Birth Order | Child Development Institute Parenting Today

Where a child places in the birth order can have an effect on how he sees himself. Research on birth order, sometimes referred to as ordinal position, shows that first born children are more likely to go to college than children in any other position in the family. These apply to “typical families” and probably do not apply to “dysfunction families” and may vary across various cultures. Parents should attempt to help each child to see themselves as unique individuals and avoid comparisons with siblings or others.

The middle child often seems to have the most negative impressions of his lot in life. One approach to help middle children reframe things is to point out that in a sense they have the best of both worlds. They are the youngest to the older sibling and the oldest to the younger sibling. Therefore they are both a big brother/sister and a little brother/sister. Younger children always want to be able to do things older siblings are allowed to do. And older siblings may feel that the younger siblings get away with things they were not able to when they were the same age.

The following characteristics will not apply to all children in every family. Typical characteristics, however, can be identified:

Only

- Child Pampered and spoiled.
- Feels incompetent because adults are more capable.
- Is center of attention; often enjoys position. May feel special.
- Self-centered.
- Relies on service from others rather than own efforts
- Feels unfairly treated when doesn't get own way. May refuse to cooperate.
- Plays “divide and conquer” to get own way.

First Child

- Is only child for period of time; used to being center of attention.
- Believes must gain and hold superiority over other children.
- Being right, controlling often important.
- May respond to birth of second child by feeling unloved and neglected.
- Strives to keep or regain parents’ attention through conformity. If this failed, chooses to misbehave.
- May develop competent, responsible behavior or become very discouraged.
- Sometime strives to protect and help others.
- Strives to please.

Second Child

- Never has parents’ undivided attention.
- Always has sibling ahead who’s more advanced.
- Acts as if in race, trying to catch up or overtake first child.
- If first child is “good,” second may become “bad.” Develops abilities first child doesn’t exhibit. If first child successful, may feel uncertain of self and abilities.
- May be rebel.
- Often doesn’t like position.
Feels "squeezed" if third child is born.

- May push down other siblings.

**Middle Child of Three**

- Has neither rights of oldest nor privileges of youngest.
- Feels life is unfair.
- Feels unloved, left out, "squeezed."
- Feels doesn't have place in family.
- Becomes discouraged and "problem child" or elevates self by pushing down other siblings.
- Is adaptable.
- Learns to deal with both oldest and youngest sibling.

**Youngest Child**

- Behaves like only child.
- Feels every one bigger and more capable.
- Expects others to do things, make decisions, take responsibility.
- Feels smallest and weakest. May not be taken seriously.
- Becomes boss of family in getting service and own way.
- Develops feelings of inferiority or becomes "speeder" and overtakes older siblings.
- Remains "The Baby." Places others in service.
- If youngest of three, often allies with oldest child against middle child.

**NOTES:**
1. The middle child of three is usually different from the middle child of a large family. The middle children of large families are often less competitive as parents don't have as much time to give each child and so the children learn to cooperate to get what they want. 2. Only children usually want to be adults, and so don't relate to peers very well. When they become adults, they often believe they've finally “made it” and can now relate better to adults as peers. 3. During their formative years, only children live primarily in the world of adults. They must learn how to operate in the big people’s world as well as how to entertain themselves. Thus they often become very creative in their endeavors.

(Adapted from Don Dinkmeyer, Gary D. McKay, and Don Dinkmeyer, Jr., Parent Education Leader’s Manual Coral Springs, F.; CMTI Press, 1978)