

LINE ON LIFE

3/22/89

Birth Order *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

What is your position in the **birth order** of your family? Are you an oldest, middle, youngest or only child? Has this influenced your personality? Psychologists have studied the impact of birth order on personality. However, this article will only cover the differences between first-born and later-born children.

The family provides the earliest experiences about the child's place in the world. What is learned within the family is generalized to other relationships outside the family.

First-borns usually have the youngest, most anxious, most inexperienced and most eager parents. They don't have to compete with siblings for parental attention, which makes them feel very special. In fact, many first-borns retain a sense of specialness, capability and self-esteem. However, these inexperienced parents may interfere more and demand more of first-borns than other siblings. Thus first-borns often feel inadequate when they do not live up to parental standards, are often more fearful and anxious as adults, and are often highly self-critical and cautious.

Born into an adult world, first-borns strive to be like their parents and advance more quickly in verbal skills than their siblings. As adults, first-borns test higher in verbal skills than later-borns. However, this birth order advantage does not show up in math.

The arrival of a sibling can be traumatic for the first-born, when the parents' attention suddenly shifts to someone else. Feeling "*dethroned*," the first-born may make great efforts to regain the throne. This attention is likely to be gained by developing capability, responsibility, conformity and achievement. As a result, adult first-borns measure higher in these traits than their siblings. First-borns are especially good at academic achievement, leadership and task-oriented occupations.

In contrast, **later-borns** have always shared their parents with siblings. Likewise, parents tend to be more experienced, older and more relaxed in the parental role. Older siblings are likely to be viewed as models, superiors, pacesetters or barriers. To stand out, the younger child often develops skills different from those in which the first-born excels. Likewise, the younger child may also exhibit a preference for the parent the oldest child does not turn to for advice and support.

Later-borns also tend to be less dependent on parents. More content to move gradually from childhood to being an adult, later-borns are often described as more easy-going, friendly and popular. With their siblings, first-borns use the advantages of strength, ability and responsibility. In contrast, later-borns tend to become the parents' favorite – if there is a favorite – by using less-demanding tactics, seeking parental protection and by

being good compromisers. Since later-borns have to interact with siblings from birth, this makes more of them superior at people-oriented tasks. Becoming good at social skills may also help to develop to keep them from being overwhelmed by older siblings – to help them survive and thrive.

Psychological research has made additional discoveries about the effects of birth order.

1. First-borns tend to earn higher grades in high school and college.
2. The impact of birth order on intellectual growth tends to increase, as individuals grow older.
3. First-borns are likely to receive more physical punishment.
4. First-borns are more likely to become obsessive compulsive personalities.
5. When research subjects were asked not to talk to others about their participation in a psychology experiment, first-born subjects are more likely to comply with the request. This suggests that the first-borns are better at keeping confidences – or possibly they are just more conforming to requests of those in authority.
6. First-born girls are more accurate in their perception of their own physical attributes than later-born girls.
7. People tend to marry those of a different birth order position, possibly to create earlier family relationships.

However, these birth order effects are modified by the age gap between siblings, gender differences (Birth order effects are stronger, if all siblings are the same sex.), the number of siblings, and various other special conditions. For example, there might be a death or disability of a sibling or a late adoption of a child. More recently, the trend of **blended families** – two groups of siblings from different marriages being reared together – complicates the issue even more.

Even so, birth order will influence your lives. For example, first-borns will continue to have the most complete baby book records, and later-borns will be likely to have an older sibling to help them learn how to count and how to tie their shoes.

* Adapted from Simons, Irwin and Drinnin's *Psychology: The Search for Understanding*, West Publishing, 1987, pages 342-343.