely unscientific way, how extant the old saws about singletons were. She narrowed her eyes and then looked from side to side, as if checking to see whether she could share an embarrassing confidence or commit an unutterable thought-crime. Having established that the coast was clear, out flowed a litany of unflattering stereotypes; words like 'selfish', 'spoiled', 'precocious' (not meant kindly) and 'anti-social'. As a follow-up question I wanted to know what aptitudes she would ascribe to a siblinged child. 'Well-rounded' she announced with a flourish of her powder puff.

Had she succumbed to the bigotry of an outdated worldview? This is a question for my next chapter. In it I will call upon some of the world's most influential sibling scientists – both living and dead – to put her apparent prejudice to the test.

3

Well-rounded Children

There is still a widespread myth that to be an only child is to be cosseted or indulged. Since the 1960s academics have sought to demolish this ill-founded prejudice and, to a great extent, they appear to have succeeded. Any bias against the only child is certainly not being acted upon by the general population. The number of children without siblings in the UK is rising year on year (although a significant proportion of this increase is accounted for by women postponing childbearing until later in life). Looked at baldly, the broad trend suggests that in a generation the proportion of only children has risen from one fifth to a quarter of all the babies born here.¹

Over that period, and indeed well before it, the drift of intellectual argument has not stopped at an exoneration of the only child's perceived failings. Metaphorically speaking, academics have not spared siblings the rod. Psychiatrists, from Freud on, have charted the pitfalls of sibling rivalry. Sociologists have weighed in with their Dilution Theory and Confluence Theory, neither of them kind to high sibship, as I will shortly seek to illustrate.

More recently still, there has been a fresh re-alignment within academia. Sibling scientists now seem to feel justified in finding the positive side to sibling rivalry; demonstrating how competition can be beneficial and how 'de-identification' – the process by which siblings try to be different from one another – creates diverse personality types within a family. They have turned their corrective lenses on the aforementioned Dilution Theory – the idea that siblings dilute parental resources to the detriment of all – and sought to show how siblings enhance emotional intelligence and even, in some cases, improve intelligence in its narrow, exam-based, sense. I have a funny feeling that

this shift in ivory-tower opinion will, almost perfectly, match an evolution in popular opinion, albeit in the opposite direction. The view that only children are spoiled, indulged and entitled is increasingly outdated. Popular opinion, or should I say the opinion of non-academics which is increasingly popular, is that to be an only child – or the parents of a sibling-free child – is to be advantaged indeed.

This popular opinion has a definable socioeconomic locus. It is not shared by the rich, who continue to have relatively large families, often with the assistance of paid help. Nor is it shared by the poor, who disproportionately continue to have large families, often with the assistance of state benefits. It is parents on middle-incomes who have been curbing their reproductive instincts over the last two decades in Britain.²

The make-up artist I introduced earlier has always worked and has three grown-up children. I suspect that if she were twenty years younger and starting a family today, her prejudice, rather than being directed at the only child, might just as well be aimed at larger families with all their perceived weaknesses and inconveniences. If I am still working in television a generation from now I suspect that, rather than inveighing against the perceived folly of an only child, it might just as well be the middle child her successors will hold up as an example of selfish parenting. I have a firm conviction that if we were able to poll a hundred suburban parents today and ask them who they felt was prone to being a 'problem child', they might well reply 'the middle child'. A generation ago the answer, it seems to me, would almost certainly have been 'the only child'.

To examine the arguments for the utility, or otherwise, of siblings, I want to imagine my own home as a test-bed for sibship theory and its evolution over the decades. I shall theoretically 'invite' some of the most influential figures from academia to take a look at my own brood in action.

Several of these academics are long dead and buried, but their ideas about family expansion continue to reverberate down the years. Elsewhere in this book I investigate why, in my view, siblings are an asset to societal outcomes and to parental competence. I have already discussed how having a second child or subsequent children can help couples.

Now I come to the core of my thesis; why siblings are potentially good for each other. Later I will look at the physical and mental health benefits of sizeable sibship. Here I am looking at how siblings shape one another in terms of psychology. In other words, how siblings shape personality to mutual benefit.

Less Is More

First through my doorway would step a Parisian called Arsène Dumont, a lawyer and sociologist driven to the study of reproduction after reading the French census of 1880. Dumont likened families to flowers. Successful plants drew water up – through the stem – using capillary action; the narrower the stem, the higher the liquid climbed. So it was with families. If they wanted to ascend the social scale, they needed to stay small.³

I fear that Monsieur Dumont, who never married and was childless, would take a dim view of my *famille ultra nombreuse*. So too those who were influenced by his Law of Capillary Action. Social historians like Joseph Banks, who took Dumont's principle and applied it to the British middle classes of the 1950s, concluded that to 'get on' they would need to keep their family small.⁴ This idea – that high sibship thwarted aspiration – was codified in the 1970s by Robert Zajonc, a Polish-born American who devised the so-called Confluence Model. Our initial introduction might be a little stilted. In 1975 Zajonc wrote a seminal article provocatively entitled 'Dumber By The Dozen' for *Psychology Today*, in which he predicted that children got more stupid the more of them parents had. He argued that

a household's intellectual environment degenerated as a couple had more offspring and spent more time with 'preverbal' children. The whole family succumbed to a linguistic lowest common denominator.

If I invited Zajonc to spend a few days at my home he would, surely, find evidence to support his theory. For instance as I write, it was only this morning, as my wife and I sat listening to the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4, that our bedroom was invaded by our three smallest children. There is a regular scrap to mount the marital bed and secure the prized position between mum and dad. This involves much shouting and, unsurprisingly, the debate about Euro membership on the bedside radio was drowned out. *Prima facie* evidence of the Confluence Theory at work?

Well, on one level, yes. However, Robert Zajonc's work offered several concessions for families like mine. He said that any 'dumbing down' brought about by high sibship was ameliorated in educated families. In terms of how my children turn out intellectually (and since the eldest is only 13, it is too early to know) what really matters is the intellectual climate set by their parents. Ultimately, what matters to my children is not that I cannot occasionally hear what Evan Davies is saying on Radio 4 – but that their parents are, at least, trying to listen to a speech-based current affairs programme which promotes reasoning and general knowledge.

I know from experience that parents face a daily dilemma about how to address their children. Should we 'talk down' to our kids, in the process – as Zajonc would argue – dismounting to their lower intellectual level. Or should we, in so far as it is possible, try to keep the verbal IQ high, even at the risk of not always being understood? Within my home the aim is to do the latter, even at the risk of incomprehension.

Hard on the heels of Robert Zajonc would follow Judith Blake, a New Yorker, demographer and architect of the

Resource Dilution Model. In her presidential address to the Population Association of America in 1981 she wrote:

'If people believe that they can trade-off child quantity for child quality they are, indeed, on the right track.' 5

Judith Blake's Resource Dilution Model will resonate with every couple who have given their first child a sibling. It begs questions that go to the heart of good parenting. Can I still give my eldest child everything they need? Is it possible to give an equal share to each sibling? This gets trickier for high sibship parents. There are obvious sacrifices that children with siblings are called upon to make. It is not always possible to have a parent's undivided attention. However, less can be more. I would ask Judith Blake if my children are learning important social skills because I am not hanging on their every word. Might they have a firmer grasp of gratification deferment as a result? Will they learn the important life-lesson that not everybody wants to know what they think on any given subject? Not everybody will find them interesting.

Judith Blake might argue that no 'soft skills' can make up for the dilution in parental resources precipitated by high sibship; of time, cash and energy. As she sees me slump on the sofa, after an exhausting day at work, marauded by children, would she nod sagely seeing my hand reaching for the TV remote control, so that I can tap in the code which brings a few moments of parental respite thanks to Nickelodeon or CBeebies? Perhaps she would.

Would she also acknowledge though, that what I allow my children to watch on television, for how long and until what time, will also have a powerful bearing on the development of their young minds? In short, that every time I switch on the box I do so fully aware that I am using it as a virtual childminder – and that I have both to ration and filter its use. Would she acknowledge that other parents might be less discriminating and that outcomes for both sets of children would, consequently, be chalk and cheese?

Bigger Is Better

In my imaginary experiment, not all the house-guests would be potentially critical of my domestic arrangements. They belong to a new modern wave of academics who have struck out against what was the prevailing orthodoxy of sibling science. They question whether there are, in fact, bona fide advantages to enlarging sibship.

I would begin with yet another American, sociologist Douglas Downey. In his examination of the Resource Dilution Model, Downey says the negative effect of fecundity on intellectual performance has been overestimated for some families.⁶ In the 1990s he wrote in the *American Sociological Review* that: 'The parental resources producing the largest reduction of the effect of sibship size on educational performance are (in order): frequency of talk, parent's educational expectations, money saved for college, and educational objects in the home. Indeed, including just these four indicators for parental resources is enough to reduce the effect of sibship size on grades to non-significance.'

That quotation, in many homes including mine, is lived out daily. We could show Downey that my family talk a lot. My wife and I expect all our children to do well at school and go on to university (as we both did). We could show him our internet bank details, and our plans for paying tuition fees (trickier one that). He might leaf through our bookshelves to see the books that stare down at our children (and occasionally provoke one of them to be picked up). We would show him the school reports which show our children are doing fine.

Downey's 1995 paper seems to have been a turning point. Since then Dilution Theory, and the assumption that more children result in poorer outcomes, has been unpicked by a growing number of academics. The authors of a Dutch demographic study, entitled 'Sibship Size and Status

Attainment', provide one recent example. In 2010 they wrote: 'Resource dilution theory predicts that with larger sibship size, children's status outcomes fall. However, the empirical record has shown that this is not always the case.' The report cites no fewer than a dozen academic studies which have revised or debunked the Dilution Theory. Significantly, the publication dates of many of those studies are clustered around the late Noughties.⁷

The Dutch authors, well-respected social scientists all, also made this spectacular claim: 'Over the past decades, a number of studies have presented contradictory evidence [to the Resource Dilution Model]. The negative effect of sibship size on child outcomes has been found to be much weaker, neutral or even positive'. 8 That final point set my ears fizzing. We appear to have reached the stage where some academics now believe siblings can result in 'positive' outcomes when it comes to getting on in life, or 'status outcomes', to repeat the words used by the researchers. Those words have an importance which transcends academic study. In the UK social mobility has become a priority for politicians. How children avoid or repeat the success or failure of their parents is interesting to me as a parent. To the country, at large, it has become a pressing issue of public policy. Hitherto, siblings have been seen as a drag on social mobility. If recent academic work is to be believed, it may sometimes produce the opposite effect.

Some of the potential social goods of sibship are discussed elsewhere in this book. There I seek to establish that children with siblings are, all other things being equal, more likely to be outward-bound, fitter, less obese and allergy-prone than children without siblings. Those are physical aptitudes. What, however, is the case for the educational or emotional benefits of increased sibship? In what way, to use a phrase adopted by one leading sibling scientist, Katherine Conger, are siblings positive 'agents of socialisation'.⁹

Let me return to where I began, in my own domestic sphere. What are the social skills, skills which will smooth their passage through adulthood, that I can daily see my children imparting to one another?

One of the most obvious examples – and one I would have liked, were she still alive, to put to Judith Blake – is the notion of gender complementarity. I recall from my own classroom memories, how teachers would appeal to the better nature of errant schoolboys by simply asking: 'Would you do that to your own sister?' As a boy with two sisters it was a tactic which struck home with me.

It has been argued that, by growing-up with a sibling of the opposite sex, a boy learns to empathise with the perspective and dignity of a girl. William Ickes, the author of *Everyday Mind Reading* and a psychologist at the University of Texas at Arlington, has investigated why some men abuse their spouses in aggressive marital relationships. Part of his work involved monitoring how male and female students got on when first introduced. He found that approachability and confidence were typical of those students who grew up with an opposite-sex sibling.

With five sisters, my son, John, has no shortage of opposite-sex siblings. As a grown man, that might give him a potentially healthier attitude towards women and even an edge over competitors in the workplace. Should he enter a profession like journalism or the law, he will rapidly find that there is every chance of having a female boss. Having five older sisters will make him well equipped to follow orders issued by a woman, unlike some men, who even today, still struggle with the long-overdue shifting gender dynamics of subordination.

Shapers of Conscience

I want, briefly, to expand this idea of siblings as shapers of conscience, because I think it goes far beyond inter-gender relations. There is something uniquely 'grounding' about

the relationship enjoyed, or sometimes endured, by siblings. In modern mobile societies, our relationships are growing more transient. Staying in work means that pulling up sticks is more important than putting down roots. Relationships suffer and divorce rates rise. Friends, spouses and neighbours move away. Former co-workers and school friends are forgotten. Parents die. Yet our biological siblings, with whom we share more DNA than anyone else, can be the great constant reference points of our lives; from beginning to end.

In a world where it is ever easier to reinvent and makeover ourselves, siblings hold us to account. Over the course of the entire lifespan, nobody stands a better chance of highlighting our contradictions and identifying our hypocrisies than our own siblings. Where introspection fails, siblings stand a good chance of being the true custodians of conscience.

Of course, this may not be a pleasurable experience for those who find themselves accused of cant or doing something they once said they would not. Indeed, no gain without pain is a dictum long held by the next academic I would like to invite into the heart of the Brazier household. Judy Dunn, developmental psychologist and mother, has spent many hours with a stopwatch and notebook, patiently observing how siblings interact; how they knock the corners off each other through (their often abrasive) contact. In the *Guardian* in 2011 she wrote that sibling rivalry 'can be constructive, preparing [children] for important relationships when [they] are older' and that it can 'boost mental and emotional development, increase maturity and enhance social skills'.

Dunn believes that children learn to regulate their emotions through conflict with siblings. Between the ages of two and six in particular, the seeds of maturity, conflict resolution and anger management are sewn. How do they do this? For one thing, siblings see a lot of each other. One

WELL-ROUNDED CHILDREN

study estimated that siblings between three and seven years old engage in some kind of conflict three times an hour. That figure rises to more than six for toddlers going through the 'terrible twos'. That is some sort of spat every ten minutes. ¹⁰

Not so long ago my wife and I had one child heading into and another coming out of these 'terrible twos'. This is the period when a child's ego begins to impose itself and a tantrum is the consequence of the child not getting its way. From a parent's perspective, the terrible twos can be pretty purgatorial. You are setting the boundaries which the toddler is noisily banging up against.

If that toddler has a sibling, the terrible twos assume an additional dimension. I might, as a parent, try to mollify a 24-month-old whirling dervish with soothing indulgence or calmly measured words. However, that toddler's sibling – being a child – may well take a far less forgiving view. A tantrum often sparks off an equal and opposite reaction in an implacable sibling.

Of course, a child without siblings goes through this obnoxious phase too. The difference, and I have seen it frequently with my own children, is that siblings generally have a lower tolerance of rebarbative behaviour in a child than that child's parents. A child, arguably, can get away with less if a sibling is on the scene. The essence of this argument could be said to extend well beyond the terrible twos.

The key thing here is not that the resulting cacophony frays a parent's nerves (especially when the sibling conflict takes place at a busy supermarket check-out, for instance). Nor is the really important point that siblings fight – we know they can. So can unrelated playmates. But unlike friends, siblings cannot walk away from their dispute. Argue with a friend on a sleepover and they will be gone tomorrow, but the nature of being a sibling is that your brother or sister will be there tonight, tomorrow, next week and for years to come. Siblings can express themselves

'warts and all' without terminating their relationship. Some academics have invoked Attachment Theory (the idea that a stable attachment figure – usually a parent – is vital to a happy childhood) to explain how this kind of sibling relationship might be beneficial to a child.¹¹

It might be argued, naturally, that such interactions embed bad behaviour in children, while making the lives of their parents a misery. We know that some sibling rivalry can degenerate into serious bullying and even abuse. Again, this seems more likely to happen in a family where parental oversight and regulation is not what it could be. Nonetheless, if a parent is prepared to put up with the sheer hassle of sibling rivalry (*pace* the supermarket check-out) it would be comforting to know that there is a potentially demonstrable benefit.

One of the biggest studies to address this question - it involved 20,000 children - amounted to a revelation when it was published in 2004. 'Playing Well With Others In Kindergarten: The Benefits Of Siblings At Home', was the work of academics at Ohio State University, including the aforementioned Douglas Downey. It used information collected from parents, teachers and children. I found it particularly revelatory because it seemed to buttress the anecdotal - something oft-repeated by child-minders, nursery teachers, even grandparents - namely that kids with siblings are easier to teach and manage than those without. The Ohio study claimed to have established 'a compelling case for the position that children hone social and interpersonal skills through sibling interactions at home, and that these skills then become useful outside the home'.12

Their results found that children with siblings got into fewer fights, made friends more quickly and kept them for longer. They were better able to get 'along with people who are different'. They were empathetic and skilled at comforting and helping other children. They were

consistently more upbeat. They were better at 'respecting the property rights of others' and at soaking-up pressure. They were less disruptive.

The authors weighted their study to circumvent the gremlin at the heart of sibship research. When it comes to children with siblings, how fair are comparisons with those without? Just one significant factor is when a disproportionate number of children without siblings are brought up in underprivileged homes by a lone parent. The Ohio study authors claimed successfully to have controlled their sample for socioeconomic background. They included one big codicil. Large age differences between siblings, they said, devalued the currency of sibship. However, the authors stressed, even with big age gaps, there was still evidence that having a sibling boosted non-cognitive aptitudes. Nowadays we round-up these skills under the heading 'emotional intelligence'. A generation ago the phrase might have been 'well-rounded'.

The Ohio study was noteworthy partly because of the size of the sample. Of course, there is one glaringly obvious cohort whose numbers offer sibling scientists unprecedented opportunities to assess the impact of having a brother or sister: China.

In January 2013, the journal *Science* published a study which sought to show that China's one-child policy was back-firing by producing a generation of children who were anything but 'well-rounded'. These youngsters grew up to be adults who were, as a press release announcing the findings put it, 'significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious'. (I found the last adjective – 'conscientious' – particularly arresting in view of my sense that siblings act as 'shapers of conscience'.)

Lisa Cameron, one of the lead researchers, claimed the findings revealed the negative effects of being an only child in China, even if there was significant social contact with other children while growing up. 'We found that greater exposure to other children in childhood – for example, frequent interactions with cousins and/or attending childcare – was not a substitute for having siblings,' she said.

It's the Pedagogy, Stupid!

My final house-guest would be a British mathematician who left behind a lucrative career as an international tax analyst to apply her expertise to the emerging science of siblings. Maria Iacovou has looked at how siblings teach one another. On one level, this is a fairly transparent process. Last week I watched my nine-year-old daughter, Agnes, help her six-year-old sister, Gwendolyn, to tie shoelaces for the first time. I can think of many other practical examples of such domestic pedagogy. However, sibling scientists have constructed controlled settings in which to test this phenomenon and see more precisely which children are learning, which are teaching and how they do so.

In the early 1990s two American psychologists¹⁵ devised one such experiment to gauge whether senior siblings were better than friends at teaching younger siblings. One test involved building toy windmills. Elder siblings were not necessarily better at teaching than unrelated playmates. But, interestingly, younger siblings 'observed, imitated and consulted' older siblings more than they did peers. The youngsters badgered explanations out of older siblings, unafraid of a confrontation which would jeopardise a relationship with a friend (a sibling will always be there tomorrow). The educative process was more spontaneous. Younger siblings were less awkward about demanding a go for themselves with questions like: 'Why put that block on that one? Why not stick it over here?' Obviously, an infant can enjoy such tutelage at a nursery or friend's house. However, such opportunities are necessarily limited.

It is one thing to copy a tower of nursery bricks. However, what, if anything, can siblings teach one another that will help them in more formal areas of education? In spoken language there seems to be some advantage to higher sibship in certain circumstances. One such piece of research was set in London's East End. It argued that the 'seeds of literacy' are sewn by older siblings in a 'non-threatening' setting where children feel able to experiment with language; making and correcting mistakes overseen by a brother or sister rather than a parent or teacher.¹⁶

This particular study focused heavily on siblings of Bangladeshi heritage living in Tower Hamlets, where some parents do not speak English as a first language. Nevertheless, the idea has validity in homes where English is spoken all the time. The East London research looked at how a brother or sister creates a setting where a sibling feels able to experiment linguistically without fear of censure. Of course, this is not to say that a child without siblings is put at a disadvantage in terms of language development. Parents with one child will often say their offspring have highly evolved verbal skills, not least because they spend a lot of time eavesdropping on, and participating in, adult conversation.

So to the work of Maria Iacovou. In a 2001 report for Essex University she crunched O-level results to compare the performance of children with and without siblings. Her conclusion ran: 'The elder sibling of a two-child family does better than an only child by ten per cent on the measure of attainment in English O-level, but does 25 per cent better in maths.' This sibship advantage in mathematics is repeated in other studies, although I struggle to deduce an obvious explanation as to why. Do elder siblings help their younger siblings with long division at the dining table?

It could be exactly that. Beyond the basic number skills required for everyday life, parents do not use maths with anything like the same degree of complexity that they use English. An older sibling, if a half decent scholar, will have balanced algebraic equations in the recent past and the

answers will be fresh in the memory. Maths is also a subject which sometimes requires drilling by rote (think times tables) but often needs to be understood by the person doing the teaching. It is not a subject which lends itself to 'blagging' or indifferent comprehension on the part of a tutor. As such maths may be a good example of the kind of subject where the learning process applies just as much to the deliverer as it does the receiver. In other words, teaching maths is a very good way of becoming better at it. This idea of siblings learning by teaching has been flagged up by several studies. One study, involving the entire population of Norway no less, concluded: 'The eldest child acts as a teacher for the younger children and learns how to organise information and present it to others.' 18

Iacovou's findings are not, however, definitive; none ever are of course. She concedes that: '... the penalty associated with being an only child, rather than one of two, ranges from less than 1 per cent to 22 per cent'. That is a big spectrum of outcomes. It is one, I suspect, which might set my house-guests at loggerheads. Those who believe that high sibship impoverishes a child's mind and acts as a brake on social climbing, could use this as proof of the essential flakiness of sibling science. They would have a point. Not least because it is hard to adjudge siblings as great educators if those children without siblings routinely come from underprivileged backgrounds.

Similarly, just because my children seem to benefit from siblings who are 'agents of socialisation' does not mean all siblings will. My children also enjoy 'supportive' parental oversight. As parents, my wife and I are on the look-out for signs of bullying by elder siblings. Our home is 'learning-resource' rich and conversation is characterised by a relatively high verbal IQ. This is not to be smug. It is simply to highlight that, as my academic visitors will have already realised, not all families are equal; that siblings can have both a positive and negative impact on one another. If a

WELL-ROUNDED CHILDREN

troubled older sibling is a role model to his younger brother, he can simply lay down the track so that his younger sibling can follow him off the rails. However, if that same sibling is good at maths or football, jokes or story-telling, those aptitudes might well be taught and learned.

One final, and deeply unfashionable, point. The longer I turn over those findings from the Essex University study, the more I return to one possibility. It is one I cannot prove and one, some parents will feel, their family unit could well live without. In particular, I was prompted to consider it by reading recently about the home life of Boris Johnson! The Mayor of London was one of six children, all of whom went to Oxbridge, all of whom, by any standards have been successful - and very privileged. Their eccentric father, Stanley Johnson, insisted on cultivating a home environment which was positively spartan in its attitude to competition. He would set children tests where the object was, purely and simply, to beat their siblings rather than a set score. Is this the x-factor at the heart of sibling tutelage? Do those siblings who excel at maths do so, not because of the vagaries of data control and odious comparisons with the only children of poor single-mothers – but because they are driven to greater success by the biting wind of competition? I do not know, but I think it is a seriously interesting question.

4

Saviour Siblings

I was not quite a teenager when my relatively happy homelife was punctured by my parents' divorce. The experience had little to recommend for it, save that it brought me and my sister closer together. It was a personal and painful example of how a sibling can ease the anguish of a childhood trauma.

Watching parents separate can be one of the most psychologically damaging events to befall a young person. As a growing number of couples struggle to keep their relationship going, I want to consider to what extent a sibling can act as a shield in the event of a parental breakup. Indeed, what other kinds of emotional support or protection can siblings provide? Whether a brother or sister can be a crutch in later life, following the death of a parent or spouse, for instance. There is, as I argue elsewhere, strong evidence to support my assertion that siblings can endow protection – physical protection – in the form of boosted immunity to allergies, certain illnesses and obesity. Here I want to assay how siblinghood can form a protective barrier against harmful life events.

I should begin by highlighting a claim that this is an area of scholarship suffering from academic neglect. Psychologists, of course, have a vested interest in stating that they are tapping into a field of research which has, hitherto, been marginalised. However, let us take at their word the authors of a 2005 study on sibling solidarity. They stated: 'The largest void in research on sibling relations ... is on the outcomes associated with sibling support'.¹ This situation has ostensibly not changed.

Parental separation, of course, is not new. Its prevalence, however, certainly is. Of the 12 million children in England and Wales, one in four have separated parents. Between

150,000 and 200,000 couples with at least one biological child together part every year.² The question for me to address is whether those children who have a sibling, or siblings, fare better than those without after their parents separate.

The answer is not straightforward. It cannot be assumed that siblings will 'pull together' as their parents are pulled apart. The process of marital or relationship disintegration can often be bitter and protracted. It is not simplified by the presence of children. Parental separation can lead to shifting allegiances within a sibship. Parents sometimes attempt to manoeuvre children into 'their corner'.³

The act of witnessing inter-parental conflict may also pose problems for children (notably conflict between parents doesn't necessarily end in their separation). Quite clearly, if a mother and father are locked in a daily cat-fight, involving acts of verbal or physical intimidation, they are providing unhelpful behaviour models for children. It is unlikely to be mere coincidence that children whose parents divorce are far more likely to go through a divorce themselves.4 However, the balance of what evidence there is, does seem to tilt in favour of siblings as agents of support rather than extra antagonism. One 1991 study from American child psychologists involved rating the impression teachers formed of adolescent pupils whose parents were going through divorce or separation. The most serious adjustment problems were suffered by students who had no siblings.5

The role of the older sibling seems to be central to this support. Parental separation, as I remember from my own childhood, can be an intensely confusing event for a child. It upsets the natural order of things. Unconditional relationships suddenly become conditional. Divorce and separation can thereby usher in a harsh world of doubt. Often grown-ups, acting with the best of intentions, only add to a child's bewilderment by rationing the number of

facts they reveal. An older sibling can clarify events for a younger child, correct misunderstandings and help create a sense of perspective.⁶

An older sibling can also provide a secure attachment figure, not just through the potentially baffling period of the separation, but also when parents form new relationships, which can be just as troubling for children. In the words of one study from American psychologist Mary Eno, siblings can provide a 'safe and predictable world inside a family undergoing instability and change'.⁷ That was certainly my own experience.

Glum Kids

Separation, unless it involves the removal of an abusive or neglectful parent, or high conflict, is unlikely to bring about an improvement in the overall mental health of a child. Divorce can be a catalyst for the onset of depression in children, particularly if the marital break-down happens to a child during adolescence.

Setting parental conflict aside, is there an argument for siblings as a buffer against childhood depression, whatever the cause? If siblings can help shield one another from the harmful effects of a potentially traumatic experience like divorce, can they provide a lifebuoy for an unhappy sibling who is struggling to keep his or her head above a sea of other troubles?

Again, let me begin by setting a statistical context. In America, from where much of the data on this subject hails, adolescent suicide has quadrupled since 1950. Over here a similarly bleak picture has been depicted. In 2006 the British Medical Association (BMA) said a fifth of British children and adolescents would probably suffer from mental health problems as they become adults. A Unicef report in 2007 depicted children in the UK as pretty much the unhappiest in the world.⁸

There is not likely to be one single cause accounting for

SAVIOUR SIBLINGS

this depressive (and depressing) epidemic. There are many potential and interlocking explanations. That is not to say we cannot devolve to generalisations. In his 2005 best-seller about happiness, Professor Richard Layard noted that people who care about other people are happier than those who are more pre-occupied with themselves. Certainly, there is data suggesting that having a sibling promotes a mindset that militates against solipsism. Arguably, sibship encourages a worldview rooted in empathy. One American study by Laura Padilla-Walker, for instance, has shown that having a brother or a sister makes siblings more inclined to 'good works'; charitable acts like helping a neighbour or looking out for other children at school.9 A slew of child psychologists have sought to demonstrate that the act of caring for a sibling gives children a sense of perspective they would not otherwise have.¹⁰

However, when it comes to siblings as a specific buttress against depression, the evidence takes a gender twist. More than one piece of academic research points to a strong protective effect against unhappiness – provided the sibling is a sister. The main study in question, produced by a psychology professor in Belfast, involved nearly 600 people aged between 17 and 25. It found that a female sibling encouraged a clear expression of emotions. The researchers claimed that with those lines of 'open communication' sisters had more optimism, better coping skills, and a more balanced personality.¹¹ Brothers, tending to be less expressive, were found to offer less support.

The Hurried Generation

So (some) siblings can provide some protection against unhappiness, an important finding in advanced societies where rates of depression, especially among young people, are rising inexorably. However, since this is a study of sibship rather than depression, I am compelled to ask a further question. Is there anything in the nature of being a

child without siblings which puts that child at more or less risk of unhappiness? Are there particular pressures which are brought to bear specifically by dint of not having a sibling?

I find myself harking back to my interview with Amy Chua, of *Tiger Mother* fame, touched on briefly in the introduction to this book. Chua is clear about two things in relation to sibship and the nature of self-confessed 'pushy' parents like her. First, she acknowledges that the pressure such parents exert would be dangerously oppressive if focused on a solitary child. Second, in the face of such overpowering parental expectation, siblings can form an alternative, and comforting, reality. Or, as Chua herself puts it: 'One nice by-product of my extreme parenting was that Sophia and Lulu [her daughters] were very close: comrades-in-arms against their overbearing, fanatic mother. "She's insane," I'd hear them whispering to each other, giggling.'¹²

Whether it is the support Chua's daughters give each other, or whether she knows how far she can really push her 'hurried' or 'over-scheduled' siblings, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is not the story of children pushed over the edge by a 'hyper-parent'. Yet, there is plenty of evidence of a growing problem for children who do crack under the claustrophobic pressure of parental expectation.

One of the most insightful books I have encountered detailing this phenomenon is by an American psychologist who has specialised in dealing with mixed-up kids. *The Price of Privilege*, by Madeline Levine, is summed up by its sub-title 'How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids'. Levine's caseload has become increasingly burdened with troubled teens from affluent backgrounds in an 'upper-middle-class suburban community'. Her insights are rooted in 25 years of personal experience of clinical practice and, as such, worth quoting verbatim.

She writes: 'Between accelerated academic courses, multiple extracurricular activities, premature preparation for high school or college, special coaches and tutors engaged to wring the last bit of performance out of them, many kids find themselves scheduled to within an inch of their lives ... They lack spontaneity, creativity, enthusiasm and, most disturbingly, the capacity for pleasure.'

As a father of a multi-sibling family, I find Levine's final clause really arresting. My children may not have all the extracurricular challenges they could have, but they seem to exude a capacity for pleasure. Levine never specifically queries whether the epidemic of unhappiness she describes has any foundation in sibship size but, as I read the book, that question sits like a rhetorical elephant in the room. It stands to reason that a pushy parent will likely be able to push more if there are fewer children to push. As Amy Chua says, bringing up a pair of siblings meant the dissipation of her laser-like intensity.

In the year Madeleine Levine was publishing her account of teenage depression, researchers elsewhere in America were urging therapists like her to 'incorporate siblings into the therapeutic process'. Their prescription was based on evidence which strongly linked having a brother or sister with fewer mental health problems.¹³

Specifically they found that 'sibling support' resulted in better self-esteem and 'life satisfaction'. Higher sibship was found to lead to less loneliness and depression, as measured on an eight-point scale listing symptoms like poor appetite and a propensity to cry often. The researchers found that support from siblings was enough to compensate for a lack of such support from parents.¹⁴

Of course, depression and other forms of mental ill-health are not the sole preserve of the rich or those who grow up in quiet suburbia. The problems of disadvantaged children, however, are identifiably different; rates of teenage pregnancy and gang-related violence, for example, are far

rarer among better-off youths. What protection, if any, can siblings furnish against such risky behaviours? The answer depends on the individual circumstances of the child. As noted elsewhere, siblings appear potentially to accentuate the positive and exacerbate the negative. If an older sibling has developed bad habits, there is a likelihood that they will be passed on to a younger sibling. There is strong evidence to support this in relation to underage sexual activity, teen pregnancy, early drug use and addiction.¹⁵

A sibling, for instance, is said to be a stronger influence on alcohol usage than parents and on a par with the pressure exerted by peers. ¹⁶ Having an older sister who is a teen-mother has been found substantially to increase the risk of a younger sister finding herself in the same boat. The same research has found that even boys who have a sister who is a teen-mother are more likely to have sex at a younger age than average. ¹⁷

Similarly there is evidence to show that a younger sibling with an older brother who smokes is more likely to take up the habit because a strong role model already has. Indeed, his brother is a potential source of cigarettes. The same principle would apply if the drug was cannabis rather than nicotine.¹⁸

Bully for You

Siblings can lead astray. They are able to hasten the adoption of risky behaviours in younger siblings. However, they might also, in some circumstances, be a more direct agent of destructive behaviour. They can bully. In the summer of 2011 widespread publicity was given to a study from Essex University which suggested that half of all children aged 10-15 underwent some kind of bullying at home. The researchers found that children who were hit or shouted at by their parents were more likely to bully siblings, with the middle child the most likely perpetrator and the eldest, perhaps counter-intuitively, the most likely victim.¹⁹

However, much other research paints a different, contradictory, picture. A British study from the Economic and Social Research Council in 2006, for example, looking at slightly younger children (7-13), found siblings to be an important and invisible source of support for children who were bullied in everyday life, including school.²⁰

A year earlier a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report was published which took account of children's views towards siblings and bullying. 'Children,' it said, 'often said that having brothers and sisters meant there was always "someone there" for them, and gave an emotional sense of protection from being alone.' More relevantly, the authors argued that older and younger siblings should be viewed as a resource in initiatives to tackle bullying at school and outside the home.²¹

One area I cannot find a study to back up empirically, but one which emerges from my own experience as a parent as a powerful deterrent against risky behaviour, is that of inter-sibling surveillance. This is a kind of sibling support, albeit one where the 'supported' sibling is oblivious to what is going on and might not be pleased if they did know. A better word for it, and certainly the word my children would use to describe the practise, is 'snitching' or 'grassing'. Siblings are not signatories to the Seal of the Confessional; just because they are told secrets does not mean they keep them. The sympathetic ear of a sibling is not governed by the rules of confidentiality which bind therapists. This is useful for parents. Most of the whistle-blowing my children do rarely extends beyond 'shopping' a sibling for not tidying a bedroom, or playing a video game on the computer rather than researching homework, as promised.

However, I can foresee a time when the misbehaviour of my children is more serious and the need for parental intervention more pressing. That intervention might be made possible because a sibling has 'spilled the beans'. In a society where a disappointingly high percentage of parents would like their children 'micro-chipped' (so they can be tracked by a Global Positioning Satellite), sibship can offer round-the-clock trip-wires and 24/7 monitoring. Snitching is not well-intentioned, siblings usually 'dob' their brothers or sisters in the mire in response to some perceived slight. Sometimes, I am sure, it is simply for the thrill of disclosure. The motivation is immaterial, the outcome is that parents know more than they would otherwise about what their children are really up to.

Of course, there are circumstances where my analysis falls flat on its face. Not all imparted information is factual and perhaps, as they get older, my children will take as much pleasure in duping me and 'covering' for their siblings, at which point sibship would work against the intelligence-gathering practised by most effective parents. Let us imagine one of my daughters had fixed up a meeting online with a boy she had never met. Inter-sibling surveillance would help me as a parent if one of her sisters was to leak information about the illicit rendezvous. 'Dad, I think she might have been groomed on the internet.' However, sibling solidarity could work against me – and potentially against the interests of my daughter – if one of her sisters helped provide a bogus alibi. 'Oh, she's gone to the cinema with Amy.'

The nature of supportive sibship doubtless changes with age. In the sort of adolescent scenario depicted above, siblings can help each other navigate their way through early encounters with boyfriends and girlfriends. This might involve helping to keep a dubious relationship secret, or divulging its existence. It could entail providing a shoulder-to-cry-on; being a confidante or an ad hoc counsellor, especially if parents struggle to communicate about sensitive issues around sex and drugs.²²

Of course, in relationships of poor quality, siblings may not talk at all, at least for a period of time. And clearly girls, though generally found to be better at empathy than boys, can also be sources of unhappiness as well as support. A sibling can take away as well as give. A sister may not recall with fondness the actions of a sibling who steals her clothes or, for that matter, her boyfriends.

When Siblings Grow Up

What happens to sibling support once childhood ends? A third of respondents to a survey of 7,000 American adults published in 1992 said 'sibling' when asked: 'Who is the one person you would call if you had an emergency in the night, needed to borrow \$200 in an emergency, or were depressed and confused and needed advice'. Two-thirds considered at least one sibling to be among their closest friends.²³

What becomes of sibling support throughout the lifespan? The level of solidarity seems to vary. Siblings who never marry or who never have children, appear often to maintain a level of sibling solidarity much closer to childhood levels.²⁴ However, a more typical chronology would seem to see siblings close in early and middle childhood. (In early childhood sibling support is 'task-oriented', things like helping a sibling climb out of a cot. In middle childhood it can involve care-giving, help with school-work and mediating with parents.)²⁵

Thereafter, relations can often cool during early adulthood and middle-age. As their own children grow up and leave home, sibling relationships and old intimacies are often revived. This is particularly true if a spouse dies. Widowed siblings, particularly older sisters, have been found frequently to fall back on a source of support they have not used to such a degree for decades.²⁶

Indeed, the death of a parent, every bit as much as the death of a spouse or partner, can be a transformative event in sibling relations. If a parent dies while children are still young, the effect can be far more emotionally traumatic than parental divorce. Happily, early parental death is becoming less common. Later in the lifespan, though, the

death of a parent can galvanise *or* jeopardise sibling ties. Acidic rows about which child inherits which belongings are not simply the stuff of Dickensian novels. Parental death and probate disputes can set siblings at loggerheads for life. Yet, the more commonplace reaction to a parental death appears to be positive for siblings. In one major US study of brothers and sisters with ages ranging from 25 to 89, the majority said their sibling relationship had been improved after their mother or father had died. Less than a fifth said it had resulted in a cooling of ties.²⁷

As I write these words it is almost a year since my wife's mother died after being diagnosed with lung cancer. At the funeral wake I had a long and moving conversation with a family friend, an only child, whose parents had died some years before. It was, he said, the sense of memories dying with his parents which he frequently found so insupportable. With neither parent nor sibling to share fond recollections with, it was, he said, as if his childhood had never happened. It was obvious too, though unspoken, that the practical aspects of growing older without siblings weighed heavily upon him. The funeral wake we were attending had been jointly organised by my wife and her two sisters. In preceding weeks and months they had taken it in turns to provide care for their mother. Towards the end of her life, they had drawn up a rota to ensure a fairly constant bedside vigil at hospital. By contrast, he had found the burden of ministering to his parents as a sole carer very difficult. He had turned down opportunities to live and work in another part of the country to stay constantly close at hand.

His dilemma must be increasingly typical. Fewer parents are having multi-child families to share the weight of care in their twilight years. Those 'twilight years' are lasting longer. Some commentators now predict that, given statistical trends, eldercare will supplant childcare as the major work-life balance issue of our times.

SAVIOUR SIBLINGS

The situation is exacerbated by evolving trends in fertility. Many parents have their first child at an age when previous generations were ready for grand-parenthood. The children of these thirty-, forty- and fifty-something parents have to care for their mothers and fathers sooner than in years past. My mother, for instance, gave birth to me at 21. She is now in her early 60s and unlikely to require any recognisable eldercare for many years yet. For my children, the youngest of whom have been born to parents well into their 40s, the situation could be very different.

The essential arithmetic is worth labouring. In 2007 the number of people aged over 65 outnumbered those under 16 for the first time ever in Britain. The driver is average life-expectancy, which jumped by 30 years in the UK during the 20th century and is set to rise further. The cost of eldercare is, consequently, rocketing and much of it is shouldered by families. Carers UK estimates that the value of unpaid support runs to £87 billion a year. The bulk of that figure will be support given by children to parents.²⁸

Cinderella

Plainly, if there are three children sharing that responsibility, rather than just one, the strain on the carers is dissipated. Of course, that assumes that each child takes on an equal share of the work. In reality, what are the chances of something so equitable? If you have a sibling can you expect the burden of eldercare for parents to be divided evenly? Or will there always be a 'Cinderella' child who cops for the lion's share of the work and the worry?

In the majority of families, the responsibility of eldercare, of course, is not shared as equally as it could be. American data suggests only 10 per cent of siblings feel that eldercare is shared fairly.²⁹ It often falls to one primary caregiver – she (and it is very often a woman) is frequently the child who lives closest to the parental home. However, British research shows that sibship does at least help.

Grown-up children with elderly parents to care for, on average, suffer less hardship if they have siblings.³⁰ Siblings take on specific roles. One might provide financial help, others more practical support. The principal caregiver can often be given a break. Even the least-committed grown-up child can be called upon occasionally to run Mum to the doctors or help Dad with a subscription to his favourite magazine.

Of course, there is a flip-side to this sibling support for elderly parents. To put it bluntly, it is not only the responsibility of eldercare which is shared. When parents die, their assets must be divided between siblings. In Britain residential property is a huge source of inherited wealth. Undivided, it can represent a major financial leg-up for children without siblings.

Ultimately, the response to the declining health and growing needs of a parent varies from individual to individual grown-up child. It stands to reason that children who have been reared by loving and supportive parents are more likely to reciprocate when their parents are in their dotage. Very few parents in developed societies now see their offspring as a bulwark against hardship in old age. That inter-generational link, which once meant parents viewed children as units of economic usefulness, has long since been broken. Western parents no longer have kids to help them bring in the crops when they are too old to wield the scythe.

Yet it is still likely to be true that, where parenting is concerned, you reap what you sow. Neglectful parents probably stand a better chance of being neglected by their grown-up children. By that logic, arguably if siblings have been taught to co-operate with and care for one another as youngsters, they may well be more likely to do so when it comes to looking after their elderly parents.

Hello Kitty

Do I, as a father of six, have a greater expectation of care than a dad with a smaller brood? Yes. Is that why I have had so many children? Of course not, although I cannot explain, with one pithy sentence, why my family is three times the size of the British average. However, if forced to justify my fecundity, I could do worse than recall my youngest daughter's first nursery report, given to me and my wife recently.

Katharine's key worker reported that our three-year-old was one of the jolliest children she had ever come across which was, unsurprisingly, what any parent would want to hear and difficult to contradict. She said something else, though, which really caught my ear. We were told that Katharine (Kitty) did something which none of her peers did. She related every activity she undertook at nursery back to her family. If she was drawing, the picture would be of her siblings. If she was being read a story, she would reference events in the narrative to her own sisters.

My initial reaction was to narrow my eyes. Had we created a child who was not outward-looking or interested in the world beyond a home she would one day need to leave behind? But the more I thought about it, the more sanguine I became. Katharine idolises her big sisters, even as she mothers her little brother. Her siblings will provide more role models and sounding boards than many of her contemporaries could begin to imagine. Her chances of getting away with mischief are severely circumscribed by sibship; with so many pairs of eyes, our home is a hard place to keep secrets.

Not all Katharine's sisters will provide a shoulder to cry on or a sympathetic ear, but somewhere amongst them there will always be someone who has time for her. That will be true long after her parents are gone. 5

Sibling Germ Swap

Even now Agnes, my second eldest child, has fingers that look as if they have been badly scalded or burned. Happily, she seems to be beyond the worst. However, from the age of 18 months until she was six, she presented many of the classic symptoms of eczema urticaria. Virtually every evening, exposed areas of inflamed skin needed to be patched-up with steroid cream. Her bathwater required special emollients. Her hands needed wrapping in gauze gloves. Some mornings it would be an agony just getting out of bed. As she woke and stretched her legs, the scabs which had formed behind the knees overnight would crack and bleed.

By the standards of child sickness, this is not the stuff of Great Ormond Street. Yet it is still distressing for infant and parent. Trying to persuade a child – every day – that they must submit to the application of hydrocortisone, even though it stings and burns like fury, is no fun for either party.

None of Agnes's siblings have suffered with the same symptoms. The odds are that with six children, more of them might have been expected to succumb to eczema or another atopic condition. After all, the UK is in the grip of an allergy epidemic such that four in ten Britons will have an allergy at some point in the lives.¹

We know a lot about allergies. For instance, we know that females suffer more than males, the young more than the elderly. There is a league table of the most common triggers, topped by an allergic reaction to pollen (26 percent), followed by house dust mites (11 percent) and pets (9 percent). Other allergies include mould (4 percent), rubber (2 percent) and metal (1 percent). My wife and I have certainly tried to ensure our daughter avoids any potential triggers. For years now we have avoided giving

Agnes cow's milk, lest it should spark an eczema reaction. We are not alone in our worries. Eczema is the most rapidly worsening allergy among children in the UK. Doctors have seen case-loads increase by more than a third in four years.³ In 2005 the Royal Society of Medicine took a stab at the number of eczema sufferers – just in England – and came up with a figure of 5.8m. It will very likely be larger now.

My daughter's condition, therefore, was certainly not unusual. Indeed, since it typically afflicts children between the ages of five and nine (and girls more than boys), my wife and I were braced for many more tears before bedtime amid the bandages and unguents as our younger children moved towards their vulnerable years.

There was, as it has turned out so far, no need to worry. None of our other children developed eczema to anything like the same extent. What may be a surprise to you (as much as it was to me) is that this may be more than a function of serendipity. There appears to be a direct link between sibship size and allergies. Quite simply, this link means that there are fewer allergies when there are more siblings.

That is quite a claim, is it not? Obviously, I do not say that the experience of my own children in any way proves this relationship. The fact that eczema has not seriously affected our younger children may be a happy coincidence. However, studies involving many thousands of children show that precisely such younger siblings enjoy substantial protection against allergies like eczema, as well as a host of other auto-immune – and altogether more serious – conditions, from multiple sclerosis to lymphatic cancers.⁴

Such a phenomenon requires an explanation which is necessarily technical. Naturally, as a non-scientist, I am not qualified to interpret all the evidence which is relevant to this discussion. So, rather than paraphrasing, I will reproduce some of the statistics as they appear in the original literature, much of which is available online for further analysis. I will

try to keep the language used by researchers to a minimum, although sometimes direct quotations are useful in establishing the reliability and provenance of the purported link between siblings and allergies.

Hygiene Hypothesis

The central protagonist in this story is, at the time of writing, still working in a London hospital. Professor David Strachan's 'breakthrough' perhaps does not need inverted commas. It first appeared within the pages of the *British Medical Journal* in 1989 and, to this day, remains the fundamental building block from which much of the research in this area still rises.⁵

Put crudely, his original research revealed a sliding scale of resistance to allergies based on sibship. A second-born child, for instance, was found to be one-fifth less likely to develop eczema than an eldest or only child. However, the risk would be halved for a fourth-born child. In short, and in retrospect, his findings gave a reason for why the apparent immunity to eczema enjoyed by my younger children might well not be fluke.

This is not quack science. Strachan's findings formed the backbone of what became known as the 'Hygiene Hypothesis', also known as the 'Hygiene Theory' or 'Infection Hypothesis', one of the single most influential explanations behind the global allergy epidemic. Strachan argued that exposure in early life to bacteria, viruses and even parasitic worms fired-up a child's immune system in a similar way to how sensory experiences helped programme his or her brain. Strachan suspected that in order to develop this immunological training, children needed to swap germs at a young age. If they did not swap germs at a young age their immune systems might start to malfunction at a later stage. This, he argued, could force the body to overreact to foods, pollen, animals, dander and dust, failing to distinguish between harmful infections

and harmless allergens. My children, it behoves me to say, have always swapped lots of germs.

In a world where dirt and bacteria are not seen as conducive to good health, Strachan's idea must have seemed like an improbable conclusion. He arrived at it simply by studying the available data. The findings were embedded in the data of patients with allergies contained within Britain's National Child Development Study – a snapshot of 17,414 children, all born within a week of each other in March 1958. Strachan was struck by a strong correlation between having siblings and having fewer allergies. The correlation remained even after he took account of socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyle variables such as whether parents smoked or breast-fed.

However, the most striking results contained within the original Strachan paper were not for eczema but for hay fever. Like eczema, hay fever is inconvenient rather than lethal. However, as Allergy UK's Lindsey McManus told the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee: 'I do not think people realise the impact of something like allergic rhinitis or hayfever on people's lives. They think that hayfever is quite a minor condition, but it can impact dreadfully, particularly on children who are just about to sit their exams right at the height of the hay fever season. There has been research carried out that they do not do as well in their exams as they did in their mocks earlier in the year, so it is very important.'

In 1965 around ten percent of the British population was affected by hay fever. The current proportion is closer to a quarter. What difference, then, might having siblings make to the rapidly growing number of people succumbing to hay fever? Strachan claimed that brothers or sisters made an impact which – by statistical standards – could be described as enormous. His analysis of the National Child Development Study showed that the incidence of hay fever fell by a quarter if a child had a brother or a sister.

Stunningly, it was more than halved if a child had two or more siblings.

Eczema and hay fever can cause inconvenience, and as such, we might feel able to dismiss the importance of siblings in curbing their incidence. Some allergies, however, are potentially fatal. Asthma, unlike eczema and hay fever, is a very serious atopic reaction. Globally, it hospitalises more children than any other medical condition. It is the main reason children miss school in the developed world. According to Asthma UK, a child is admitted to a British hospital with the condition every 19 minutes. The estimated annual cost to the NHS is £1 billion a year. In 2005, 27 children under the age of 14 died of asthma in the UK. Recent research suggests that the number of asthma cases seen by British doctors has reached a plateau, and may indeed now be falling. However, the caseload by historical standards, remains high. 7

Is there a definitive link between this most serious of allergies and sibship size? A review of the international evidence is inconclusive. The most eye-catching evidence for a connection I have found came from a study of half a million Israeli army conscripts. It claimed that later-born infants in larger families had a very slim chance of developing asthma, where it was close to 1 in 200.8 This compared to one in ten for only children. In other words, more siblings meant less asthma. However, several other studies, while reproducing evidence of a protective link between siblings and eczema and hay fever, do not repeat the asthma findings.9

Not Just Allergies

Scientists, often working in the United States, have also applied the so-called Hygiene Hypothesis to other autoimmune disorders, some of which are far more lifethreatening than asthma.¹⁰ The Hygiene Hypothesis has been invoked to explain increases in disorders as varied as

leukaemia and Crohn's disease, a condition unknown before World War Two, which today affects 1.4 per cent of the US population, half a million Americans. In 2005, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* looked at the link between sibship size and the risks of contracting multiple sclerosis. The researchers' conclusion stated: 'Higher infant sibling exposure in the first 6 years of life is associated with a reduced risk of MS, possibly by altering childhood infection patterns and related immune responses.'¹¹

When I read the conclusion of that report I metaphorically shrugged my shoulders. So, a possible reduced risk of MS. Well, that probably means the risk fell – but not by all that much; nothing to get worked up about. However, on looking a bit closer at the pick-up to the research, its potential implications became clear. *New Scientist* assessed the importance of the 2005 study noting that living with a sibling for over five years 'could reduce the risk of developing MS by almost 90 per cent'. That is a potentially gigantic reduction in risk for the most common disabling neurological condition affecting young adults. According to the Multiple Sclerosis Society, around 100,000 people in the UK have MS. 13

As someone who has spent 25 years in the communications business I can spot an information gap when I see one. If we were to stop ten parents on our local high street today, and ask them whether having a sibling might endow a child with any health benefits, I imagine most would look nonplussed. A few, I daresay, would be deeply sceptical if I told them that sibship size could potentially reduce the development of a disease like MS by 90 per cent.

It is clear that reliable statistics show, from Strachan onwards, a positive link between these harmful conditions and sibship. Less clear is why the protection might be generated. The Hygiene Hypothesis has been revisited many times since 1989. Some immunologists have queried whether the impact of environmental factors was

underestimated by Strachan. Yet the essential empirical link between having a brother or sister and having fewer allergies seems to be holding. For instance, a 2006 study by public health epidemiologists from Bristol University, Queen's University in Belfast and Massey University in New Zealand, looked at measurements of asthma, eczema and hay fever. It concluded that there remained 'a robust inverse association between sibship size and allergic disease' and that the results favoured 'the Hygiene Hypothesis....over new environmental exposures'.¹⁴

Research based on the original Hygiene Hypothesis has also noted that allergy rates are lower in developing countries. Standards of hygiene are generally lower in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, than California or Catalonia. There are more worms in the food, fewer antiseptically cleaned pots and pans in the kitchen. This does not undermine the essential link between siblings, infection sharing and, ultimately, infection resistance. There may be more germs around, but there are also more children. Families in poorer countries tend to be larger, *ergo*, there are more siblings to spread germs and infections to one another at a young age.

What about Play Dates?

Whenever I have outlined this evidence to friends of mine, who are the mums and dads of only children, they have shot back one obvious question. Yes, they say, there may well be some benefit to be had by children from sharing dirt, germs, coughs, colds and all the rest. That is not to say, however, that such immunological pump-priming need only happen with siblings. The Hygiene Hypothesis seems to be a function of young people sharing germs, not parents. Singletons, for example, who go to early years' nurseries, would be exposed to lots of other small children – and their infections. Day-care, after all, is a more probable destination for an only child in the UK whose parents are more likely to

be in full-time employment (parents frequently find that having two or more children starts to make working uneconomic, given the prohibitive cost of childcare).

So can sibling-free children replicate the potentially positive immunological effects of siblings in other ways? The answers seem to range from a 'possibly, maybe' to 'no'. The firm negative comes from some of the most recent research. It takes the Hygiene Hypothesis in a new direction – in terms of its *modus operandi* – and opens up a new field of immunity: to food allergies.

In February 2011 the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) warned that hospital admissions for food allergies had risen by 500 per cent since 1990 and the UK was one of the worst affected countries. ¹⁵ The most common foods to produce allergic reactions today are: cow's milk, fish and shellfish, eggs, sesame, soy, wheat and kiwi.

Usually the symptoms rarely extend beyond a tingling or burning sensations on the lips and inside of the mouth, or perhaps an attack of hives. However, for the one-in-50 British children who suffer from nut allergies, the results can be fatal. They can suffer an anaphylactic shock – leading to difficulty in breathing, swellings and even heart attacks – simply by shaking hands with someone who has been touching nuts. Ten people die, on average, in the UK each year in such circumstances. ¹⁶

A month after NICE issued its findings on food allergies, scientists – for the first time – claimed to have established an apparently causal link between sibship size and life-threatening reactions to the food we eat. At the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology held in San Francisco on March 20, 2011, Japanese researchers explained how they had made the discovery based on the records of 13,000 children aged 7-15.¹⁷

Their conclusions, in their own way, are as startling as David Strachan's immunological thesis of 20 years ago.

The Japanese team replicated the 'traditional' findings of the Hygiene Hypothesis; namely that firstborn (or only) children are more prone to hay fever than later-born children. However, they also discovered that the more children there are in a family, the smaller the risk of a dangerous or painful reaction to food. The prevalence of food allergies was 4 per cent for the eldest or sole child. For a second-born child it was 3.5 per cent, falling to 2.6 per cent for those born later. In other words, the risk of a potentially serious food allergy was found to be almost halved for a third child.

The researchers could not give a clear reason for the emergence of this pattern. They paid due clinical obeisance to the Hygiene Hypothesis, acknowledging that more children might mean more germs and therefore a greater exposure to pathogens at an early age. As such, their work tallies with several studies, some of which speculate on how infections kick-start a youngster's immune system.¹⁸

However, the Japanese scientists also introduced another – novel – possibility. Takashi Kusunoki, one of the team of researchers at the Shiga Medical Centre for Children in Japan, said the protective effects might also be down to mutations in the wombs of mothers. Multiple pregnancies, he said, might cause changes to the mother's immune system, which might then go on to give protection against allergies to the foetus. Children in playgroups can swap germs just like a brother and sister at home. However, this Japanese data adds to the idea that it is the physical act of being born to the same mother which endows the resilience.

Although the Japanese research represents some of the latest thinking on the application of the Hygiene Hypothesis and how siblings boost the immune system of children. It is obviously not the scientific Last Word. However, if there is something in the idea that repeated pregnancy endows children with protection against allergies it would not be possible for children to gain this

'natural' protection by simply acting as if they had siblings. In other words, it would not be enough to place a young child into day-care and let them boost their auto-immune system merely by dint of mixing with other youngsters. As an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* stated in 1997: 'There are several puzzles concerning the "Infection Hypothesis". It is not clear, for example ... why preschool nursery attendance, which is known to promote cross infection, does not seem to be associated with a reduction in atopy.'¹⁹

In studies where there does seem an immunological benefit in sharing germs with other young children, for instance in one study of children in East and West German kindergartens, the advantage may be limited to very young children.²⁰ In a review of the Hygiene Hypothesis, the *Wall Street Journal* noted that 'infants who attend day-care during their first six months of life have a lower incidence of eczema and asthma'.²¹

In summary, nobody seems to know for sure why allergies have become such a disease of the modern age. In a sense the explanation is immaterial. At the unscientific micro-level, as an observer of the petri-dish of my own family, I can say that my children have bucked the allergy trends. The younger ones have no (or are yet to show) signs of eczema-urticaria, hay fever or asthma.²²

Nor do we need to watch what they eat. None of them has a food allergy. We might just be lucky and, of course, our luck might change as they age. However, I hope you will agree with me that the substantial – really substantial – immunity against allergies first revealed by Professor David Strachan merits some serious interest at least. Refinements to the theory have produced astonishing results in relation to conditions like multiple sclerosis. People can disagree with Strachan's assertion that children with siblings get fewer allergies because they share germs when young. The Hygiene Hypothesis is only ever a theory.

STICKING UP FOR SIBLINGS

People, however, will likely find his essential statistical finding, which his theory then sought to elucidate, more compelling. Those statistics are based on the medical records of thousands of young people. They show, and I repeat, that children with siblings have fewer allergies.

For those parents at whom this book is targeted, who have one child and are vacillating about whether to have another, this evidence is unlikely to be decisive, but certainly of significance. Couples who take the plunge and opt for a multi-child family will spend many extra hours dealing with the minor medical emergencies which all children entail. A second or third infant inevitably increases the likelihood of the call all working parents in particular dread: 'Your child is sick. Can you come and pick them up from school and keep them at home for at least 24 hours?' However, as I have sought to show in this chapter, it is not all one-way traffic. More children will inevitably mean an overall greater burden of domestic healthcare for parents. There will be more colds, in totality, to deal with in a house with four children rather than one. But, as individuals, those colds may not be wasted. As the Hygiene Hypothesis illustrates, shared infections make children stronger and provide them with immunities that may well substantially improve the quality and, quite possibly, the duration of their lives.

6

The Play's the Thing

'Are they all yours?' At a guess, I probably had three children when some well-meaning passer-by first asked me this. Of course, not so very long ago questioning the parentage of children was liable to provoke serious umbrage. The idea of legitimacy and its extreme cousin, bastardy, are happily no longer part of the modern parenting argot. Yet, if we could wind the clock back a century, I could imagine dark mutterings and knowing glances whenever my family and I drew by. Because, in terms of appearance, my six children present an astonishing degree of physical amplitude. None of them have remotely the same heads of hair. The spectrum stretches from straight dark brunette to curly white blonde; one has a hint of red. Facially, it is hard to find a common denominator, save for a Brazier chin dimple. Bodily, a couple have the makings of Amazonians, while another is what I would call willowy although kids in the playground might prefer the less tactful 'skinny'.

They have another thing in common. They may have varying body shapes, yet none of them is obese. That is encouraging, because obesity in childhood is a very strong indicator of obesity in adulthood and obesity, as we know, is rapidly emerging as one of the key inhibitors of longevity and good health in modern societies.¹

Are my children on course to avoid obesity simply because their parents are conscientious, middle-class and well-equipped, forever fretting about their five-a-day and making sure they go swimming in the school holidays? Or is there something in the fact that they, as a unit of siblings, do something which inclines them against running to fat? Has it anything to do with the fact that they live in a household where kinetic energy is perpetually on the loose,

with children zipping from one place to the next in pursuit of each other, pets, parents, toys and juice-bottles in a form of domestic Brownian Motion?

The answer, not just for my big brood but for siblings more generally, seems to be a yes. As with allergies, sibship can offer important, if latent, health benefits.

I certainly had a strong hunch that siblings – once you stripped out the socioeconomics – would enjoy some protection against obesity. Obviously, there are many risk factors responsible for people becoming dangerously overweight. Some of them are specific to adults, such as giving up smoking. Other catalysts are universal; genetic susceptibility, sleep problems, inactivity and a bad diet are among the things normally blamed.

Whether or not an obese person has siblings is rarely cited and, yet, when we drill down into the available literature, the link between sibship size and obesity looks pretty strong.

One report from the United States, in particular, initially caught my eye. It was delivered in the summer of 2004 to the US Department of Health, which wanted to take a fresh look at the risk factors which lay behind America's galloping obesity epidemic. Two scientists from Pittsburgh University's Medical School, Sue Kimm and Nancy Glynn, delivered their observations based on a 10-year-long study of 2,379 girls at schools in California and Ohio. The projection they extrapolated from the data was very specific. 'The odds for obesity', they said, 'decreased by 14 per cent for each additional sibling in the household.'²

A year later a clutch of Portuguese universities published the results of weight readings from thousands of primary school children. They concluded that not having siblings was 'significantly associated with obesity'.³ In 2007 a Japanese investigation based on the medical records of 7,979 high school students established that 'children without siblings are the ones most at risk [of being] overweight,

especially girls'.⁴ A 2009 study from University College London noted that 'smaller family size [was] associated with higher childhood BMI (body mass index)'.⁵

These 21st century studies offered fresh statistical impetus to a solid base of research from previous decades. A massive 1977 data sweep of all the children born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne found that 'being an only child' was one of the 'most significant' causes of obesity in children.6 A year later came the great-grand-daddy of them all. It was a piece of research explicitly seeking a link between sibship size and obesity. They examined data from 280,000 19-yearold Dutch males, born between 1944 and 1947. The authors rounded-off their report with these words: 'Individuals from one-child families (only children) were uniquely at risk for obesity, particularly in the non-manual social class.'7 Coincidentally, the same data has been used by at least one leading academic to prove that siblings do not confer any intellectual advantage compared to those born without them. But, as every schoolboy and girl knows, brains are not the same as brawn.

In short, the evidence on the link between sibship and obesity seems to be surprisingly one-dimensional. However the question is not whether siblings offer protection against obesity but how they do so. Is it just about burning off more calories with a ubiquitous playmate, or is there more to it than that?

Table for Three

Excepting thyroid problems and other inherited causes, obesity has two main determinants. First, calorific input is too high. Second, energy expenditure is too low. I begin by asking how might sibship size affect the first? Does sibship influence the quantity and quality of food children consume?

In a 2008 letter to the *Beijing Review* magazine, Professor Tsung Cheng, a cardiologist at the George Washington University School of Medicine, wrote about rising obesity in

China, much of which has been ascribed to industrialisation and an increasingly Westernised diet.⁸ He highlighted, as many have, that China offers a unique demographic laboratory because of the state's controversial one-child policy. The professor further argued that this had an impact on obesity that was 'seldom mentioned'. He added: 'With only one child in the family, the doting parents (2 in number), grandparents (4 in number) and great-grandparents (8 in number) pamper their only child by overfeeding the "little emperor". Furthermore, food that used to be distributed among his siblings is now devoured by just one person.'

There are several reasons for China's obesity problems which seem to be related to its transition from developing to developed world. Weight-gain was associated with affluence by many rural Chinese, a mindset which takes time to wear off during the migration from subsistence farming to urban fast-food consumption, or from bicycle to car. However, the much-commented-upon phenomenon of the Little Prince and Princess may be implicated.

To what extent might it be true, as Tsung Cheng suggests, that 'doting' parents and relatives have some share of the blame when it comes to obesity? Is it right to assume that a child without siblings might be 'doted' on, and therefore indulged more with food? Surely, a contrary analysis is possible? Many parents of a sibling-free child will argue that they are fastidious about their offspring's diet, because they only have to worry about feeding one child and can, therefore, take greater care over what that child eats.

At least one piece of research makes the statistical case for a link between pampering and calorific consumption. This was based on information drawn from 12,000 three-year-olds whose experiences formed the statistical foundations of the (British) Millennium Cohort Study. It focused, not on the apparent indulgence of parents, but on grandparents. The research, published in *The International Journal of Obesity*, found that, where grandparents provided childcare, children were 15 per cent more likely to be obese.⁹

The authors speculated that a propensity to indulge or 'spoil' a child with unnecessary snacks and bigger helpings might be to blame. Of course, grandparents may feel that, as occasional child-carers, they can afford to dispense treats with more abandon than parents. Grandparents may serve up cakes and sweets to curry favour with recalcitrant grandchildren. However, the same logic may apply to parents who see little of their own children. Working parents whose children are in day care, for instance, might want to make the most of their quality time together. I know from experience that the most efficient way of putting a smile onto a disconsolate child's face is to conjure up a chocolate bar. It's worth noting that working parents are more likely to have children without siblings. It is often one of the reasons they can still work. The cost of childcare frequently removes the financial benefit of working, once a second or third child comes along.

So, speaking generally, the link between obesity and sibship size may be partly rooted in the emotions at play between child and carer. It could also simply be a function of domestic arrangements. Not so much 'how often' we feed our children, but 'when'. Might it be the case, for example, that - with several children - a parent will cook a 'bespoke' children's meal? My dining table certainly has two evening sittings; one for the kids and one for the grown-ups. If there is only one child, the child may sit down to eat with the grown-ups, with helpings which are correspondingly closer to adult-size portions. I can think of one couple I know who regularly take their primary-school-aged child out to dinner with them, where he faces plates of food ostensibly prepared for grown-ups. His parents argue, inter alia, that he is eating and learning about good food and, indeed, their child could in no way be described as overweight.

That individualised experience underlines a key point of sibling science, already discussed, but worth repeating in the context of obesity. As with other types of risky behaviour, like smoking and alcohol abuse, having a sibling cannot protect a child from bad parenting. If anything, in a chaotic family, older siblings will make a bad situation worse. If struggling parents feed junk-food to an only child, they are not likely to change the household menu because there are more mouths to feed. Potentially quite the reverse in fact. A trip to a fast-food restaurant, with its childfriendly menu, might be an attractive prospect for parents struggling to keep the domestic show on the road. However, the situation is potentially reversed if the family is not struggling. In that situation having siblings may provide, as the studies highlighted earlier suggest, a framework for keeping obesity at bay. Children will, in many cases, find that they are playing and burning off more calories within and without the home if there is a sibling on hand. It might also be true, although the evidence for this is merely speculative, that their portion sizes are more likely to be child-sized.

Two to Tango

Clearly, many children are eating more than is healthy. There is only very circumstantial proof that calorific input is any greater for a child if that child has no siblings. However, I want to try and show that the evidential tide flows much more strongly when it comes, not to energy intake, but energy output. In other words, how many calories a child burns off.

The number of obese children in Britain has doubled in the space of 20 years. It is estimated that almost a third of youngsters are obese or overweight. There are many reasons for this, most of which afflict children regardless of whether or not they have siblings. Evidence suggests an obvious deduction: siblings have been found to be less

sedentary – and their calorific usage commensurately greater – than children without a brother or sister. However, is correlation anything to do with causation?

Why should a child without siblings move about and exercise less than a child with siblings? After all, an only child can canter around a nursery with unrelated contemporaries just as vigorously as siblings in the family garden. Play-dates can fill the void of physical inertia at weekends. At school, PE forms a statutory part of the curriculum. However, such a hopeful analysis faces obstacles, some obvious, others less so.

An unorthodox piece of social science by the UK's Centre for Transport Studies in 2007 laid bare how much children need to direct their own play in order that its calorific expending potential be maximised. The researchers took 200 children and fitted each of them with a motion sensor – the Doctor Whoishly-named 'Accelerometer'. After decanting the readings into spreadsheets for different kinds of activity, the authors arrived at a surprising conclusion. They wrote: 'Playing provides more physical activity than organised clubs.' They found, for instance, that 'unstructured' ball games, where children were left to their own devices, led to the incineration of more calories than formal games.

Growing up without siblings clearly does not disqualify an only child from informal play and physical activity. However, it normally takes at least two to tango. A solitary child, all other things being equal, will likely not expend as much energy as two or more children in an informal play setting. When watching a child play alone, you witness an immediate increase in physical motion when that child is joined by a playmate. There are, put simply, limits on the number of play-dates and opportunities for communal play which a child without siblings can avail him or herself of.

For siblings spend a colossal amount of time in each other's company. A crucial caveat is proximity: the closer

they are in age, the more time they spend together. For example, on average, a piece of US research has found, a third of a child's free time is shared with siblings by the age of 11. That exceeds the amount of time spent alone, with friends, parents or teachers, according to the findings by Penn State University published in 1996. Even adolescents, fond of ploughing their own furrow, were found to spend at least ten hours a week sharing activities with siblings. In Latin-American homes, where families are bigger on average, the number was found to climb to 17 hours. These are interestingly high figures given the rival distractions of teenage life.

Among young children the level of interaction between siblings is potentially greater still. Another American study, this one involving pre-school children, found that there were on average 85 interactions between siblings each hour. An 'interaction' is characterised as an initiation which gets a response from a sibling, an initiation which could be as trivial as the offer of a toy. All of the interactions, however small, entailed some form of physical activity, some kind of kinetic motion. There is, it seems, something in the nature of having a sibling which is intrinsically exertive and inherently active. Thelma S. Horn, an associate professor at Michigan State University, wrote in a 2008 book, *Advances in Sport Psychology*: 'Siblings clearly appear to be agents of physical activity socialisation', offering '... instruction, advice and support'. 14

This 'physical activity socialisation' generally starts young. Most parents in a multi-child household will testify to the existence of such informal and spontaneous tutelage. It might simply be an older child helping a younger sibling to climb the stairs, throwing a ball for them to retrieve, or chasing them around the kitchen as they scold them into completing a task.

It is not easy finding a metric to measure such an easily observable phenomenon. Sarah Berger, an experimental psychologist has made a fist of it. In a paper presented in

THE PLAY'S THE THING

Japan in 2006, she detailed how she had found that secondborn and subsequent children reached significant motor skills milestones thanks to the example set, and encouragement offered, by an elder sibling. A second child, on average, walked significantly earlier (11.94 months) than their older siblings (12.61 months). For crawling the figure was 8.0 months, for the younger sibling, and 8.26 for the eldest.¹⁵

This notion of elder sibling as 'coach' is particularly marked in boys. In the early 1980s the sociologist Brenda Bryant published a paper noting how brothers egged each other on to ever greater physical heights. ¹⁶ Obviously, this 'coaching' can spill over into some toxic displays of sibling rivalry, the potential side-effects of which are touched on elsewhere in this book.

Home Alone

Robert Louis Stevenson was poeticising an eternal verity when he wrote: 'Happy hearts and happy faces/Happy play in grassy places -/That was how, in ancient ages,/ Children grew to kings and sages.'

Were he alive today, the author of *Treasure Island* might find that his prescription for a happy childhood has more relevance now than it did when he wrote those words in the Victorian era. This is because modern children face fewer opportunities than any previous generation for exploring the outdoor spaces which Stevenson was lauding as important in the formation of a robust personality and constitution. Partly, this is because 21st century homemakers have created living spaces which restrict physical activity *per se*, never mind outside. On one level this is a function of architecture and property economics. The domestic dwelling, for instance, keeps shrinking. The average three-bedroom semi-detached house, built in the 1930s, was a third bigger than one built today.¹⁷ That means less floor space for tomorrow's kings and sages. With space

at a premium, many parents are inclined to prefer a study to a play-room; households are increasingly 'scholarised', according to a Cambridge University review entitled *All Work And No Play.*¹⁸ The bedroom, for many children, has become a *de facto* classroom. For less academically-pushed children it has become a sedentary entertainment centre, equipped with a TV, DVD-player and/or computer.

Yet children still hanker to be outdoors. Four-fifths would rather play outside than inside, according to the Children's Play Council.19 Fewer and fewer parents can indulge that proclivity. A child's freedom to stray outside unsupervised is seen as a thing of the past by more than two-thirds of British parents.²⁰ In her influential study of modern parenting, Toxic Childhood, former teacher Sue Palmer interrogates medical evidence to establish whether the 'cabin fever' contracted by a growing number of children may be in any way linked to the explosion in conditions like Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).²¹ In his 2007 book on risk aversion in childhood, the author and children's play advocate Tim Gill argues that 'everyday adventures' are key to the establishment of resilience and identity in youngsters. He says that children, deprived of the chance to manage risk, are more likely to go off the rails.²²

Frank Furedi's seminal critique of modern childhood, *Paranoid Parenting*, makes a similar point.²³ He cites Home Office figures from 2005 which show that a third of eight- to ten-year-olds never play outside without an adult being present. Play, under a parent's watchful eye, is only ever 'virtual' he says. Furedi argues that that is inevitable because grown-ups are more averse to risk than children.

Digby Jones, a former head of the CBI, has claimed that a generation of 'cotton wool children' has ramifications far beyond childhood. His extrapolations may be a trifle tenuous, yet worth repeating. In a paper for the education organisation Heads, Teachers and Industry Ltd, the ex-trade

THE PLAY'S THE THING

minister wrote: 'If we never took a risk our children would not learn to walk, ride a bicycle or swim; business would not develop innovative new products; move into new markets and create wealth for all.'24

We may be veering towards *reductio ad absurdum* to deduce that a shortage of outdoor activities produces a lack of international competitiveness. However, that there is a problem with play is officially acknowledged as a problem worthy of government intervention. In 2007 the Labour Government set aside £250m in its Children's Plan for new playgrounds because 'outdoor activities are important for children's development and to reduce obesity'. As obesity levels continue to climb – and the cost to the NHS in dealing with side-effects like diabetes rises concomitantly – it does not look like state initiatives are capable of turning the tide.

How, then, might siblings change any of this? Can we assume that children with siblings are more likely to play outside, to stay outside longer, and do so without adult supervision? I would say yes, yes and yes. It seems reasonable to suggest that high sibship potentially provides critical mass, safety in numbers and an antidote to ennui. From hide-and-seek to tag, games are easier to sustain with more participants, particularly if their ages vary. Interestingly, a research paper from a psychology professor at Boston University, published in 2011, shows that 'play works best in terms of nurturance when those playing are at different stages of childhood'. Siblings provide this variety in a way classroom games may not.

When it comes to play, older siblings – often grudgingly – act in *loco parentis*: their supervisory role more accommodating of risk than if it were performed by adults. It may seem perverse to assert, as I do, that having more children might ease the problems posed by a shrinking family home. Surely higher sibship only makes matters more claustrophobic? However, my argument need not be entirely contradictory. Children yearn to be out of doors

and siblings provide them with incentives and safeguards to make that happen.

There are less conscionable, if no less effective, reasons for the adventurousness practised by siblings. Omniscience declines with rising sibship. Parents with several offspring cannot monitor their children's movements with the rigour practised by the parent of a sibling-free child. As mentioned, helicopter parenting, where a parent hovers over a child and scrutinises its every movement, becomes difficult in a multi-child household.

The late Cassandra Jardine, a celebrated journalist and mother-of-five, categorised this process elegantly in her writings about larger family life. She talked oxymoronically - about the helpful side-effects of what she considered 'benign neglect'. Of course, turning a blind-eye to our children's wanderings is easier if they are heading-off into a leafy suburb where teenagers are not routinely carrying knives and opiates. This does not alter the essential logic of Jardine's proposition – that children will take more risks if there are more siblings to take them with. However, the nature of the risk-taking depends very much on the personalities of those older siblings who are supervising their younger counterparts. Again, we come back to the codicil at the core of sibling science. Siblings have a demonstrably beneficial impact where older siblings have been inculcated with values which reflect the mores of their functional parents. Siblings will have a deleterious impact where older siblings have drawn from the well of a problematic household. Such siblings can potentially, as discussed elsewhere, become accelerants for risky behaviour. In dysfunctional families, outdoor play with siblings might provide an invidious calculus. Being allowed to play outside, without a parent hovering above, may allow younger siblings to burn off calories. It might, however, mean they encounter destructive and dangerous habits they could do without. Not much of a quid pro quo.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

Risk is subjective. As a former resident of an affluent suburb myself, I can testify that many parents still worry that their children will be exposed to knife-wielding gangs. Their fears are rarely justified. This begs an important question about how sibship might impact on the mindset of mums and dads and, in particular, how it can help hinder the rotor-blades of helicopter parenting. Is it not probable that those parents of high-sibship families also have an acute sense of risk? A father- of-three is exposed to the same media focus on child abduction as a father-of-one. Yet arguably the experience of bringing up children, without those scare stories translating into reality, might do well to produce a more relaxed parent who does not see stranger-danger at every turn.

It has been my experience that with each additional offspring, parents learn to let children out of their sight. It is also my experience that many parents often spend relatively little time going out into their community. They travel to work, listening to radio reports or reading newspaper stories which might well give them a distorted picture of life 'on the outside'. It is their children who have the opportunity, unsupervised, to gauge what risks are really out there. I would suggest those risks are less serious than many parents, at least in leafy suburbia, imagine.

A parent with multiple offspring learns to, indeed has to, delegate (at least to a degree), the oversight of younger children to their older siblings, whether that is on a school run or running an errand to the shops. This is not to put too heavy a burden on an older child. I would not expect mine to administer first aid when there has been a crisis on the climbing frame – but I would expect to hear about it. A responsible elder sibling will run back with news of a sprained ankle or help the invalid home. Indeed, it is not always about giving an older sibling responsibility. I know from the experience of my own children that age and maturity are not necessarily the same thing. I would sooner

entrust my sensible seven-year-old with a letter to the postbox, than ask her slightly older – but flightier – sister.

The value of risk-taking with siblings grows as institutions where it was once encouraged wither. Charitable organisations which promoted an outdoor life for children, like the scouting movement, have been struggling to attract recruits. Sharp rises in insurance premiums to indemnify against compensation claims have made many schools notoriously risk averse about school trips. Schools and voluntary sector youth groups had one thing in common. They were both forums for exercise and risk-management which were particularly useful to children without siblings, who could not necessarily find alternative calorie-busting activities at home.

The Walking Bus

Parental paranoia and institutional wariness are not alone in depriving children of unsupervised exercise. Widespread, and not entirely unjustified, anxiety about the relentless rise in traffic volumes has seen the numbers of children transported by car everywhere rise sharply. The number of children, for instance, who are now allowed to walk to school in the UK has fallen off a cliff. The amount of traffic on our roads has risen regardless of where you live. Studies have shown that the proportion of ten and eleven-year-olds who travel unaccompanied to school fell from 94 per cent in 1970 to 47 per cent in 1998.²⁶ More than half of British parents say that the amount of traffic stops them sending their children out to play.27 Many local authorities now encourage children to form 'walking buses'. Children with siblings, when attending the same school, frequently form their vanguard.

To summarise. Children in advanced societies are fattening at a rate unprecedented in human history. Some of the biggest rises in obesity have been recorded in Britain. Often, blame is laid at the door of diet, perhaps because it

THE PLAY'S THE THING

seems to be the culprit most immediately remediable. Clearly, too much fatty food is unhelpful. However, this should not eclipse our view of the sedentary lifestyle of many infants. In 2010 the *British Medical Journal* showed a dramatic decline in the fitness of UK youngsters over recent years.²⁸

Siblings appear to counterbalance this trend. Higher sibship can be the enemy of immobility both within and without the home. At the risk of getting repetitive, siblings initiate physical action. They make it easier for children to enjoy open spaces for longer. Whatever the reason, the statistical corpus is vivid. As families grow, waistlines shrink, all other things being equal. I have not found a shred of evidence to suggest that having siblings makes children *fatter*; I *have* found several which illustrate the contrary. Not for the first time where sibship is concerned, I am at a loss as to why such palpable empirical evidence is not more widely discussed. It is not because the subject matter is unimportant or the statistical analysis flaky.

7

The Unknown Unknowns of Parenting

Parenting is big business. Parenting magazines and self-help books are worth millions of pounds annually to the publishing industry. Each year dozens of new titles are launched. Successful authors become household names. The respected British psychologist Penelope Leach produced an Emmy-award-winning documentary series based on her parenting manual, *Your Baby And Child*. It has sold two million copies since publication in 1977. That is small beer by American standards. Dr Benjamin Spock, who started the ball rolling in 1946 with *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, saw his book printed in 42 languages and rack-up sales in excess of 50 million copies.

The sector is in a restless pursuit of new markets and customers. From the all-encompassing approach to parenting pioneered by Dr Spock, there are now titles tailored to the perspectives of specific groups; mothers who are single, working, older, or – like the authors of *Heather Has Two Mommies* – gay. Publishers target would-be mothers with scores of books on conception. There are authors who deal with particular moments in a child's life. For instance, you will find no fewer than four search pages on the Amazon website dedicated to potty training alone. Typical titles include: *Toilet-training in Less Than a Day; The Potty Boot Camp; Princess Potty* and *Even Firefighters Go To the Potty*.

There are guidebooks to childcare for grandparents (*The Nanas and the Papas: A Boomers' Guide to Grandparenting*, to name but one) and books aimed at siblings who want to be ready for the arrival of a brother or sister. Such is the success of parenting publishing that it must pose a headache for

librarians and booksellers. Does a book about sex during and after pregnancy belong on the Adult shelf? Should *The Black Parenting Book* go in the Race Studies section? What about a title which promises to help a mother regain her figure post-partum – should that be fitness and exercise?

There are books for men, like *The Expectant Father* and the butch-sounding *Marathon Dad: Setting a Pace that Works for Working Fathers*. However, they are very much in the minority. Not untypical is how the author Joan Leonard begins her book *Twice Blessed*: 'Just when we thought we were finally getting the hang of it. Our stretch marks have started to fade; we've packed away our nursing bras and our maternity clothes.'¹

I will not be taking a naked flame to my underpants to protest at such a display of rank sexism. Publishers understand their market. They know the gender of their customers and, presumably, it is not predominantly male. Over the past decade I may have, like a well-drilled pit-lane crew in a slick Grand Prix motor racing team, developed the ability to change nappies with dizzying speed. However, I am a long way from being a militant New Dad, craving equality among the yummy mummies of Nappy Valley. I am reconciled to the fact that there is no equivalence between pushing a buggy into Caffè Nero and pushing a baby through the birth canal.

However, as a journalist, my professional cast is that of the careful observer. Physiology has denied me access to all areas of parenting, where women do the hard yards, but sometimes a little distance can be helpful. In short, my opinion, as a man and a father, still counts for something.

Next Best to Breast

The protocol of sexual politics carefully observed, let me introduce a subject on which a father's opinion and experience is rarely sought. Breast-feeding is an intellectual and scientific battleground. The combatants sometimes

divide between rival branches of midwifery. Often it is mothers who take opposing views. Certainly, the efficacy and necessity of breast-feeding has both promoters and detractors. Broadly speaking, two decades ago it was sometimes sniffed at, now it is held up as a litmus test of conscientious mothering. As someone whose job it is to go through several newspapers most days, I can confirm that breast-feeding stories are a staple of the medical correspondent's output. It feels like there is a new development every few months or so. Indeed, at the time of writing, one of the most recent items of research has suggested that children who were fed with their mother's milk for a minimum of six months had higher IQs than those who were given formula.

When our first child was born, my wife Jo was bombarded with advice about the benefits to both baby and mother of breast-feeding. She was well aware, long before she went into labour, that feeding her newborn breast-milk was 'a Good Thing'. However, when it came to it, the physical reality was overwhelming. In common with many other first-time mums, she could neither endure the intense discomfort nor watch her newborn's weight slip backwards as she failed to feed her enough milk. Within a fortnight she had given up and, because of the apparent veneration of breast-feeding, was left feeling as if she had failed her child in some way.

As we tried, unsuccessfully, for a second child, that seemed to be where the matter rested. Happily, Jo was lucky enough to have a second successful pregnancy. Again, she tried to breast-feed. The pain was just as vinegary second time around. However, this time she persisted. Steadily, the discomfort grew more manageable and, to her evident relief, began to subside.

With subsequent children, the initial agonies of breastfeeding never disappeared. The pain was so sharp when a baby clamped itself to her nipple that sometimes Jo would go into full jaw-clenching, foot-stamping, head-shaking mode. Yet she was able to tough it out because – experience had taught her – things do improve. The skin does harden, the nerve endings do numb, the baby learns how to suckle more efficiently. Had she remained a first and only-time mother, her view of breast-feeding would have been unremittingly dim; a medically laudable but practically impossible maternal ambition. Instead, practice has made – if not perfect – then tolerable.

My wife is no zealot about breast-feeding, but she has learned that it can be done. No matter how well-written a parenting manual is on the subject of breast-feeding, it can never replicate the actual physical experience. No diagram can really portray where best to place a baby's mouth, because each woman's body is different and babies are not mass-produced in one-size-that-fits-all. No agony aunt from a parenting magazine can muster words soothing enough to take away the pain of breast-feeding. Going through that soreness, and knowing that it does eventually dissipate, may be the only real reassurance on offer.

Supernannies

The mistakes made and lessons learned bringing up an only child cannot be corrected, refined and implemented on a second child who never is. This is not to say that a first-time mother or father does not improve in parenting proficiency following the birth of their child. Their learning curve will, of course, be made shallower by the help of a parent or close friends who have been through the experience. Parenting manuals, magazines and websites can be useful sources of information and reassurance too. However, as the breast-feeding example above hopefully shows, it sometimes takes the experience of repeated childbirth to learn 'on the job'. Sticking, or being stuck on one, potentially creates a mass of parenting Unknown Unknowns.

Seen through that prism, it is reasonable to speculate that ignorance is bliss – and a very profitable bliss – for the publishers of parenting advice. If a society is filled with more first- and only-time parents, there is likely to be a greater demand for manuals, information and guidance which more experienced parents would consider redundant.

It is not only in print that experts arrive to fill the knowledge gaps of novice parents. The last decade, presumably spurred by the success of publishers, has seen the arrival of a new television creation: the Supernanny. A clutch of them, such as Little Angels and its American counterpart Nanny 911, came to our screens in the midnoughties. These programmes, it is important to note, are not strictly in the business of offering the sort of parenting guidance which Dr Spock would recognise. They focus on the correction of behavioural problems in children. In *The* House of Tiny Tearaways the format is recognisably that of Big Brother, where three families with difficult parent/child relationships are taken to a purpose-built house, where they are watched and helped over the course of a week. I am sure the producers would contest this, but toddler tantrums make for much more arresting telly than showing a mum how to breast-feed better

Let me be clear. These *Supernanny*-style programmes are not aimed at inexperienced parents, or indeed, first- and only-time parents. Many of the children sent to Jo Frost's 'naughty chair' have both serious behavioural problems – and siblings. However, they do reveal a broader truth about trends in parenting, in particular a loss of confidence by mothers and fathers in their own ability to solve the challenges posed by parenthood. It is my contention that one of the reasons for this loss of parental confidence is simply that fewer and fewer parents get to polish their parenting skills and knowledge by raising more than one child.

Already, it seems to me, we have witnessed an encroachment by the state into the vacuum created by this loss of

parental sure-footedness. Announcing a multi-million pound scheme allowing child psychologists to guide parents, Tony Blair – towards the end of his premiership – cited 'the huge popularity of all these television programmes in which experts help parents with their problem kids'.² By 2012 David Cameron was doing the same thing, announcing plans for parenting lessons redeemed with vouchers available from Boots.

Of course, nanny state meddling in the lives of children is as old as the nation-state itself. Relatively recent examples – mandatory education and the prohibition of child labour – were profoundly unpopular with some parents when introduced. Obviously, the Tony Blair/David Cameron initiatives are not on the scale of either of those reforms, although they could be straws in the wind, indicating changing attitudes to the tutelage of modern parents, a growing number of whom lack the experience of parenting taken for granted by previous generations or access to the expertise of parents who live nearby.

It is my assertion that halting the mission creep of parenting professionals requires a recognition that many families can still provide their own bespoke solutions to the challenges of parenthood, through trial and error, which can never be replicated by a council official or telegenic childminder. As sociologist Frank Furedi has noted before, simply because effective parenting has to be learned does not mean that it has to be taught.

The Brazier Biscuit Diet

It goes without saying that there are struggling parents who, for their children's sake, require state intervention. Some of these parents have large families which they, quite plainly, cannot manage to any standard that would be deemed acceptable.

However, the vast majority of parents are not dangerously incompetent and should not, in my lukewarm

libertarian view, be encouraged to see themselves as needing the expertise of outside agencies or experts. Partly, this is because parenting is arguably something which should be experienced rather than prescribed. It is also because, as I will seek to demonstrate, no prescription for parents can ever be universal. In other words, what Gina Ford thinks is good parental practice may be very different from what Dr Spock recommends.

Human nature being what it is and, given that most publishers do not operate on a not-for-profit basis, there is an obvious commercial reason for this diffusion of opinion from parenting professionals. If you are trying to flog a book, you may feel compelled to find a USP, a unique selling point, which will help generate publicity and sales. That might involve the presentation of parenting advice which, though eye-catching, can actually be spurious or even unhelpful.

The babel of voices promising 'a diet that really works' is a good example of how this can happen. If I announce a brilliant new way of shedding weight I might struggle to make myself heard. If, on the other hand, I win lots of headlines by promulgating a dietary regime which involves the consumption of, let us say, biscuits, then I am on to something. The Brazier Biscuit Diet may actually not work at all, but it has a chance of securing media coverage and a share in the wealth of those ready to believe in miracle cures and quack science.

What evidence do I have that the guidance sought by parents is not always gilt-edged? Let me turn to a comprehensive examination of parental advice written between 1975 and 2000 (some of the books were initially published sooner but were later re-printed). This study considers the work of nearly 50 popular authors as well as writers from the more serious academic end of the spectrum.

The divergence of opinion is marked, even in areas where one might expect consensus.³ Take, for instance, the

question of how parents should behave towards an existing infant, when a new addition to the family appears. Child development specialist Penelope Leach has suggested that the arrival of a sibling should give the existing child a licence to behave immaturely to 'make it clear that far from having to be "grown-up" to keep your approval, you love her devotedly even if she decides to be more babyish than the newcomer'.4 Child psychologist Dr Haim Ginott suggests that children should be encouraged to draw pictures to 'find appropriate ways to release tension',5 while author Hilory Wagner proposes that negative sibling encounters should be re-enacted using puppets or dolls.⁶ Another prolific author, Seymour Reit, takes a more pugilistic approach to the use of dolls. In his 1985 book, Sibling Rivalry, he suggests that an older child should be allowed to vent his or her frustration at the new arrival on a doll or stuffed toy, lest they take it out on the real thing. At around the same time (1983) Brooke McKamy Beebe, a writer specialising in toddler psychology, was arguing that annoyed older siblings might benefit from the use of an actual punch-bag.7

I am not listing these methods for comic effect. Sibling rivalry can be a big problem for families and there is, certainly, sibling rivalry among my own children. Tempting though it is to have a punch-bag standing in the hallway for those moments when it all gets too much, my wife and I take a more conventional approach (we talk to our children about it and encourage siblings to intervene as peacemakers).

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the techniques listed above – and let us not forget we are talking about remedies for a common parental complaint recommended by best-selling authors – the list does reveal a wide divergence of opinion. Parenting is a vastly subjective area and one in which experts can only ever create an illusion of the definitive.

Of course, the parenting advice industry is currently going through a revolutionary period. No longer do parents sit, passively, awaiting pearls of wisdom from selfappointed gurus, whose advice sometimes lacks any empirical grounding at all. The internet has democratised parental guidance. It is no longer about the Grand Panjandrums dispensing rulings by didactic fiat. It is much more about real-life parents sharing what they have learned in chat-rooms and forums. This may be a great leap forward. It can still be argued that businesses like Mumsnet are, unintentionally, trading on the insecurities of novice parents. However, many of the website's regular users are multi-child parents who clearly revel in the opportunity of pooling their collective experience. Sometimes that collective experience can help debunk what I would characterise as anti-sibship myths; fallacies which are actively peddled by those sometimes seeking to tap into the parenting milieu.

Economies of Scale

A good example came in July 2010. A media release was issued in the name of a leading financial services company. It sought to put a price on parenting and even included a scientific-sounding acronym: COTS (Cost Of The Sibling). The story gained widespread media pick-up with its headline claim that a second child meant 'double trouble' financially.⁸ Six months later there was a follow up. It put the cost of raising a child at – on average – £270,000.⁹ These 'studies' are far from neutral. They are used to promote insurance or savings products. However, as previously mentioned, they take no account of the economies of scale of higher sibship. On Mumsnet parents were quick to deconstruct the calculations.

One mother, calling herself Abi, wrote: 'On the plus side, having two children has cut down on the cost of weekend activities because they play together (which costs nothing),

whereas when I just had DD I was ending up taking her out most times so that she had other children to play with, or buying supplies for things to keep her busy at home. Not needing to spend as much on entertainment balances out the other costs.'10

Other parents pointed out that it costs the same to own or rent, heat and light a home regardless of sibship size. Warming-up a pan of spaghetti rings on the hob will consume about the same energy if the portion is for two as one. Clothes are handed down, so too buggies, bicycles, carseats and toys. Baby-sitting gets cheaper when the eldest does it for free. State schools offer 'sibling rules', allowing children with older siblings to enter popular schools where places are limited. Independent schools offer sibling discounts. There are still some leisure centres, theme parks, hotels and tourist destinations which offer 'family tickets'. The effect of all the above is to reduce the average cost of having a child. That average cost is likely to fall further as family size increases. A tub-full of bath-water costs the same to fill for four as it does one. I know from my own experience that, as our family has expanded, some of our financial horizons have dwindled. Expensive foreign holidays, for instance, lose their lustre when they involve flying abroad with lots of small children.

It is certainly hard for many British parents to react to a figure of £270,000 for the cost of raising a child with anything other than incredulity. One mother of five, writing in response to these 'guestimates', wondered how such a total could have been arrived at. 'Finishing schools in Switzerland? Designer buggies? Dolce & Gabbana handbags for five-year-olds? Children are expensive – they do have to eat – but not nearly as expensive as some make out.'11

The business of bringing up children does seem to be a subject of ever mounting financial, political and media interest. 'Parenting' – a verb which did not exist a couple of decades ago – can guarantee publicity for politicians who

want to show they are in touch with the concerns of hard-working families. It can generate headlines for publicity-seeking press officers. For television producers, journalists and authors it can deliver ratings and sales. They just need to catch the right wave at the right time.

The Mummy Brain

Obviously, I am not – at a stroke – condemning out of hand every title which finds its way onto the parenting best-seller list. One such book, ¹² in particular, advanced my knowledge of sibling science in a quite unexpected direction.

While working in America, I picked up Katherine Ellison's exploration of how the act of repeated reproduction makes 'mothers smarter'. In the US it caused a mild sensation, with a hypothesis that motherhood – repeated motherhood in particular – brings about profound and demonstrable physical changes in a woman's body and brain.

Ellison is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist whose book offers a highly technical explanation of how having kids rewires and trains a woman's brain to work better. She was inspired by the experience of having her own two children and, less romantically, research in neuroscience showing that female rats led the pack only after they had given birth.

Outside of the lab, it transpires that humans too witness substantial improvements in smell, hearing and cognitive function in early pregnancy because of a huge burst of incipient neurones – stem cells – produced in the forebrain. Initially, this produces what any pregnant mother will recognise as 'porridge brain' – a deterioration in brainpower, memory and concentration in the ante-natal months. Ellison says that the hormonal – and concrete – changes wrought by hormones during pregnancy are as long-lasting as puberty or the menopause. It is quite a claim.

Ellison flags up medical research which shows how the female body learns from and improves on the experience of childbirth. She writes: 'Second-time mothers react faster and more efficiently to their babies. Second-time mothers throughout mammal species also tend to have more milk and lower levels of stress hormones than first-timers.' Even in fathers there are some beneficial chemical changes, she says. Dads who are caring for their infants have been found to have more of a calming hormone in their blood if they are fathers with two or more children, compared with men becoming fathers for the first time.

Ellison acknowledges that many of the findings she relates are counter-intuitive. Personally, before reading her book, I certainly would not have associated higher sibship with improved physical function (except that, perhaps, having a multi-child family precludes too many late nights). However, she also points out that motherhood hones many organisational and communication skills, which has prompted some women to include 'having babies' on their CV. She cites the example of the formidable former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who took several years off working professionally to rear her three daughters, and told one interviewer that she would probably put 'parenting' on her resume if she were looking for a job today. The list of skills might include multi-tasking, time management, dependability, interest in the long-term, leadership, and pastoral care giving.

Of course, some of these attributes apply to a mother of one. Yet some, as Albright herself acknowledged, can only pertain to a mother of several. When she was asked which part of parenting had helped with her subsequent and hugely successful diplomatic career, she replied: 'Getting people to play together.' Naturally, not every mother can afford to take a three-child-long career break like Albright, or a five-child career break like her fellow Democratic Party heavyweight, Nancy Pelosi. It is, perhaps, worth noting that both women had their children early, with their careers only really blossoming afterwards.

STICKING UP FOR SIBLINGS

In summary then; I would submit that the act of having more than one child is an opportunity to accumulate a storehouse of knowledge, and that those skills are particular to one family's personal circumstances and history.

I certainly can attest to the fact that the way I bring up my sixth child is very different from my first. I am far more relaxed about certain risks, but much more attuned to (a smaller number of) others. I have learned that parental confidence, consistency, routine and boundaries are critical components to a stable childhood. I am frequently gobsmacked by a child's ability to forgive and forget, their innate resilience, and their sensitivity to favouritism or perceived slights. Some children need 'talking down' more than others. Some need lots of tactile tenderness, others simply need listening to.

Learning about these dynamics has been, like all tough examinations, difficult. The revision, however, has been done in-house; in conversation with my wife, in reflections on mistakes; not with my nose shoved inside the latest tract from the parenting industry's author *du jour*. And not by investing in a punch-bag.

The Sibling Society

The scholastic spotlight on the effects of siblings is burning brightly. But the focus is narrow. The potential impact of sibship size on children is now well illuminated. The light grows dimmer when it comes to understanding what having a sibling means beyond childhood, across the lifespan. Also in the twilight are the potential benefits of a multi-child family on the people having them – parents.

This book has sought to reflect upon some of this emerging research. As I traced developments in these respective areas of study, especially those that transpired over the past decade, one big penny began a long, slow, drop. The vast thrust of sibling science is oriented towards impact on individuals; be they children or, to a lesser extent, their parents (the study of sibling rivalry is one obvious example).

Just because much of the data is drawn from surveys and studies which examine the experience of thousands, does not mean that there is much intellectual toil directed towards the consequences of evolving family composition on large collections of individuals: on society at large.

I have found myself asking this question: if there is a mounting consensus at the micro-level that a brother or sister can have a big impact on an individual's personality, surely it behoves us to ask whether the presence, or absence, of siblings has a macro dimension too? Put another way: if the incidence of multi-child families falls, and falls quickly, will that alter the behaviour of the world around us?

That question has been answered in the past. A quarter of a century ago the influential American sociologist, Denise Polit, argued that because children who grew up without siblings were 'fairly similar' to those who had them, there could be no suggestion that a future society 'populated with substantial proportions of only children

would be a country whose character would be substantially altered'.¹

In 1987, when Polit wrote those words, one in five British children had no sibling. Today the fraction is on a trajectory which could take it to a third. We are certainly now living in a society composed of a 'substantial proportion of only children'.

It is entirely intellectually honest to argue that not having a sibling is 'a Good Thing' for the couple who elect not to have a second or subsequent children. There is strong evidence to show that not having a brother or sister can help the child too. An only child enjoys regular exposure to adult-only conversation and sometimes this can lead to a precociously high verbal IQ. Equally, as I have sought to establish, there are strong grounds for the counter argument.

But recent developments in both child psychology and sibling science make it difficult to maintain that there is no difference between siblinged children and singletons. To repeat: this is not to say one condition is superior to the other. It is, however, to say that the experience is demonstrably different and, as such, it produces individuals who are correspondingly different too. It is hard to stand by the claim that the cumulative effect will not have wrought any change on the world at large.

This final chapter approaches – in a discursive way – the question of sibship size and society. As I acknowledged in my introduction, this begins to touch upon politically-loaded questions about demography. Intellectually speaking, I do not have a dog in that fight. However, I do want to consider how a society composed of fewer citizens who do not have siblings might begin to look.

19 March 2003

I stopped being the parent of an only child on 19 March 2003. That was the day my wife Jo gave birth to our second daughter, Agnes, at a hospital in Brussels. After years of

trying for another child you might have expected me to have been in on the event. Instead, I was wearing the desert camouflage of an American infantryman – and 'embedded' journalist – 2,500 miles away. Agnes was born in the morning and, by the evening, I was inside Iraq as part of the coalition invasion force.

I have a picture, taken at Baghdad airport four weeks later, showing me holding up a laptop computer. On it is an e-mailed digital photograph of Agnes; my first sight of her. I look exhausted and caked in grime. What the picture cannot show is my sense of relief. The previous month had opened my eyes to war reporting. The US Army Division I was attached to had inflicted heavy losses. I had seen some of them. Four of my journalist colleagues had died along the way, including a reporter from *El Mundo*, the Spanish newspaper who had sat next to me as we were bussed to our unit in the run-up to the invasion. Looking back at that picture I can remember the heightened sense of reality I felt at the time. I eventually came home, thrilled to see my newborn daughter, and with a clearer grasp of the fragility of life.

Agnes, naturally, was oblivious to the date of her arrival on the planet. Young children, like her, struggle to get their heads around the idea of history as a lived experience. Kids do not grasp the passage of time in the way that adults learn to over the years. It is an acquired sensibility – a little like we grown-ups trying to understand the difference between a trillion pounds worth of debt and two trillions. We are told there is a big difference, but because it is beyond our frame of reference, it is not discernibly quantifiable.

Agnes, instead, uses a different yardstick to situate herself in the world. It does not matter to her when she was born, but where. Not so much where she was born physically, since her sense of geography is no better than her grasp of history, but where she was born in relation to her siblings. In other words, where she fits into the family pecking order.

And that, if you asked Agnes, is at the top table. Our eldest daughter, Edith, is significantly older than her five younger siblings and, given the gap, stands apart. But there is just under six years between Agnes and our youngest child, John.

Where siblings are close together in age they seek, child psychologists have argued, to differentiate themselves from one another all the more. The process is referred to as 'deidentification', and I can see it vividly expressed in the personalities of Agnes and her next-born sibling, Constance, her junior by a mere 15 months.

Constance does not live up to her name. She is, in fact, a model of big-hearted inconstancy, erratic and unpredictable. There are few similarities with Agnes, who is broadly reliable and 'sensible'. The reason for this palpable difference may be in the genes. But, on the face of it, deidentification does seem to provide a neat explanation.

However, the difference between these two siblings may also be rooted in a more primitive dynamic, because Constance is also a great mimic. She coins her own catchphrases and repeats them in a silly voice until she realises we have all started using them. In this, she is not so very different from the next youngest child in our family, Gwendolyn. She is more emollient than her rumbustious sister, but also an entertainer. She tells jokes so bad that they are unintentionally funny. The point is not that she is currently a terrible comic, but that if any of our children are trying to provoke laughter it will be her. She feels the need to weave fantastical tall stories to win attention. Recently, the trainer at a local horse riding school where my older daughters go on Saturday afternoons, told me he had found her in his tack-room holding forth to a group of ten older girls. She had them 'in stitches'.

Katharine, our youngest daughter, is different again. Her terrible twos were terrible indeed. She was, as I have been forced to explain to stunned bystanders astonished by her fits of rage, a difficult toddler. Yet now she has, it seems, found a less vituperative means of finding favour. She has a beatific smile and an angelic countenance. Kitty appears to have learned that her siblings will not tolerate bad behaviour even if her parents will. She seems to be trying a new tack. It is to be, in a word, cute.

Katharine, of course, is simply growing up. Children move through phases as regularly as the moon. But I recognise in all these siblings irreducible cores, which may exemplify a basic tenet of life growing up in a multi-child family.

If you are a child with bigger, stronger, older siblings, how do you go about getting what you want? Brute force will probably not work. In even the most functional families, there will be times when older siblings seek to dominate and prevail, rather than protect and nurture. Might it be that in such families younger, smaller, weaker children must turn to charm or learn to hoodwink older siblings into letting them get their way?

Whatever the reason, de-identification or self-preservation, one thing is clear: any parent of siblings finds that siblings, identical twins excepted, are rarely peas in a pod, at least in terms of personality. The question which presents itself is whether a pattern emerges to explain this behaviour and, if there is a repeatable pattern, can it be codified by a coherent theory? Does the way my younger children seem to rely on a silver tongue in lieu of iron fists tell us anything beyond our family circle? If Constance, Gwendolyn and Katharine – all 'middle children' – seem inclined to deflect aggression and defuse tension with humour and wit, rather than *force majeure*, can sibling science explain why their dispositions are as they are?

Order, Order!

The study of birth order, the order in which children are born, is a booming sector of sibling science. By 2010, for instance, Google Scholar had indexed no fewer than 65,000

articles related to birth order.² Interest in where we are born relative to our siblings may be exciting unprecedented levels of academic scrutiny but, to an extent, it is already the stuff of popular trivia and pub quizzes. This is particularly applicable in relation to eldest children, where the correlation between high achievement and birth order can appear, frankly, stunning. More than half of all Nobel Prize winners and U.S. presidents are said to have been first-born children, and every American astronaut has either been the eldest child in the family or the eldest boy.³

The point where statistical quirk might be useful comes where it intersects with the marketplace. There seems to be growing interest in birth order in the world of business – as well there might. One survey of more than 1,500 chief executive officers in America found that more than half were first-borns.⁴ There are even enterprising analysts who offer advice to help recruiters pair the right executives with sibship size and birth order in mind. One typical offering, from Dattner Consulting, provides a ready-reckoner of personality based on an applicant's childhood position within the family they were raised in.⁵

According to Dattner an archetypal first-born exhibits certain 'predictable' characteristics. The list of adjectives typically includes words like: confident, assertive, dominant, inflexible, conformist, politically conservative, task-oriented, conscientious, authoritarian, disciplined, status conscious and defensive. Dattner suggests that first-borns end up this way because of their experience of childhood. Partly, because they are often left in charge of younger siblings (they learn to be bossy), and are encouraged to emulate and please their parents.

When I look at that roll-call of first-born personality-traits, part of me recoils. Lists of characteristics like that have a natural home in the sort of magazine you will find in the waiting room of a doctor's surgery; facile answers to complex questions frequently dressed up in cod science.

But let us not simply dismiss birth order as irrelevant. If you are born first and have no subsequent siblings, there is a strong likelihood that this will have an impact on your outlook and that of those who care for you. If you are born into a family with siblings, several of whom are older than you, this is likely to have some impact on an inchoate temperament. It is a matter of common-sense, not abstruse child psychology, that growing up with a big brother or sister is likely to make a child relate to the world differently.

This need not be a problem for the sibling-free child, of course. That stunning correlation between career success and first-borns makes birth order, *inter alia*, of interest to couples who stick on one. As discussed elsewhere, the only child can benefit – as well as suffer from – a surfeit of parental attention. This parental focus also applies to the eldest child of a family until a sibling arrives. An eldest child is, for some time at least, an only child.

The Squeezed Middle

It would be wrong to – point-blank – assume that an eldest child 'has the same characteristics' as an only child. Clearly, some of the personality traits said to be seen in an eldest child stem from that child's relationships with siblings lower down the birth order. However, arguably neither first nor only children lead childhoods which are defined by a constant battle to be heard. That is, however, the lot of some middle children. Indeed, I witness this fight for attention on a daily basis at home.

Personally, I can attest to the observation that birth order stereotypes should not be completely dismissed as crude caricatures. There is a growing body of literature showing that, for instance, middle children are more impulsive and creative, albeit less disciplined than siblings who book-end the family unit.⁶ Middle-children are also said to be more rebellious and less dutiful.

Adjectives typically used to describe middle children, in

this type of literature, include: rebellious, unconventional, creative, flexible, empathic, liberal, funny, altruistic, itinerant and diplomatic. As noted already, these traits make some sense. An eldest child gets undivided attention until a younger sibling comes along. They are conditioned to enjoy parental interest and often have the physical wherewithal to ensure they carry on getting it. Therefore younger siblings might be shrewder in how they go about making a parent pay them heed. They have to be imaginative if they are to get what they want from a big brother or sister (getting what you want from a parent as an only child takes less effort).

So, birth order is increasingly popular among sibling scientists as a way of unlocking the secrets of the psyche. And yet, paradoxically, birth order has never been less relevant. In Britain and developed societies like it, the proportion of singletons is soaring. An only child cannot be ordered, ranked or indexed, being both the first and last child simultaneously.

That does not render birth order theory irrelevant. It still resonates in those families where sibship exists. Birth order theory might also help provide some answers to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: beyond the obvious demographic impact, is society at large changed by more parents electing to have children without siblings?

I would say it has to be, at least to some extent. The calculus is simple. More only children will mean, by definition, fewer middle or younger children and, *ipso facto*, that changes the character of society at large. Or, at least, it does if you buy the idea that children within a family are routinely and predictably different, as birth order theory would have us believe.

Familial Diversity

There are areas of everyday life where changing patterns of sibship size seem likely to have an effect. Fewer siblings means less familial diversity, a reduced proportion of younger and middle children and, hence, a diminution in the range of character stereotypes to be found among the people we move amongst. This poses a number of questions.

For instance, might that shifting balance of family composition have an impact on the dynamics of our workplace and social relationships – from the trading floor to the shop floor, from the boardroom to the bedroom?

Does a sustainable economy really need an effective increase in the proportion of headstrong eldest/only children, unmediated by those from lower down the birth order? Does our testosterone-fuelled banking sector need more traders who are strangers to self-doubt? Conversely, if economies increasingly rely on creative services, how will they fare if the number of 'creative' middle-children falls sharply?

And so you could argue that an aptitude for avoiding confrontations might be the secret of an enduring marriage every bit as much as deft personnel management. There is, indeed, some evidence that middle children have more enduring relationships than offspring born elsewhere in the birth order.⁷

It certainly seems to me that the areas affected could potentially extend far beyond business. Personal relationships might not be easier with fewer peacemakers. The arts may lack a certain vitality and edge with fewer footloose rebels. Will politics grow an even rougher trade if the number of natural-born diplomats entering public life shrinks?

The scope of societal change will, presumably, hinge on the speed and scale of changing patterns of sibship size. A country which sees a sudden growth in the number of one-child families is likely to witness a bigger impact than one where sibship changes evolve slowly. Working in Italy, I was struck by how the increasing prevalence of the only child excited more interest than it seemed to in Britain; but then Italy – unlike the UK – is a country which has gone from high to low sibship very rapidly indeed.

It seems possible that a society which undergoes a sharp reduction in the number of citizens with what we could broadly term 'middle-child characteristics', will not necessarily be a better place. I cannot say if there is an ideal blend of first- and middle-children, but I do think there is likely to be an impact on any culture which has, put bluntly, potentially more 'leaders' and fewer 'compromisers', more authoritarians and fewer rebels. It might mean repercussions for significant parts of the public square – the workplace, the economy, the arts, democracy, even the defence of the realm.

Take, for example (at the risk of sounding flippant), the Steven Spielberg film *Saving Private Ryan*; an Oscar-winning war movie with a family crisis at its core. Set in 1944, the plot follows the rescue of the eponymous Private Ryan, the only surviving child of four sons who volunteered to fight in World War Two. Improbably, the film may tell us something about how a society is subtly and collectively altered by shifting sibship size. Such was the view articulated by Philip Longman in an influential paper for the American periodical *Foreign Affairs* in 2004.8 He argued that a growing number of sibling-free children would make it harder for developed nations to go to war. A parent would simply be more reluctant to let their only son or daughter go off to fight, die and, at a stroke, leave them childless.

Essentially, all family sizes are not equal. To pretend otherwise is to succumb to what we might call familial relativism. Let me be clear. Other than the obvious problems with generalising, at the micro or nuclear level, bringing up an infant without siblings has obvious advantages. It frees parents to engage more fully in the workplace, whilst allowing them to throw undiluted resources at their only child. Lingering stereotypes about the only child are, increasingly, unfashionable.

However, there are also, as I attempt to elucidate, potential latent benefits to sibship; not least in potentially

helping to curb three of the great epidemics of modern life – obesity, allergies and depression. Siblings help knock the corners off each other, refine social or soft-skills, help brothers or sisters manage risk and teach parents how to parent.

Put simply, there are – generally speaking – some demonstrable differences between children who grow up with and without siblings. Libertarians, whom I naturally incline towards, will say this is a matter for personal choice. If a couple decide to limit their family size, they do so cognisant that their child will gain and lose, just as I, with my half-dozen-strong brood, accept that sibship will deny my children some things even as it gifts them others.

However, evolving shifts in family composition, as well as being rapid to an unprecedented degree, also affect all families. No family, to paraphrase John Donne, is an island unto itself. As discussed elsewhere, I fear that declining family size means that the 'gold standard' of parenting increasingly borrows from an only child template, with repercussions for those who have more than one. More importantly, as I have considered in this chapter, society in the very broadest sense may be altered by a sharp growth in the number of citizens who have no formative experience of sibship. An economy with fewer middle children may be less diverse. A polity with fewer 'middle-child peace-makers' may grow more combative, even as a society required to wage war grows less so.

Final Thoughts

In addition to the six children she has borne me, my wife has been the most inspirational figure in my life. I can think of few women – and still fewer men – who could switch lifestyles with anything like the equanimity she has shown. In the spring of 2002 she was in America, collecting an award for Sky TV's coverage of the 9/11 attacks, which she had masterminded as the channel's Head of Foreign News.

Professionally, she was sitting pretty. A decade on and she has exchanged the tantrums of highly-strung television correspondents (I was one of them), for the rantings of irascible toddlers and petulant pre-teens.

What possessed her to do such a thing? Partly, it is her preternatural lack of ego. Partly, it is a cussed determination not to take the line of least resistance or bow to convention. In that sense her decision to have a big multi-child family owes something to her politics, which were forged on the campus of Bristol University in the 1980s. There she worked for the fledgling Revolutionary Communist Party and though no longer still active, she retains, if not membership, then the RCP's addiction to iconoclasm.

The RCP was co-founded by the sociologist Frank Furedi, and because television newsreaders love nothing more than a tortured segue, I find that when it comes to credit for inspiring this book, both he and Jo warrant a mention.

It was in Furedi's kitchen in 2005 that I decided to try and write a paean to siblings. There was no epiphany. It was simply an intellectual tipping point. I was in his home recording an interview for a report which required an articulate sociologist with some name recognition. As the camera crew fixed-up their equipment I told Furedi how much I had loved his book deconstructing modern parental malpractice.⁹

Paranoid Parenting encourages parents to recover the confidence the author asserts they have misplaced in recent years. It discourages helicopter parenting. When I read it, every chapter seemed to invite a deduction which the author – puzzlingly – never made. Want a parent to rediscover their self-belief and dilute reliance on an increasingly sententious state? Why not enlarge your family and learn on the job? Want to give hyperventilating 'pushed' children some space? Why not divide all that parental attention with another child?

Why, I wondered, did Furedi not consider that, for

instance, giving a child a sibling could be a remedy for parental risk aversion? The manner in which mums and dads avoid risk is, after all, the central preoccupation of his book. Perhaps simply such a 'solution' was deemed too drastic.

Furedi wrote, as I write of course, presumably partly from personal experience. Furedi is the father of an only child. Did that make him incurious about the impact of sibship size on parental paranoia? Since I was at his home ostensibly to discuss another story, it would be improper to reprint the answer he gave me. Suffice to say I left Furedi's home with my admiration for him intact and armed with an idea. That there was scope for an exploration of how the number of offspring we have can change the way parents relate to their children – and how that change can be to the benefit of all concerned.

From that germ sprang a broader analysis. If siblings were potentially a good thing for the couples who had them, perhaps they might be beneficial for each other in ways that were increasingly overlooked. And perhaps that benefit did not end with individual families – could society at large be impoverished by declining sibship?

I believe there is an interesting case for siblings in all these contexts – and they stand repeating here with some polemical force. These truths, if that is what they amount to, are often uncomfortable. The size of family a couple have together is a deeply personal business. Disagreements over how many children to have can create stress fractures in an otherwise solid relationship.

Those who have set their face against a sibling for their only child may grudgingly acknowledge the weight of some of the arguments suggested. The evidence, for example, that a brother or sister can assist a child to cope with divorcing (or dead) parents, is strong. But, as such, higher sibship perhaps amounts to a kind of insurance policy beloved of all wishful-thinkers: namely, that it will never happen to me. Or that it is too distant an event to fret about.

However, I think this book also helps establish a case for a second child as a source of, if not quite instant relief, then help in the more immediate future. A new-born will bring its share of burdens for a couple who have opted to give their only child a sibling, but much of the hard-core hardship will abate. Indeed, over time, a sibling starts to pay-back that initial investment. As years pass, parents who take the plunge sometimes wonder how their eldest child would have flourished without a sibling; without a permanently on-tap playmate, without someone to share gardens, walks, anxieties and attention with, without an intimate who will always be there. As economics professor Bryan Caplan notes in his 2011 book Selfish Reasons To Have More Kids, 10 '... many of the benefits of children come later in life. Kids have high start-up costs, but wise parents weigh their initial sleep deprivation against a lifetime of rewards - including future grandchildren.'

Many parents intuit these things; at bottom they do not want their child to be lonely. Their behaviour, in that sense, is rooted in the visceral. It is my assertion, however, that they can make the case for family expansion by reference to more solid 'evidence'. All other things being equal, there's a strong case that siblings make children thinner, fitter, healthier and happier than kids who grow up alone.

They can, less emphatically, endow children with emotional intelligence. From that springs soft-skills which are strangely suited to the spirit of the age. Learning how to defer gratification can be a hallmark of life in a multi-child family. It could equally be a motif for the guiding principle of post-credit crunch life for society at large. Indeed, if you can again forgive a yearning for symmetry, maybe we can see a parallel with the behaviour of parents who 'haven't invested' in their family's future – and leaders who decided to have jam today and none tomorrow.

Bringing up more than one child takes hard graft. It taxes parents in ways impossible when a couple outnumber their

only child. But I would argue it rewards the initial inconvenience. Parents who are able to create a stable and happy home environment for siblings witness a multiplier effect – and that effect is from cradle to grave.

Toddlers with siblings pass early motor-skill milestones sooner. At primary school they are less likely to be debilitated by allergies. As teenagers, siblings provide a shoulder to cry on. In adulthood, siblings can share the care of an ailing parent. In old age, a sibling is frequently a buttress against loneliness.

Multi-child families can also encourage thrift. There is a reduced sense of entitlement and increased competition for scarce resources – be that daddy's quota of trips to the park or the Christmas toy budget. Those same toys are handed down. Dad can accompany more than one child to the playarea simultaneously. Economies of scale. There is often less waste. Siblings find their own entertainment. They are less likely to require buying-off with expensive trips, endless play-dates or 'quality time' goodies.

Critically, siblings also create sustainable growth, in the sense that they allow children to be children, to mature at their own pace, nourished by the youngsters who are more likely to share their world view. Siblings militate against premature adulthood. An only child enjoys advantages by dint of having lots of adult company. But when I see my children mix with singletons I am forced to conclude that a free-flowing sense of levity is not always one of them.

Of course, siblings do not automatically provide the key to a forever-land of laughter. Siblings introduce a level of austerity to young lives which are otherwise, increasingly, coddled. In my dining room there is a framed quotation from Nancy Mitford, one of the half-dozen Mitford sisters, which reads: 'The great advantage of living in a large family is that early lesson of life's essential unfairness.'

Life's 'essential unfairness' is much thought of in these post sub-prime days. Many Westerners are waking up to the shifting tectonic plates of global finance, the unsustainability of welfare states contorted by an ageing population and the looming dominance of the Eastern business model.

I am not recommending that we, to paraphrase Shakespeare, 'imitate the action of the tiger (mother)'. Even Amy Chua, author of the best-selling bible of hyperparenting, rejects China's enforcement of the only child template. But the drive she brings to parenting hails, by her own admission, from a national stereotype. It has produced a generation of workers, investors, managers and entrepreneurs who are reshaping the economic world order. They are ruthless in the pursuit of success.

In other words, our children will have to fight harder to enjoy the good things which we took for granted. Higher sibship, as I have argued, can stoke the fires of competition. It can also make our economy structurally stronger, and not simply by increasing the production of future workers, consumers and taxpayers. Sibship creates diversity in the workplace. Much of our future growth will rely on the creative industries, which may disproportionately draw upon the skills of middle children – a dwindling breed. If there is to be a renaissance in British manufacturing, it may not be founded on the backs of eldest and only children who, birth order theory suggests, prefer to run rather than man production lines.

This may be far-fetched. But I can argue with conviction that if we are all to be poorer in the future, high-sibship may provide a rare safe haven. When my children are retired, generous welfare provision in old age may be unaffordable. They will, though, have each other.

Ah yes, some will wonder, but if we are entering a new economic dark age, how can it possibly make sense for cash-strapped parents to take on the burden of another child? The government is cutting child tax credits, freezing child benefit for some and cutting it altogether for the better off. Food and energy prices, both of which

disproportionately affect families, are rising faster than other commodities.

For many men and women agonising over a decision to stick on one, or twist for more, these are all too real considerations. Some will be interested to learn that a sibling for their only child can improve that child's chances of enjoying better mental and physical health. Others will recognise the logic behind my analysis that a multi-child family can help parents relax into the role – get better at it by raising more than one child.

Yet for many it comes down to something this simple. Will we be happier with a second child? Although divorce rates seem to fall among parents who expand their families, this does not mean such parents are necessarily jollier folk. Children demand sacrifices, there are no two ways about it. The financial services industry press officers are misleading when they issue another release with a gob-smacking figure for the newest average 'cost of having a child'. But having a second child never saved a couple money.

To these doubters I would simply say that happiness is not a universal constant. 'No man,' as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, 'ever steps in the same river twice.' What makes us happy changes. Time was when I looked upon a summer fortnight in a villa on the Mediterranean littoral as a basic human right. Now other things make me happy.

These things are intensely personal, often meaningless gibberish outside of the family. For instance, my children have a game which involves chasing me around the house and the dining table in particular. It sometimes ends in tears when a child clatters into a chair, or another child. But for a few minutes I slough off the cares of a hard-bitten journalist and enter into the spirit. For a few minutes I am a child again, in the playground of my own home. It is joyful because it is escapist and anarchic, like one of those medieval feast days when the tables are turned and authority inverted. It is joyful, also and critically, because I am in the minority.

STICKING UP FOR SIBLINGS

I end this book as I began, looking to the lessons I can draw from my own family home. Today is the last day of the school holidays. Ten minutes ago I went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Some of my children were clustered around the laptop computer on the breakfast bar. An unremarkable scene. And yet, as I sit at my desk, cradling my steaming mug, I am struck by what was going on next door. The children were looking at an interactive cartoon website called Moshi Monsters. They should be outside, of course, but the weather is nasty. They ought to be listening to a parent reading from an edifying book, but their father is too busy tapping away on his own keyboard. So they have found their own entertainment – just as a child without siblings would.

There is a difference, however. Agnes is typing. Her siblings are standing at her shoulder, watching and offering – frequently unwelcome – advice. Our youngest daughter Katharine, not yet four, is standing on a piano stool to get a good look at the screen while offering a running commentary. What could be a silent interaction between a child and a virtual world has been turned into something more social – more real. At the risk of sounding utterly pretentious, they have made the inert gregarious, softening the impact of new technology.

Our children are shaped by forms of communication which are constantly changing. For my grandparents it was radio, for my parents, television. For my children it is the World Wide Web. They navigate that brave new world with one of the oldest of developmental resources – a sibling.

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