

FIRST BORN, SECOND BORN

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[Assignment: Write an essay about a familiar social situation where patterns of behavior are portrayed as a constellation of causes and effects. Try to explain to your readers how the patterns work.]

(1) Have you ever wondered just who you are, or how you came to be who you are? Finding the answer to this question can be one of the most serious and rewarding activities of your life. Many factors influence who we are. Genetic inheritance decides our gender, size, coloring, and health. Healthy eating habits and exercise are important to our growth and help to maintain our well being. Social and home environments also influence us greatly--be that environment loving or hostile, rich or poor, rural or urban. A single parent family is raised differently than a traditional family. These factors are just a small sampling of the many variables that affect our personality and self-image. But one very important variable we seldom think about is birth order or family constellation.

(2) Recently, many psychologists have begun to analyze how birth order influences who we are. Thus, William D. Altus, of the University of California, has conducted studies on the differences between first and later born children. Altus strongly feels that our family constellation determines greatly how we react to others, how we make or do not make friends, how we find companionship, and it may even influence the choice we make of a spouse. Many studies currently being conducted on the subject of birth order deal in theory and statistics, and are not meant to be interpreted as maxims, but they do establish a definite association between birth order and one's approach to life situations (Altus 44-49).

(3) First born children tend to be very self-assured and in many cases they are high achievers. First borns usually score higher on IQ tests than second borns, second born's scores are often higher than third's, and so on. This pattern may be due to the fact that first borns are only children for a time, receiving parents' undivided attention, but it may also be due to the fact that parents set higher standard for the first born than they do for the other offspring. Parents may also compare the "great" achievements of the first born to the possibly "not so great" achievements of the younger siblings. How many times have you heard a parent proudly comparing first born's accomplishments to his younger sibling's accomplishments; the second's are obviously not a source of pride. Being a parent myself, I can remember the mixture of joy and anxiety I felt with my first born as I strove to do everything the "right way." My husband and I focused all our love and attention on this baby. We watched his development daily, and were thrilled at every

little bit of progress he made. All of this attention surely must have convinced him that he was the center of our world, and he still thinks he is: a position I'm sure he will claim forever.

(4) Oldest children have only their parents as a role model. They often carry the parental qualities they acquire through this relationship into their relationship with younger siblings, and perhaps into their marital relationship. Many first borns are found to be perfectionists who are intolerant of other people's shortcomings. The best mate for a first born is thought to be the youngest of a family, whom he can lead and nurture. The worst mate would be another first born, with whom he or she would vie for spot number one.

(5) If you are second born, you are likely to be a good negotiator, and a very good diplomat after having spent your childhood working your way around an older, stronger sibling. A boy-boy family may produce a very strong rivalry. The second born who has an intellectually superior brother will usually try to excel in another area, such as sports. Many times he is successful at this attempt, unless his older brother excels in both areas; this sometimes causes the second born to withdraw from the competition, leaving him quiet and easily discouraged. This passive attitude may carry over into adult life, and subsequently affect his relationship with others outside the family, in marriage, or in the work place. Second borns often feel rejected by their first born sibling. This rejection is primarily due to the conflict over the number one spot in the family, which may result in a lower self-image for second borns. Many mothers tend to over-protect the second child, especially if he or she is the baby of the family. The mother may sense that the second born has feelings of inferiority. It is not uncommon for the mother to baby the second child, and therefore not to expect him to assume as much responsibility as first born. This second child may enter adulthood unable to accept responsibility for his actions, and he may blame others or circumstances for his own failures.

(6) A girl-girl family does not seem to produce as much rivalry as a boy-boy family. The second born girl characteristically is more soft spoken and easy going than her older sister, who is usually bossy and domineering. In a boy-girl family, the siblings usually complement each other's gender, especially if the boy is the elder. He can easily maintain his status of number one, which will emphasize his masculinity, and she can capitalize on and enjoy her femininity. The best mate for a second born is another second born. They are usually considerate of each other's feelings, and tactful in their criticisms. The worst mate, of course, is a first born.

(7) I find many of the second born characteristics evident in myself, and in my own second born son. I am second to a very intelligent, high achieving brother, and I also have a very gifted first born son. I realized one day that I almost always take the side of my second born against his older brother, possibly making up for the frustration I once felt for my brother's constant achieving. Recognizing this, I was able to become a much fairer arbiter in disagreements, listening to both sides instead of automatically feeling sorry for number two.

(8) Many studies refer to the third born as the baby; fourth, fifth, and sixth often follow the same pattern as first, second and third, in order (Forer 39). The baby of the family learns early to be a manipulator, charming everyone with an adventurous, outgoing, optimistic personality. Often times, this child is lacking in self-discipline; by the time the third born comes along, parents have often let down their guard as far as discipline. Parents seem to realize by this time that their children are all born with special talents and gifts, and that the parenting role is to guide their children not mold them into what they want these children to be. The care of the youngest sibling is often the responsibility of the older siblings, who may look out for this baby of the family much of his or her life. It is not uncommon for the youngest born to have some difficulty in decision making, and they may rely on their older siblings to help them make decisions. Their best mate is thought to be a first born, who will guide and nurture them; worst mate would be another youngest child.

(9) A common problem that may arise in a three children, same sex family is often referred to as the "middle child syndrome." The child who is in the middle of three is competing both with the older and younger sibling. She may spend much of her time struggling for parental approval, affection, and her "place" in the family. She is usually rather introverted, and does not usually succeed well academically. Middle children are often self-critical, which may lower their self-image. An interesting point about being a middle child of the only sex is that you are usually very happy in your gender role. Opposite sex siblings who are older and younger than you complement your gender, and also help you to appreciate the typical qualities and characteristics of the opposite sex.

(10) Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychiatrist, who is credited with being the first to recognize the effects of birth order on the personality and the structure of society, writes:

The position in the family leaves an indelible stamp upon our style of life. Every difficulty of development is caused by rivalry and lack of cooperation in the family. If we look around our

social life and ask why rivalry and competition is its most obvious aspect--not only in our social life, but at our whole world--then we must recognize that people everywhere are pursuing the goal of conqueror, trying to overcome and surpass others. This goal is the result of training in early childhood; of the rivalries and competitive striving of children who have not felt themselves an equal part of their whole family. (154)

(11) Overall, knowing the effects of birth order will not only help you know yourself; it will also help you to understand more fully why people interact in ways they do. Understanding your position in the family constellation offers you the possibility of developing many special strengths, which may help you as you relate to others; or you may become more aware of your limitations, which will help you to cope with them and to become more tolerant of yourself. Rivalries and competitive situations become less threatening to you as you become more familiar with effects of birth order. You will have more insight as to why some of us are so driven, overbearing, and competitive.

(12) Of course, we are all unique human beings. We all react to environments and situations differently. The characteristics that I have described are not inevitable or absolute but they are frequent enough to help us understand the type of personality an individual has, even our own child. Knowledge of the effects of birth order can be a useful tool in effective parenting, in helping your child achieve his or her highest potential. You can encourage your children and help yourself to live a life in cooperation, with tolerance and concern for others. These are attitudes that will help us all live comfortably with other people and ourselves for the rest of our lives.

Works Cited

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