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Birth Order: Shaping Lives One Sibling at a Time

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Abstract

Personality development, and even intelligence, is influenced by family members once a child is brought into the world. The family, especially the siblings, has a notable impact on the child's development. Siblings provide the first social interactions children have, both positive and negative. Siblings affect the personality and intellectual development of individuals via differences in family responsibilities and changes that arise in the home environment as more children are added to the household. Older siblings will likely have stronger leadership skills because of these responsibilities, and younger children may not receive as many benefits in intellectual abilities because of these changes in the home. Results are shown through a variety of longitudinal and observational studies. Although these studies are limited due to the increasing belief that peers have a greater impact on the development of individuals, the studies reviewed here promote the relationship between personality and intellectual development and the birth order of children in a large family.

In his book on siblings, author Jeffrey Kluger (2011) wrote, “There may be no relationship that affects us more profoundly, that’s closer, finer, harder, sweeter, happier, sadder, more filled with joy or fraught with woe than the relationship we have with our brothers and sisters.” Researchers often study relationships, especially when looking at couples and friendships. But home is where relationships are first formed, both parent-to-child and child-to-child.

It has been found that siblings have a great impact on those within the family; in fact, siblings are the center of family life and personality development (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Drinkwater, 1985). Although there has been a decline in the number of siblings a child has, many have at least one. In 2010, a population survey indicated that 82.22% of youth under the age of 18 lived with at least one other sibling (Kim, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2010). That is greater than the percent of children who live in a household with a father figure (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). Siblings help shape individuals; they are a fixture in the everyday lives of children and adolescents in a family and are involved in each other’s everyday experiences as “companions, confidantes, combatants, and as the focus of social comparison” (McHale et al., 2012, p. 924). Siblings are with an individual during the prime development of their lives.

The interactions individuals have with siblings may affect personal development. Studies show that siblings have direct effects on development when they serve as social partners and role models; siblings can also influence one another indirectly impacting on larger family dynamics (McHale et al., 2012). Siblings impact one another as family resources become more diluted with every child and by simply serving as the main building blocks of the family structure (McHale et al., 2012). The home is where people learn the basics of life because families are the building blocks of society.

Even though the relationships that siblings share with one another provides a potential influence in the development of children, researchers have often neglected the study of these close relationships, especially within a large family context. Available studies are often outdated, possibly due to a decline in the number of siblings within a household. In 2010, the average number of siblings

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was 1.51, with only 15% of children living with three or more siblings (Kim et al., 2010). Most studies examine the oldest sibling in relation to younger ones due to the rights and responsibilities that have been conferred on them by laws and mores around primogeniture, or the state of being the firstborn (McHale et al., 2012). Although there are some studies on older and younger siblings, little research has been completed on the personalities of middle children; more research in this area could add to the understanding of sibling impact on personality and intellectual development. Other studies focus on the limits of achievement that often decrease in correlation to the size of a sibship, or the number of children from the same parents (Blau & Duncan, 1965). Still other studies focus more on the parent-to-child relationship, and how it changes as more children enter the family (McHale et al., 2012). All of these factors should be taken into account when looking at the development of individuals because all of these things can play a role in personality and intellectual development.

While sibship sizes are declining, many in today's society attribute development of an individual to other factors. Some of these may be environmental, social, or socioeconomic (Kim et al., 2010; Vatan, Geneez, & Lester, 2010). Although the development of an individual's personality and intelligence can be influenced by a variety of factors across the lifespan, birth order in large families may play a significant role in childhood personality development and intelligence, because increased responsibilities of older children (such as setting a good example for younger members of the family and assisting with childcare), in combination with the evolution of parenting practices as more children enter the family, may impact childhood personality and intellectual development.

Responsibilities of Children

Birth order may influence child development due to interactions with siblings of different ages in different stages of development. Older siblings are the first to enter the family dynamic, and their main influences are their parents. When younger siblings are brought into the family, they have parents and older siblings to influence them. People are usually drawn to those who are closer to them in age and

experience, which, in the family, is usually siblings (McHale et al., 2012). A study of 350 five-and six-year-old children demonstrated how younger siblings tend to look up to their older siblings as models; they would try to mimic what they saw their older siblings doing, because they wanted to be like them (McHale et al., 2012). This is not always true for younger children: the traits that older siblings have typically determine whether the younger siblings are drawn to them. For example, young children will look to siblings that are nurturing and loving for guidance rather than parents or peers due to the level of comfort among siblings (Whiteman & Abigail, 2008). Thus, the home is a place where siblings serve as role models and the first social partners.

Older siblings help pave the way for younger siblings. One way older siblings can do this is by setting examples for them. Many observational studies document toddlers who imitate their older siblings; rarely do older children imitate the actions of those younger (McHale et al., 2012). Older siblings often serve as a references or models, as they are the ones who are exposed to and engage in more problematic behaviors than the younger siblings. These differences in experience can foster an imbalance of power, or jealousy, which is especially true for those that may be close in age or are consecutive in order (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). Thus, the older sibling will typically play a stronger role in shaping the behavior of younger siblings (Azmitia & Hesser, 2007). Just as many people look to those with more experience and wisdom, younger siblings will look to those closest to them who also have more experience.

Another way older siblings are influenced (and also influence younger siblings) is in childcare and tutoring. Caregiving responsibilities, such as babysitting and chores, are often given to older children to aid the parents (Belity & Dureczky, 2017). When taking on the roles of a caregiver, it is easier for older siblings to develop leadership qualities that will likely influence their personality over time (Belity & Dureczky, 2017). Another way that having younger siblings affects older children is seen in tutoring; the act of tutoring allows the older sibling to process information and portray it in a way that will help the younger sibling, which results in improved linguistics

and general intellectual abilities for the older sibling (Prime, Pauker, Plamondon, Perlman, & Jenkins, 2014). Although the younger siblings receive help, the older ones also benefit from helping.

Sibling relationships may also impact different personalities. When siblings have good or difficult relationships, it can often lead to differing temperaments (McHale et al., 2012). Difficult temperaments usually arise under conditions of stress in the home environment, which usually expresses itself in relationships with siblings (Low, Snyder, & Shortt, 2012). If siblings have good relationships, they are more likely to have a mild temperament due to less confrontation as a child (Low et al., 2012). Thus, many factors contribute to the development of personalities among individuals, but the sibling-role plays a major part. The number of siblings, the type of relationships, and the differing responsibilities all help to shape individuals into who they are.

Parenting Practices

Siblings clearly play an important role in the development of individuals through direct interaction, but their influence extends to factors beyond their control, such as the actions of parents. Parents typically establish the type of environment their children grow up in, and what is acceptable in this environment varies based off of family resources. As children enter the family dynamic, family resources, such as time, energy, and money, become depleted. Studies have shown that the greater the number of siblings, the more diluted the resources become, which in turn may limit the individual children's achievement in areas such as future education and occupation (Blau & Duncan, 1965). Over the course of multiple years, data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been collected and portrays the relationship among the presence of a sibling, the parent's resources, and the child's academic achievements throughout 20 different countries. It showed that when the parent's resources were split among multiple children, the achievements of the individual children decreased in multiple areas including reading, literature, mathematics, and scientific literacy (Whiteman & Abigail, 2008; Winstrom & Wegmann, 2017). Because these resources are limited, rivalry between siblings may result.

Siblings often experience rivalry in their lives. This may be due to the social comparisons and hierarchal dynamics within families, where older siblings seem to have more power than younger siblings (McHale et al., 2012). This rivalry is fundamental in the development of an individual's personality due to an internal desire to reduce this competition, which leads siblings to differentiate or de-identify from one another (Prime, Plamondon, Pauker, Perlman, & Jenkins, 2016). This is demonstrated by the sibling competition hypothesis, wherein an increased sibship size correlates to greater competition among siblings (Tanskanen et al., 2016). Competition is typically greater among adolescents than adults, because youth rely on parents for survival (Prime et al., 2016). The sibling competition hypothesis also states that from the children's perspective (no matter how many siblings there are), it is important to acquire as many resources as possible from their parents. On the other hand, parents feel it is best to share resources among all children to promote the well-being of the children (Tanskanen et al., 2016). Although the parents ultimately decide how family resources are used, sibling rivalry arises, which leads to children differentiating themselves from others.

To settle the demands of sibling competition, children often turn to de-identification, which occurs when a sibling intentionally attempts to define him or herself as a unique individual, different from the others. The de-identification sibling theory is a theory that states that siblings "consciously and unconsciously choose different niches, develop different personal qualities, and define themselves as different from one another in order to reduce competition and garner a share of parental love and attention" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 58). This theory is most prevalent among siblings who are closest in birth order, born consecutively, and of the same gender (Prime et al., 2016). Children will develop different likings, and passions, and those things can help shape what they find to be important; they will try to appear different from other siblings and thus promote differing personalities (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). By de-identifying with siblings, competition is reduced, and different personalities will emerge.

As more children enter a family, parents may institute different practices when it comes to raising children. Some practices include

praising children or helping with schoolwork. Studies show that parents are more likely to provide greater attention to each individual child within a smaller sibling group than to children individually within a larger group (Marjoribanks & Mboya, 2000). Parents also provide more attention to the first-born child, or if there are multiple siblings, the ones born earlier rather than later (Osmanowski & Cardona, 2016). Older children are then exposed to more adult language than those who are born later, especially those within a large sibling group (i.e., parents include older children in more ways). This results in an environment where speech becomes less mature and simpler as more children enter the family (Whiteman & Abigail, 2008). Ultimately, children who fall at the end of the birth order may be less exposed to more intelligent conversations, which could result in lower intellectual abilities.

In addition, parents typically have a set amount of resources to split among all children, and as they share them, the resources become more diluted. This is best explained within the parental resource dilution model, which identifies how parental resources influence a child's academic performance; if there are more resources, a child will perform better and gain more from education (Holmgren et al., 2006; Marjoribanks & Mboya, 2000). As the sibship size increases, the resources are divided among more people, giving each individual less than if there were only a few with whom to share. Parental resources are finite, so as more children enter the household, the parents' abilities to allocate more resources to each child decreases; this may result in a decreasing level of school performance as the number of siblings increases (Winstrom & Wegmann, 2017). The most ideal situation would be to increase the amount of resources a parent has as they increase the number of children within the family, but this is not always possible (Wu, 2016). Thus, the number of siblings greatly impacts a child's intellectual development, because they are not always privileged with the same amount of resources as those with a smaller sibship size.

Similarly, family size is a factor when considering that parents play a vital role in the development of children. Although the number of children a family has is not something that the children themselves

can decide, it is a factor that directly influences their development. One way in which sibship size impacts an individual is in educational outcomes, as seen in the confluence model (Tanskanen, Erola, & Kallio, 2016). The confluence model explains the relationship between the number of siblings and the educational outcome of individuals by looking at the environment of the home. With more children, a negative effect is observed on educational success due to the creation of an inferior intellectual environment (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993; Holmgren, Molander, & Nilsson, 2006). This produces a harmful environment because the individuals are afraid to ask for help, which can promote negative schooling outcomes (Osmanowski & Cardona, 2016; Tanskanen et al., 2016). Thus, the intellectual climate is partly produced by parents because of the culture and resources provided, which changes when children are added to the family. Parental resources are finite and may result in greater competition and rivalry within a large sibship (Tanskanen et al., 2016). Thus, to avoid ruining relationships, children turn to de-identification to appear different from other siblings (resulting in differing personalities) (Vatan et al., 2010). Intelligence development is greatest among those who have more resources (Wu, 2016). So, as more children enter a household, the education level decreases as the resources have to be shared among more people.

Conclusion

When it comes to the development of personalities and intelligence in children, birth order and sibship size may both impact the development of individuals because of the different responsibilities children have and the difference in parental resources. Older siblings participate in activities like childcare and tutoring, where tutoring enhances the older siblings' linguistic abilities (Prime et al., 2014). Younger siblings will often turn to their older siblings as leaders and strive to follow their examples and may have lower intellectual abilities due to parents not dedicating as much time to the younger children as they did the older ones (Osmanowski & Cardona, 2016; Whiteman & Abigail, 2008). Parental resources also become more diluted when there is a large sibship, often forcing children to

compete one with another for more resources (McHale et al., 2012). In order to cope with the competition for resources, siblings will often turn to deidentification, where they will form different likings to vary one from another (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). So, birth order and sibship size will both contribute to an individual's development, whether young or old.

Although many studies have examined early interactions and their impact on individuals, fewer address the impact of siblings and sibship size. Many focus on the impact of social interactions outside of the family dynamic like peers and often leave out one of the first interactions a person has: the family (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993). Longitudinal studies that follow families with a large sibship and observe that differing personalities and intellectual abilities of each individual would help in showing the impact families have on personal development. Studies that also look at the personality and intellectual development of middle children that come from large families could also strengthen the argument that siblings play an important role in personal development by giving more examples of it.

Siblings may play an important role in shaping people into who they become. Although this relationship is not the only factor that contributes to the personality and intellectual development of individuals, it is one that should not be ignored. Siblings are the first social companions people have and are the first to influence those around them. More so than parents or peers, siblings usually play a greater role in personal development (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993). The greater the sibship, the greater the range of personalities within a family. Certain qualities may arise depending on the birth order as mentioned above. Although there may be moments when the rivalry seems too great, siblings are the ones that help in shaping individual's personalities and intellectual abilities. The literature reveals, as Kluger (2011) wrote, that “[t]here's power in the sibling bond.”

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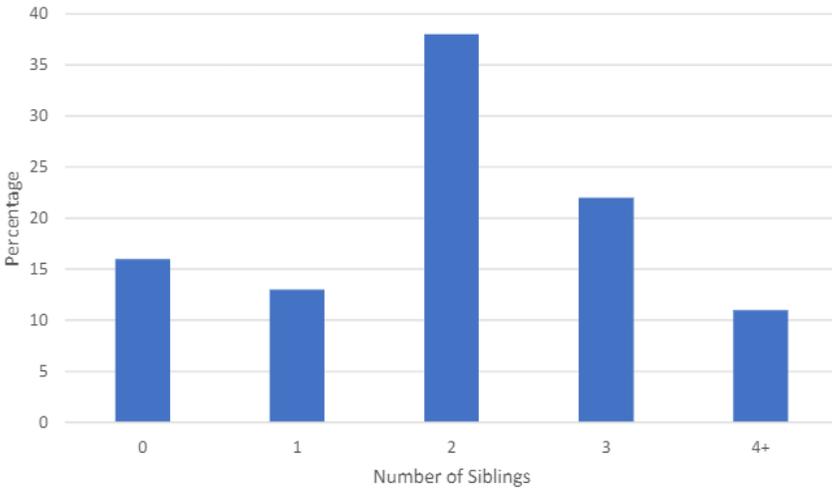
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Appendix

Figure 1

Number of Siblings in Average U.S. Household (2006)



Note. Number of siblings within the average household in the United States in 2006. The average family in the United States has at least one child per household. The majority of children in the United States have a sibling living in the same household as them, the average being around two siblings. Adapted from “Longitudinal Course and Family Correlates of Sibling Relationships from Childhood Through Adolescence,” by J. Kim, S. McHale, D. Osgood, & A. Crouter, 2006, *Child Development*, p. 1747.