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# The Benefits and Implications of Birth Order Position



by Elizabeth K. Passey

*This literature review examines the implications and benefits of birth order position on the child. Depending upon position, somewhat predictable differences are likely in expectations, responsibilities, opportunities, nurturing and the like. Consequently, birth order affects the child's peer relationships and the child's self-esteem. Children without siblings have difficulty relating with their peers throughout their lives and have relatively higher self-esteem. First-born children strive towards perfection and report higher self-esteem. This tendency may impact peer relationships negatively, except when in a position of power. Middle-born children have relatively good relationships with their peers and lower self-esteem. Last born children tend to have good relationships with their peers when they are not in a position of power and report higher levels of self-esteem.*

## The Benefits and Implications of Birth Order Position

A child is born into a family. Whether that family consists of one parent or two, siblings or no siblings, or any other of the endless familial possibilities, that child occupies a particular birth order position. Birth order is the station that a child possesses among a family and is established when he or she is born. The basic birth order positions may point to individual personality characteristics later in life (Adler, 1964). There are four separate, generally accepted stations: only child, first-born child, middle-born child, and youngest child. These positions may shift over the course of life; for example, some children were first an only child and then a first-born child. Other children were a last-born child and then a middle-born child. Yet, whether or not a shift in birth order position occurs, a child is influenced by these positions: a child's birth order position affects the psychological characteristics of the child (Rodgers & Thompson, 1986).

A child's birth order position may affect that child's relationships with others, as well as his or her self-esteem. A child's birth order position may influence interaction with other children at school or how the child forms relationships with family members. Therefore, birth order may be an important factor in understanding individual behavior and experience. This literature review will examine the implications and benefits of a child's birth order position as evidenced in the contemporary research literature and will focus on how birth order position affects the child's relationships with his or her peers and family members as well as the child's self-esteem.

### Relationships

Research indicates that a child's birth order position affects that child's relationships with parents and peers. When a child feels subordinate they will act differently than if they perceived themselves as superior. In most cases, when relating to parents and other adults, a child is the subordinate. When relating to peers, including siblings, a child potentially fills many different roles. The way children comprehend the world around themselves is important in determining the child's relationship with those in that world.

### Relationships with Parents

Children of the same family are not born into the same social or historical environment. A first child and a second child are born into entirely different situations of parental experience and availability of peers or siblings (Adler,

1964). Research indicates that the reaction of parents to the birth of a child influences the environment into which that child is born. For example, mothers raising temperamental infants may feel unrewarded by their parenting, while mothers raising good-natured, highly responsive infants are more likely to obtain satisfaction with their child-rearing skills (Honjo et al., 1998). In some cases, mothers are raising multiple children at the same time: a mother raising a first-born may be raising a middle-born and last-born as well. In this case, the stress a mother feels raising her children may correlate with her perceived effectiveness in child-rearing (Honjo et al., 1998; Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). In any case, a child's temperament may influence the relationship between parent and child.

**First-born children.** Children in the only child and first-born child birth order positions have similar experiences with their parents (Mellor, 1989). This is because every first-born child who receives a sibling into his or her family was first an only child. In a study rating mothers' stress in child-rearing by a self-report questionnaire, parental stress in child-rearing was recorded, as well as the relationship of the stress to the temperament of the child, which was measured with an infantile temperament rating (Honjo et al., 1998). It was found that child-rearing stress is greater among first-time mothers. When the first (or only) child is born, a woman quickly experiences both the fulfillment and anxiety of raising a child. A first-born or an only child is likely to be raised by parents experiencing high levels of stress and the child's temperament may be influenced by this environment.

Thus, the anxiety-promoting stress a first time mother might feel may temporarily reduce her ability to express positive emotion for her child (Harel, Eshel, Ganor, & Sher, 2002). However, first-born children report unique relationships with both parents later in life: this is often attributed to the greater significance given to the first birth and the larger amount of one-on-one time parents invest in first-born children (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007; Tashakkori, Thompson, & Yousefi, 1990). First-born children are generally identified by parents as mature, conscientious, and responsible (Eckstein, 2000). Because of these identities, parents tend to grant first-born children greater autonomy. This independence plays a role in first-born children becoming more mature and responsible (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). Also, parents invest more time, money, and effort in the first-born child, and, apparently, most do so because that child has been in the household the longest. This investment by a first-born child's parents contributes to parental preference and higher expectations for

the first-born child to return the support when parents need assistance in later years (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). This, however, does not only occur in the parents' later years. In a study conducted by Suitor and Pillemer (2007), it was found that mothers prefer assistance from first-born children and are more likely to confide in or turn to first born children for crisis support.

**Middle-born children.** A middle-born child's relationship with his or her parents is influenced by the parent's ability to express their positive emotions for the child (Harel et al., 2002). A middle-born child experiences less one-on-one interaction time with parents because other children are present. They are generally not as close to the parents as the first-born or last-born child because individual interactions with the parents are not facilitated by the middle-born's environment (Romeo, 1994). This may lead to less-close relationships with their parents when compared to their first-born and youngest-born siblings. Middle-born children experience fewer feelings of family cohesion and report they are less likely to name parents as those whom they would turn to in times of crisis (Salmon & Daly, 1998). Comparably, in Suitor and Pillemer's study (2007), mothers were least likely to name their middle-born children as those whom they would turn to for crisis support.

**Last-born children.** Generally, last-born children report good relationships with their parents (Kiracofe & Kiracofe, 1990). A division in parental attention by the older siblings may contribute to less parental involvement in the life of a youngest-born child (Harel et al., 2002). However, later on in life the last-born child tends to be spoiled more often and mothers report greater feelings of affection for the youngest-born children (Dunn & Plomin, 1991), perhaps due to the greater amount of parental one-on-one time with the youngest-born later in life. In many cases, last-born children develop sensitive social skills. They are able to create less conflict-driven relationships with their parents than did their older siblings (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). This allows parents to feel emotionally closer to their last-born children due to lower levels of stress and higher levels of affection (Dunn & Plomin, 1991). Their potentially more complex social skills may contribute to lasting parental emotional attachment to the last-born child.

### Relationships with Peers

A child's birth order position influences the manner in which the child interacts with his or her peers, both related and unrelated. A child's

relationship with his or her peers is characterized by his or her views of other children being favored by adults. When others are perceived as favored, a child's relationship with his or her peers may become more competitive.

**Only children.** An only child holds one of the most independent birth order positions and generally regards his or herself as having worth (Mellor, 1989). This is due to the only child remaining the unchallenged center of parental attention (Romeo, 1994). Oftentimes, children without siblings have greater interest in adult rather than peer relationships (White, Campbell, Steward, Davies, & Pilkington, 1997) and are not as comfortable with other children. Therefore, only children are unfamiliar with relating to other children, have difficulty appropriately opposing other children, and lack the knowledge of how to share with other children (Romeo, 1994). The peers of an only child are regarded as curiosities with whom the only child has neither learned to share nor surpass (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Only children often seek adult acknowledgment and approval, neglecting peer relationships in the process.

**First-born children.** Only children and first-born children are similar in their development: a first-born child is in the only-born birth order position for a period of time before being transferred to the first-born birth order station (White et al., 1997; Mellor, 1989). First-born children have been found to be less trustful and to reciprocate less among their peers in a study involving a game with their siblings (Courtiol, Raymond, & Faurie, 2009). This may point to a first-born child struggling to relate to peers as an equal. A first-born child may be adept at being a leader but research suggests that such a child is not likely to be a natural follower among groups of children and may feel uncomfortable when other children act as leaders of the peer group (Romeo, 1994). A first-born child has the most favorable birth order position as they enjoy singular parental attention for some time before becoming a sibling to subsequent children. This time alone with their parents may contribute to many first-born children striving for perfection and exhibiting a strong need to please the adults around them (White et al., 1997). They may stress the importance of following rules to their younger siblings and impose rules upon them (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Like only born children, often first-borns neglect to find good relationships with their peers, especially when not in a position of dominance.

For a significant period of time, the later born children will be younger, smaller, and less-developed than the first-born child. Therefore, the first-born child will spend much time developing the superior self-esteem of

someone who is bigger, stronger, and smarter than their peers (i.e., siblings). Many first-born children carry this superior self-esteem throughout their lives. Once an only child, a first-born child is eventually usurped from a position of undivided parental attention by a younger child. This is not always a positive experience for the first-born child given his or her status as the sole receiver of attention is threatened by the newborn and subsequent children. The first-born child may react as resentful and anxious when gaining a new sibling and losing undivided parental attention. Oftentimes, this results in the greatest differences between the first-born and second-born children (Courtiol et al., 2009). These differences may contribute to the competitive relationship had by many first and second-born children.

**Middle-born children.** A middle-born child is typically thought to be more relaxed and sociable than an only-born or first-born child. Yet the middle-born child is constantly in competition with the "cuter" younger siblings or the "smarter" older ones and many times, the middle child suffers from low self-esteem reflected in their peer relationships (Romeo, 1994). Middle-born children generally compare themselves to those around them and worry they will be lost in the mix, and, oftentimes, they are (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). They do not exhibit characteristics that the youngest-born child develops through parental coddling. They do not have the self-esteem the first-born child develops through feeling superior, or the self-worth of the only-born child through their treatment as a peer by the adults surrounding them. The middle-born child may feel habitually victimized by their place among siblings. They may, however, feel "squeezed" in the middle because they are constantly behind an older child and ahead of a younger child. Middle-born children tend to be more innovative as they are searching for an area where they can succeed (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Middle-born children report feeling persecuted by their siblings and, therefore, stress the importance of fairness. Learning how to stress fairness appropriately among siblings results in a middle-born child's efficacy in relationships with his or her peers (White et al., 1997). Because a middle-born child may struggle to find a place in the family, he or she may become adept at forming reciprocating relationships.

**Last-born children.** Youngest-born children tend to be the most sociable of their siblings. Youngest-born children learn to demand the attention they desire and many are driven to out-perform their siblings. They are used to following in the footsteps of their siblings and have a pre-developed niche in their home life, determined by their birth (Shulman

& Mosak, 1977). They are not comfortable leading groups of people in unfamiliar situations because their position in their family is predetermined. The relationship a youngest-born child has with their peers is generally dominated by craving the attention and the comfortable relationships established at home (Romeo, 1994). In many cases, a youngest-born child uses their charm as the "baby" to sway others into recognizing their significance (White et al., 1997). Because of this, youngest-born children may first become skilled at influencing their siblings and later at influencing their peers.

However, youngest-born children do not believe they have the good relationships with their parents that their older siblings have. In the United States, many youngest-born children report not identifying with or becoming emotionally close to their parents (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). In some instances, older siblings act as authority figures for their younger siblings; this affects the way the youngest-born child is raised. This may be due to the youngest-born child having older siblings with whom they can identify with more closely (Romeo, 1994). This may play a role in a youngest-born child feeling emotionally closer to his or her siblings, which could lead to better relationships with other peers.

### Self-Esteem

Although a child's self-esteem may be determined by many factors, parental favoritism has been shown to be of particular significance. Children are hyper-aware when parents favor one child over another (Kiracofe & Kiracofe, 1990). Whether or not parents actually exhibit favoritism does not matter in the case of a child's self-report of how their parents view them. Regardless, the child's self-esteem is affected.

### Favoritism

The time a child spends with his or her parents may influence feelings of parental favoritism in children. Among various studies, children in different birth order positions found themselves as the favorite child. In one, youngest children perceived themselves as the favorite (Harris & Howard, 1985). Another study reported that first-born children felt favored among their siblings. This may be correlated with the first-born child's tendency toward perfectionism (Ashby, LoCicero, & Kenny, 2003) and desire to please the adults around them. As they strive to please their parents they may be complimented more often and, thereby, come to feel favored. Often, first-born children have a need for achievement (White et al., 1997). Additionally, many children attribute parental favoritism to



their gender relative to their parents' gender. In a study by Kiracofe and Kiracofe (1990) examining parental favoritism, female first-born children perceived their fathers as exhibiting favoritism towards them, whereas male first-born children perceived this same tendency of favoritism from their mothers. However, more than two-thirds of the subjects in this study perceived themselves as the favorite of at least one of their parents (p.78), regardless of their particular birth order position.

### Parental Influence

Children without siblings have different interactions with their parents than children in other birth order positions (Honjo et al., 1998). The only-born child is accustomed to being the center of attention. Many only children regard themselves as autonomous, motivated, and industrious; often, only children have a stronger personal identity (Romeo, 1994; Mellor, 1989). They develop self-confidence from significant adult attention (Romeo, 1994). In studied cases, only children had significantly higher positive outcomes when faced with crises than children in other birth order positions (Mellor, 1989). These positive outcomes may be due to the confidence and good self-esteem held by only children.

**First-born children.** First-born children's lives start out in a manner similar to an only child. As previously stated, they feel the need to please adults (Ashby, LoCicero, & Kenny, 2003). Many first-born children report a higher level of parental involvement in their lives (Harel et al., 2002). They are the focus of the parental attention, and therefore generally develop good self-esteem, inner security, and confidence (Romeo, 1994). The excess attention the first-born receives, or thinks they receive, may contribute to the development of good self-esteem.

**Middle-born children.** Generally middle-born children report relatively lower self-esteem than their older siblings. They feel less important to the family (Romeo, 1994). Though many middle-born children exhibit feelings of inferiority among their family members, middle-born children generally strive toward gaining status. This is done by gaining a title, oftentimes as the peacemaker to help others achieve justice (Kiracofe & Kiracofe, 1990). Oftentimes, middle-born children proactively seek position in the family and lower self-esteem often results if they perceive their siblings as being superior or unsurpassable.

**Last-born children.** Some last-born children develop feelings of inferiority. This may be due to family member's lack of confidence in the

youngest-born's abilities and assumptions that they are weak (Romeo, 1994). Last-born children are spoiled more often than other siblings, yet sometimes feel that no one puts much weight to what they say because they are the youngest (Harel et al., 2002). However, youngest-born children tend to have good self-esteem (Neale, 1986) and many are regarded as the most sociable, least demanding, and least jealous.

### Conclusion

Through examining the implications and benefits of a child's birth order position a few general conclusions can be drawn about what the literature regards as specific to the separate positions. Children without siblings report higher self-esteem, yet have difficulty relating with their peers throughout their lives. First-born children report high self-esteem and strive towards perfection, which may impact peer relationships negatively. However, first-born children tend to thrive in a position of power. Middle-born children typically report lower self-esteem and yet have relatively good relationships with their peers. Likewise, last born children tend to have good relationships with their peers when they are not in a position of power, though report higher levels of self-esteem.

Birth order position can affect an individual's relationships and self-esteem; the research does not provide concrete evidences for the position always affecting an individual's relationships and self-esteem. Circumstances remain wherein individuals breach their birth order position. Therefore, research regarding the separate positions may aid in the conception of how much birth order position affects an individual. Additionally, studying birth order position among larger families will enhance the body of research on birth order.

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