Birth order and personality

Every child is a unique individual. However, there are a number of factors that influence our personalities.



These factors include:

The child's physical health and appearance
The sex of the child and gender roles
The family's socio-economic situation
The relationship between parents
The number of children and the spacing or years between siblings
Birth order

There is growing evidence that birth order plays a key role in our personality development. Since each child has a particular place in the family based on when they arrive, it does seem logical that this will affect their outlook on life. While the link between birth order and personality has not been scientifically proven, there do appear to be common tendencies among first-born, middle and last-born children. The following is an overview of the characteristics that have been categorized as common for first-born and only children, middle children and last-born children.

First-born and only children

Our first child is an absolute wonder. He or she receives constant and usually undivided attention. First-borns spend at least the first year of their lives (and often much more), being the centre of attention. It is therefore no surprise that many first-borns can exude an air of entitlement or superiority. The two key reasons for this attitude are Mom and Dad! New parents can be overly attentive, protective, anxious and even demanding of the first child. This influence can lead the oldest siblings to be conscientious leaders who pay great attention to detail and need to be in control.

As the oldest child, first-borns are often called on to do more chores and look after their younger siblings. This instils a sense of leadership and responsibility in these children which leads to first-borns becoming either aggressive "movers and shakers" or compliant nurturers.

Characteristics of first-born children:

- Precise, detail-oriented and organized
- Serious and earnest
- Reliable, responsible
- Perfectionists
- Goal-setters and high achievers
- They don't like surprises

The middle child

After the birth of the second child, the parents' time and attention is now shared between the new baby and the first-born. In fact, studies show that middle children realize very early on that they cannot expect their parent's full attention. They learn about compromise, negotiation and how to "roll with the punches."

When other siblings arrive, middle children become "in-betweeners" who often feel left out or invisible. They have neither the status of the oldest (leader) or the youngest (baby). To attract their parents' attention, middle children often try to succeed doing things that their older siblings do not. Since they may feel they don't fit in the family, or feel they are invisible, middle children often make many meaningful friendships. They feel comfortable in their peer group and can earn the status they seek.

Characteristics of middle children:

- Balanced, calm, avoiding confrontation
- Flexible
- Negotiator
- Co-operator
- Generous
- Social
- Competitive

The last-born child

As the youngest, last-born children always live in the shadows of their older siblings. They are always aware that they are the smallest, less experienced members of the family. However, this can often instill an attitude of "I'll show them" in many last-borns, who are often rebellious risk-takers who challenge authority and the status quo.

Since the youngest is often taught by and spends most of their time with their older siblings, the baby of the family tends to develop great people skills. Many last-born children become outgoing adults who love to talk and entertain and are great motivators. However, since they grow up surrounded by older siblings who help them learn and make decisions, they can often be unsure of their own decision-making skills and opinions. This can leave them feeling insecure and afraid of rejection.

Characteristics of last-born children:

- Outgoing, people-oriented
- Rebellious risk-takers
- Affectionate
- Critical
- Temperamental
- Impatient
- Creative, idea people
- Humorous

All of this comes with a cautionary note: there are many, many factors that affect personality development. The spacing of children, the number of children in the family, parenting techniques and early life experiences, as well as inborn characteristics such as genetics and physiology, will all determine how the effect of birth order plays out for any specific child.

Regardless of the birth order, parents should ensure that each child is valued and praised for their uniqueness. Although parents have many demands on their time and attention, it is important that all children are made to feel comfortable with their role and place in the family.