

# Alfred Adler Research on Birth Order (1870-1937)



Adler was one of the first theorists to suggest that birth order influences personality. He argued that birth order often can leave an indelible impression on the individual's style of life, which is a habitual way of dealing with the tasks of friendship, love, and work. Other birth order factors that should be considered are: the spacing in years between siblings; the total number of children; and the changing circumstances of the parents over time.

**Firstborn** children are typically believed to be serious, conscientious, directive, goal-oriented, aggressive, rule-conscious, exacting, conservative, organized, responsible, jealous, fearful, high achieving, competitive, high in self-esteem, and anxious. They may learn the concept of power at a young age, and this can be expressed in their desire to help, protect and lead others. The firstborn may also have the need to regain praise from their parents that they received before their siblings were born. The first born may come to feel unloved through the perceived loss of mother's love to the new baby. Adler (1964) referred to this as being "dethroned" by the younger sibling. Later in life the firstborn may become authoritarian or strict. A firstborn's common feeling of a fear of losing the top position may make them more risk averse, and thus less likely to embark on a new venture.

There are several aspects of the family structure that pertain to firstborn children. First time parents are usually highly anxious and "sweat all the details." They document every milestone, celebrate each small achievement, and worry if it comes later than expected. The first born child is usually the most athletic and good looking child. They put the firstborn child under a lot of pressure to succeed. In addition to parental behavior, the firstborn child is often shocked by the introduction of a competitor into the family. This may lead to sibling rivalry. On the other hand, younger siblings often idolize the first born, putting the first born in a position of leader of the children of the family.

**Middleborn** children have a diverse range of personalities. The habits of many middleborns are motivated by the fact that they have never been truly in the spotlight. The firstborn always seems to be achieving and pioneering ahead, while the younger sibling is secure in his or her niche as the entertainer of the family.

The middle or second born child or children often have the sense of not belonging. They fight to receive attention from parents and others because they feel many times they are being ignored or dubbed off as being the same as another sibling. They tend to have fewer pictures in the family photo album alone, compared to firstborns. Being in the middle, a child can feel insecure. This in turn will affect their relationships throughout their whole life. In some cases the middle child will see life from a hopeless standpoint will often become depressed or even lonely. The middle child often lacks drive and looks for direction from the first born child. Sometimes a middle child feels out of place because they are not over achievers and like to go with the flow of things.

Middleborn children are often believed to be natural mediators. Middleborn children may avoid conflict. They may also be highly loyal to the peer group and have many friends.

The middle born child may develop good social skills and have an easier time growing up with an other-centered point of view. It has been suggested that middleborn children are more likely to be entrepreneurs. Karen E. Klein, a Los Angeles-based writer, suggested that a middleborn's innate skills in diplomacy plus their flexibility in ideas make them more successful in entrepreneurship.

The middle child may have an even-temper and a take it or leave it attitude. Alfred Adler (1964) believed that the middle child feels squeezed out of a position of privilege and significance. The child is internally compelled to find peace within the family and may have trouble finding a place or become a fighter of injustice.

**Youngest** The youngest child of the family is viewed as the party animal, the entertainer who is unafraid to test his or her luck. They are also thought of as the baby of the family and an outgoing charmer. While this is certainly not true of all youngest siblings, proponents of this theory state that the youngest of the family is an endearing, and delightful friend.

The youngest child is often babied or "pampered" more than the other siblings. This "pampering," according to Adler, is one of the worst behaviors a parent can bestow on a child. "Pampering" can lead to dependence, and selfishness as well as irresponsibility when the youngest enters adulthood.

Youngest children may become manipulative and control-seeking if their sibling(s), parents, or other peers are overbearing or bossy.

**Only children** may have characteristics of either the first born or the youngest child. Adler (1964) believed that because only children have no rivals for their parents' affection, they may be pampered and spoiled by their parents, particularly the mother. He suggested that this could cause later interpersonal difficulties if the person is not universally liked and admired. Only children learn to be children on their own, they learn to depend on themselves, and they have no problem being loners.

Naturally introverted only children may show extroverted qualities if he or she wishes to make friends. On the other hand, naturally extroverted children may learn to show introverted qualities by being content to focus on their thoughts when playmates are unavailable.

**Twins** tend to have one dominate twin, who acts as the first born. However, this can sometimes not be the case. Because of twins' closeness, they tend to be a lot more confident; however, they often have trouble being alone and get lonely easily. When one twin gets married, this often causes separation problems with both twins, and sometimes leads to depression. Twins, especially identical twins, tend to be much closer than normal siblings.