

Bite-size family

By Ruth Ostrow

As school holidays come to an end, I've been reflecting on what it means to be the mum of an only child. Organising my daughter each day has been difficult. I come from a large family and always had "live-in" friends to play with. But it's undoubtedly easier to go places with one child; easier on the nerves and back pocket. And in terms of ensuring a child's emotional wellbeing, parents can always borrow someone else's family, and hand it back to its rightful owners when it gets too much.

For me, having one child was the right thing to do at the time. But as part of a growing worldwide trend, I'm one of the parents being fired upon by politicians, world leaders and the pope, no less.

So widespread has the trend to single-child families become, the former pope called it a "grave threat" that bears upon the future of Europe - where birth rates have been plummeting, with many countries registering as low as 1.1 children per household in 2002. In America, there are an estimated 20 million single-child families - said to be one of the fastest-growing family units.

Until recently, Australia's birth rate was at record lows. Speculators say the trend has been brought on by couples delaying kids for careers; marrying later; divorcing; choosing lifestyle over quantity of offspring; and a growth in infertility rates.

As a demographic, one-child families are under attack from family groups who warn that single kids will be lonely, depressed, and socially ill-adjusted. I've not found that to be the case. Better still, we parents have enough freedom to stop us from being "lonely, depressed, and socially ill-adjusted".

Others attack us for being "selfish" and to blame for the ageing population. (Peter Costello: "You should have one for the father, one for the mother, and one for the country ... ")

However, environmentalists hail us as heroes. Best-selling author of *Maybe One*, Bill McKibben, says it's selfish to have more than one child. He argues degradation of our resources is enough cause for men to have vasectomies. Others argue there are orphans in the world who already exist and need homes.

Certainly, given the appalling state of our planet, I don't think we single-child families are any more selfish than those who go forth and multiply.

Quoting Kath & Kim, the nation's favourite single-child family, I say to the critics: "Mind your own beeswax."

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in *The Weekend Australian* SAT 04 FEB 2006