

# Structure of the family and relationships within it

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The family constellation, or structure of the family, the relationships within the family, and the characteristics of the individual children all impact sibling relationships. Family constellation refers to the number and sex of the adults and children including the birth order, type of relationship (biological, adopted, stepparent or sibling), age, and spacing of the children. Although all relationships in the family are important, the parent-child relationships have the greatest impact on sibling relationships.

Individual differences among siblings also impact their relationships. When children are younger, temperament is important in sibling relationships but for older children, relationships are influenced by their personality and social and cognitive skills. Family life varies greatly and many factors influence the outcome for children. Birth Order The relationship between birth order and an individual's personality has been debated since Alfred Adler (1928) described specific characteristics of children according to their birth order. He also coined the phrase " sibling rivalry. Although a number of factors affect the outcomes for children, many authorities believe that children's birth order plays a special role in their destiny. Firstborn Children Firstborn children, who are often surrogates for their parents as caregivers, teachers, and models, enjoy a greater status/power position in relationship to their younger siblings. This difference becomes more pronounced as the age gap increases for at least up to four years. In children's eyes, status/power is conferred most heavily on the eldest son (Furman and Buhremester, 1985).

Older girls are more often good teachers and nurturers for younger children (Cirirelli, 1972). Older boys, on the other and, tend to be better stimulators and models (Cirirelli, 1972). The oldest sibling feels more rivalry over the

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birth of the second child than other birth orders do toward a new baby. This is because the firstborn has had the full attention of parents and now has to share their affections. The adverse effects of this dethronement can be modified if parents prepare the older child for the changes and give her or him special attention after the new baby arrives.

In this case, the older sibling often becomes protective of the new family member (Adler, 1928; Teti, Sakin, Kucera, Corns, and Eiden, 1996). Firstborn children tend to have distinct personality traits. Many studies depict these children as more adultlike, achievement-oriented, verbal, conservative, controlling of subordinates, and displaying a higher self-concept, but more anxious and less popular with peers than children born later (Lahey, Hammer, Crumrine, and Forehand, 1980; Zajonc, 1983). Success seems to fit firstborn children. Many firstborns show leadership qualities. Alfred Adler said firstborns were in a to be more clever (1928).

In studies as early as Galton's English Men of Science (1874), disproportionate numbers of firstborns have achieved eminence. A higher percentage of firstborn children have become scientists, professors, presidents, Rhodes scholars, and astronauts. More firstborns have been finalists in the National Merit Scholarship tests compared to any other birth order (Muzi, 2000). This advantage may be explained by the fact that firstborns have only adults for language models and social interactions in the most formative period while their siblings are influenced by their predecessors in the family.

Only Children It is not surprising that only children have many of the characteristics of firstborns with siblings (Falbo and Polit, 1986). Their

relationship to their parents is similar and both are responsive to adults. Parents provide an adult intellectual environment for these children. In the case of the only child, this environment remains unchanged by the presence of younger children. Although both groups surpass other birth orders in intellectual and academic achievements, only children, as a group, score higher than other firstborns.

They also complete about three additional years of schooling, achieve higher occupational prestige, and earn more money than firstborn children with siblings (Blake, 1989; Falbo, 1984; Falbo and Polit, 1986). However, a study on birth order by Steelman and Powell (1985) shows no correlation between birth order and academic success. Only children miss the experiences of sibling relationships and of having to share their parents with siblings. However, the stereotype of only children as more lonely, selfish, spoiled, and maladjusted than children with siblings is not true. A study of only children placed them into three groups.

Some were normal and well adjusted, others were impulsive and acting out, and others were similar to the stereotype of only children (Rosenberg and Hyde, 1993). Middle Children Middle children are more sociable and harder to classify than the firstborns. They are sometimes called the "overlooked child." It is more difficult to be the middle child when all siblings are of the same gender. If second-born children are closer in age to the oldest, they tend to take on some of these characteristics. This is especially true when the second-born is the oldest girl in a large family.

On the other hand, middle children tend to be less adaptive to parental values, perhaps because they want to avoid competition with the older child. Because firstborn children mirror their parents in searching for their identity, middle children turn to peers, often adopting some of their values. In contrast to the first-born the middle child may be more friendly, cheerful, placid, and less studious with lower self-esteem. According to Adler (1928), the middle child is ambitious, rebellious, envious, and better adjusted than either the first born or the youngest child.

**Youngest Child** When growing up, the youngest child is smaller, weaker, less knowledgeable, and less competent compared to older siblings, and often turns to attention-seeking. At a very early age, the youngest are more outgoing, exploring toys, making responses to people, and initiating more play with strangers. Youngest children are significantly more successful socially than other birth orders (Steelman and Powell, 1985). The younger or youngest sibling is more dependent on others for help.

Their dependency, however, deprives them of status/power and may lower their self-esteem. Most children are born within two or three years of the last sibling's birth (Dunn; 1995). Spacing of less than two years or five or more years is beneficial for the child's adjustment to a new sibling (Dunn, 1995; Teti, et al. 1996). A child under age two cannot realize all the implications of another sibling to their special position. In addition, young children closely spaced spend more time together than with their parents during these years and learn to understand each other intimately (Gaffey, 1997).

After age two, resentment and rivalry increase until children reach age five or six. By this time their world outside the family has expanded and they are better able to cope with and/ or avoid some of these feelings (Dunn, 1995).

All children, including the newborn, benefit from larger intervals between births. Parents have time to give them more individual attention. Age differences, gender, and the ages of children in the family account for differences in the quality of their sibling relationships. Younger siblings admire most their siblings who are four or more years older.

As already mentioned, the warmth-closeness characteristic appears greater between same-gender siblings and increases with the closeness of their ages. (Furman and Buhremester, 1985). On the other hand, conflict and competition are also more intense when siblings are close in age and, particularly, the same gender. Sibling rivalry is most intense in the early years and diminishes, at least on the conscious level, as siblings approach maturity. Family Size There are differences in growing up in a small family (one or two children) as opposed to a large family (over four children).

The larger the family, the greater is the number of relationships for a child to experience, which can be enriching or frustrating or both. Discipline in large families is more rule oriented, less individualized and there is more corporal punishment (Wagner, Schubert, and Schubert, 1985). Children in small families have fewer experiences in relationships but do have more individual time with their parents. According to some studies, they also have slightly higher test scores, more schooling, and achieve more academically and in

their occupation than children from large families (Blake, 1989; Hauser and Sewell, 1985).

**Parent-Child Relationships** The quality of the relationship between each child and parent and between parents affects the sibling relationships. Parents who are constructively responsive to their children foster good feelings and cooperative behavior among their children (Furman, 1995; Bryant and Crockenberg, 1980). In homes where fathers are affectionate and helpful there are more positive sibling interactions. On the other hand, conflict between mother and each child is associated with increased sibling conflicts (Volling and Belsky, J. 1992). The child's temperament, sex, health, or hereditary traits also affect sibling relationships.

Parents sometimes understand one child better than another. The child's temperament gender, health, or hereditary traits affect this relationship. When children perceive parental partiality, it increases feelings of competition, conflict, and Jealousy among siblings. Most children believe that their parent has a favorite child, which may not be true (Zervas and Sherman, 1994). Sibling rivalry is a normal emotion growing out of the need to share biological and affectional ties of the two most important people in a child's world, his or her parents. When a baby comes along, a child's world changes greatly.