



# Relationships

The Adlerian Team

## Birth order: Eldest? Middle? Youngest? Only?

By Marion Balla

What position did you live in as a child? Did you enjoy being the eldest, middle, only or youngest child?

Research shows that the position you perceived you lived in as a child has influenced your life choices – career, parenting, style, friendships, coping strategies and even choosing your partner.

Alfred Adler originally presented the concept of birth order in the early 1900s. Adler believed that siblings had as much importance as parents in influencing a child's life experiences and their views of the world and themselves.

Children enter their family looking for a place to belong, a place of significance. They begin observing parents and brothers and/or sisters immediately. No two children grow up in the same family situation.

Eldest and only children can create their own unique space without immediate influence from other siblings. Middle children have to observe what spaces are already taken – high achiever, music, sports, and clown – before they can carve out their place. Youngest children are often given a space as the “baby” and may feel they cannot measure up or catch up to siblings ahead of them.

Factors which influence birth order are not about the ordinal position, but rather the interpretation the child gives to the position – an only boy in a family of girls or an only girl in a family of boys may develop “only child” characteristics even though he or she was born in a family of four children. Birth order points to the differences among children in the same family. Children strive to create their own space and do not wish to be compared to other siblings.

The birth order position in a family may be changed from the norm by the following factors: illness as a child; five or more years between you and the next child; large family (five or more); childhood trauma; divorce; blended families; and of course being the only boy or girl in the family.

The family environment that surrounds each child is different – parents of a first born are learning the tasks of parenting, and thus relate differently as each child enters the family. Economics, family moves, divorce or death of a parent, grandparents moving into the family create very different experiences and interpretations on the part of a child.

There are no good or bad birth order positions. Each one has advantages and disadvantages.

### Characteristics of each position

#### Only Child

The only child spends his or her life with adults who are more competent, and they set standards that may seem high to the child. Some common characteristics of only children are:

- Being adult-like from an early age;
- strong and intense attitudes and feelings;
- protective of their possessions;
- private about sharing feelings and their life situation;
- center of attention by winning approval of adults through charm and intelligence or solicits their sympathy through shyness and helplessness;
- strong, self concept;
- more feelings of loneliness;
- expects a great deal from friends by way of support, loyalty, attention and companionship;
- want to have more than one child when they start a family.

#### Eldest child

At first he or she was an only child for a limited period of time and consequently was the centre of attention. With the birth of a second child, he or she is “dethroned” and frequently feels jealousy (not understanding that the parents are doing for the second child what they did for him or her).

- ambitious, a striver, conscientious;
- exhibits a need to be first;
- strong willed, stubborn;
- conforms to standards of parents;
- cautious, conservative;
- self-critical;
- tends to develop better verbal skills;
- independent;
- tends to achieve higher grades in school;
- helps and protects others;
- sometimes feels inferior to others;
- sensitive;
- serious.

#### Middle child

Middle children are in a unique position for they don't have the advantages of the older child nor the privileges of the younger.

- competitive;
- more interested in relationships with other people;
- aggressive, rebellious;
- cheerful, easy-going;
- enjoys activities for the own sake (e.g. athletics);
- mediator/caretaker in extended family;
- adjustable, flexible;
- relatively independent;
- gregarious and friendly;
- less rigid in choice of friends;
- too accommodating;
- unable to say no – a pleaser;
- very generous;
- important to be liked by all.

#### Youngest child

The youngest child has a special place as others tend to treat him or her as “special”. He or she may become a “speeder” and achieve success or he or she may become discouraged.

- cutest, charmer, winning nature;
- expects to be taken care of;
- spontaneous;
- original, creative;
- a fun child;
- a pleasant companion – one with whom you can relax and enjoy yourself;
- tries to get people to conform to his or her wishes;
- more accepted and included by siblings;
- age of parents can be a factor.

The concept of birth order (family constellation) has been discussed as an important concept in families for the past century. Eldest children often have more in common with other eldest children than they have with their own siblings. This whole question may be a fun conversation to have with your siblings or your children. Think about asking other people about their birth order and see how many qualities you can add to these lists. You can discover more about yourself and your family and have some interesting conversations about how we become the people we are, based on early life experiences.

*Birth Order*, Kevin Leman. Random House, 1990.

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