

Birth Order

Family roles govern the perceived expectations and responsibilities placed on children by parents and siblings. Children's perception of their place in the family constellation influences how they feel about themselves and how they interact with others (Koffman & Johnson, 1993 in Nims, 1998). It is also possible that children internalize roles and traits determined by their birth order.

Firstborn

Firstborns are typically and believed to be serious, conscientious, directive, goal-oriented, aggressive, rule-conscious, exacting, conservative, organized, responsible, jealous, fearful, high achieving, competitive, high in self-esteem, and anxious. They may learn the concept of power at a young age, and this can be expressed in their desire to help, protect and lead others. The firstborn may also have the need to regain praise from their parents that they received before their siblings were born. The first born may come to feel unloved through the perceived loss of mother's love to the new baby. Adler (1964) referred to this as being "dethroned" by the younger sibling. Later in life the firstborn may become authoritarian or strict. A firstborn's common feeling of a fear of losing the top position may make them more risk averse, and thus less likely to embark on a new venture.

There are several aspects of the family structure that pertain to firstborn children. First time parents are usually highly anxious and "sweat all the details." They document every milestone, celebrate each small achievement, and worry if it comes later than expected. They put the firstborn child under a lot of pressure to succeed. In addition to parental behavior, the firstborn child is often shocked by the introduction of a competitor into the family. This may lead to sibling rivalry. On the other hand, younger siblings often idolize the first born, putting the first born in a position of leader of the children of the family.

Middleborn

Middleborn children have a diverse range of personalities. The habits of many middleborns are motivated by the fact that they have never been truly in the spotlight. The firstborn always seems to be achieving and pioneering ahead, while the younger sibling is secure in his or her niche as the entertainer of the family.

The middle or second born child or children often have the sense of not belonging. They fight to receive attention from parents and others because they feel many times they are being ignored or dubbed off as being the same as another sibling. They tend to have fewer pictures in the family photo album alone, compared to firstborns. Being in the middle, a child can feel insecure. This in turn will affect their relationships throughout their whole life. In some cases the middle child will see life from a hopeless standpoint will often become depressed or even lonely. The middle child often lacks drive and looks for direction from the first born child. Sometimes a middle child feels out of place because they are not over achievers and like to go with the flow of things.

Middleborn children are often believed to be natural mediators. Middleborn children may avoid conflict. They don't have a lot of friends, they are shy.

The middle child may have an even-temper and a take it or leave it attitude. Alfred Adler (1964) believed that the middle child feels squeezed out of a position of privilege and significance. The child is internally compelled to find peace within the family and may have trouble finding a place or become a fighter of injustice.

Youngest

The names given to the youngest child are revealing: the youngest child of the family is viewed as the party animal, the entertainer who is unafraid to test his or her luck. They are also thought of as the baby of the family and an outgoing charmer. While this is certainly not true of all youngest siblings, proponents of this theory state that the youngest of the family is an endearing, and delightful friend.

The youngest child is often babied or "pampered" more than the other siblings. This "pampering," according to Adler, is one of the worst behaviors a parent can bestow on a child. "Pampering" can lead to dependence, and selfishness as well as irresponsibility when the youngest enters adulthood.

Youngest children may become manipulative and control-seeking if their sibling(s), parents, or other peers

are overbearing or bossy.

Only children

Only children may have characteristics of either the first born or the youngest child. Adler (1964) believed that because only children have no rivals for their parents' affection, they may be pampered and spoiled by their parents, particularly the mother. He suggested that this could cause later interpersonal difficulties if the person is not universally liked and admired.

Another view of only children, as noted by Alissa Eischens in her paper *The Dilemma of the Only Child* is that they learn to be children on their own, they learn to depend on themselves, and they have no problem being loners.

Naturally introverted only children may show extroverted qualities if he or she wishes to make friends. On the other hand, naturally extroverted children may learn to show introverted qualities by being content to focus on their thoughts when playmates are unavailable.

Twins

Twins tend to have one dominant twin, who acts as the first born. However, this can sometimes not be the case. Because of twins' closeness, they tend to be a lot more confident; however, they often have trouble being alone and get lonely easily. When one twin gets married, this often causes separation problems with both twins, and sometimes leads to depression. Twins, especially identical twins, tend to be much closer than normal siblings. Parents can have a tendency to treat the twins as a single child, buying them the same clothes and toys for Christmas, whereas they will buy separate items for non-twin children.

Personality research

Most of the claims about birth order have not been supported by scientific research. Indeed, many of the traits believed to be associated with different birth positions appear to contradict each other. Only children are supposedly more extraverted because they need to go outside of the family to meet other children, yet they are also believed to be more introverted so they can tolerate being by themselves. In fact, extraversion and introversion are stable personality traits, and they are related more strongly to genetic factors than to birth order. Firstborns are attributed with a variety of traits that do not even correlate with each other, much less with birth order. In general, birth order effects are weaker than commonly believed.

In practice, systematic birth order research is a challenge because it is difficult to control for all of the variables that are statistically related to birth order. Family size, and a number of social and demographic variables are associated with birth order and serve as potential confounds. For example, large families are generally lower in socioeconomic status than small families. This means that third born children are not only third in birth order, but they are also more likely to come from larger, poorer families than firstborn children. If thirdborns have a particular trait, it may be due to birth order, or it may be due to family size, or to any number of other variables. It is often impossible to determine which variable is the actual cause of the observed trait. This methodological issue has plagued research in this area. Spacing of children, parenting style, and gender are additional variables to consider. Consequently, there is a large number of published studies on birth order that vary widely in quality and are inconsistent in their conclusions.

Literature reviews that have examined many studies and attempted to control for confounding variables tend to find minimal effects for birth order. Ernst and Angst (1983) reviewed all of the research published between 1946 and 1980. They also did their own study on a representative sample of 6,315 young men from Switzerland. They found no substantial effects of birth order and concluded that birth order research was a "waste of time." More recently, Jefferson, Herbst, and McCrae (1998) analyzed data from a national sample of 9,664 subjects on the Big Five personality traits of extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Contrary to Sulloway's predictions, they found no significant correlation between birth order and self-reported personality. There was, however, some tendency for people to perceive birth order effects when they were aware of the birth order of an individual.

In her review of the scientific literature, Judith Rich Harris (1998) suggests that birth order effects may exist within the context of the family of origin, but that they are not enduring aspects of personality. When people are with their parents and siblings, firstborns behave differently than laterborns, even during adulthood. However, most people don't spend their adult lives in their childhood home. Harris provides

evidence that the patterns of behavior acquired in the childhood home don't affect the way people behave outside the home, even during childhood. Harris concludes that birth order effects keep turning up because people keep looking for them, and keep analyzing and reanalyzing their data until they find them.

Intelligence

Summary of the findings of Belmont and Marolla. Scores on Raven's Progressive Matrices relate to birth order and family size.

Since the 1970s, one of the most influential theories to explain why firstborns frequently score higher on intelligence and achievement tests than other children is the confluence model of Robert Zajonc. This model states that because firstborns mainly have adult influences around them in their early years, they will spend their initial years of life interacting in a highly intellectual family environment. This effect may also be observed in siblings who, although later born, have a sibling at least five years senior with no siblings in between. These children are considered to be "functional firstborns". The theory further suggests that firstborns will be more intelligent than only children, because the latter will not benefit from the "tutor effect" (i.e. teaching younger siblings).

Zajonc's theory has been criticised for confounding birth order with both age and family size, and alternative theories (such as Resource Depletion Theory) have been offered to explain the Belmont and Marolla findings. In a meta-analysis of the research, Polit and Falbo (1988) found that firstborns, only children, and children with one other sibling score higher on tests of verbal ability than laterborns and children with multiple siblings. This effect suggests that smaller families lead to children with higher test scores. Because there was no specific advantage for firstborn children, the results are consistent with Resource Depletion Theory, but not the confluence model.

The basic finding that firstborns have higher IQ scores has been disputed. One group of researchers examined data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) (USA), which gave them the opportunity to look at a large randomly selected sample of US families. The sample included children whose academic performance had been reviewed multiple times throughout their academic careers. This study found no relationship between birth order and intelligence (Rodgers, Cleveland, Van den Oord, & Rowe, 2000).

Researchers reporting in the journal *Science* in June 2007 found that "The eldest children in families tend to develop slightly higher IQs than their younger siblings." [1]