

# Birth order and personality



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Birth order can be defined as the order in which siblings are born. Personality can be defined as the characteristics that distinguish an individual from another individual. Over the course of history, people have wondered about these and how and to what extent birth order affects personality. The theory that can describe this is called the birth order theory. The father of the birth order theory is Alfred Adler. Adler (1927) stated, “ before we can judge a human being we must know the situation in which he grew up. An important moment is the position which a child occupied in his family constellation” (p. 149). The followers of Adler’s are called Adlerian psychologists; they believe that the formation of an individual’s personality is affected by the order that the individual and the individual’s siblings are born. The research that has been done has been inconclusive to some extent. Studies have shown that certain characteristics are given to firstborn children and then different sets of characteristics are given to each following later born child. In this literature review, the characteristics for firstborn and the later born children will be discussed as well as to how personality development is affected by birth order.

### Characteristics of firstborn children

Before you go into firstborn characteristics, you have to know the Big Five personality characteristics. They speak a lot about what type of a person an individual is. The Big Five are openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, and introversion-extroversion. Now into firstborn characteristics, have you ever thought about what type of person it takes to win a big award such as the Nobel Prize? Frank J. Sulloway is able to give you an inside scoop on an award like that. The reason being that he is able to tell

you the winner is because most winners of the Nobel Prize usually are firstborns whom personalities and accomplishments fall within certain paradigms that the committee likes. Smilgis (1997) notes in her article that firstborns tend to strongly identify with power and authority and are more assertive, dominant, and ambitious. They believe more in the status quo and prefer little change as well as also accepting conventional values. And lastly, they are more likely to make technical scientific breakthroughs (p. 34).

According to Keller, “ parents tend to have higher expectations of the first born so the children tend to feel more pressured to achieve” (Cabot, interview, 1996). Another tendency of firstborn children is that they tend to feel vulnerable when other children come along; they worry about losing prestige and status from their parents. Using the Big Five personality dimensions has also been used to find out personalities characteristics. According to Cichomski, Herrera, Wieczorkowska, and Zajonc (2003), “ Using the Big Five personality dimensions, he [Sulloway] claimed that firstborns are:

more achievement oriented, antagonistic, anxious, assertive, conforming, extraverted, fearful, identified with parents, jealous, neurotic, organized, planful, responsible, self-confident, and traditional. Moreover, they tend to affiliate under stress and are more likely than later borns to assume leadership positions” (p. 142).

The characteristics stated so far are very noticeable. It would be very easy to pick a firstborn child out of a group by only basing it on these certain characteristic types.

## Characteristics of Later born Children

Later born children are a different breed than their older sibling or siblings. As claimed by Harrigan (1992), “ There is a school of thought-and a cottage industry to go with it-that decrees that birth order is destiny. We are who we are because of who was there ahead of us when we were born, and who came behind” (p. 66). Harrigan’s own case of his older brother Jim and himself. His brother is a business executive who dresses the part, is three inches taller than him, and goes by the commanding initials J. P. During the tour given by the older brother, the author realizes that even during childhood, when his brother was Jimmy and he himself was Stevie, that he already perceived his brother as the commanding business executive J. P. To compensate for this perception, the younger brother, in this case Harrigan, starts to develop characteristics opposite of the older sibling. This is known as sibling deidentification.

As can be seen in the above example, the characteristics that later born children develop are usually opposite of what firstborn children develop themselves. According to Cabot (1996), second born children “ tend to be mediators, to avoid conflict and to be more independent and loyal to a peer group” (p. 28). In the article that the above example is from, Harrigan (1992) says,

“ Middle children, like me, are the hardest to nail down, but in general we are seen as the victims of benign neglect, the ones with the fewest pictures in the family photo album. To cope with that lack of attention, we became rebellious and secretive, relying on friends for the companionship that

somehow eluded us within the family. And because we never got our parents all to ourselves, we learned to compromise. By the time we were out of childhood, we were already seasoned diplomats” (66).

The youngest children are the most smothered of all the children. They tend to be charming and quite manipulative. Harrigan (1992) also says about last born children by the time that they are born, parents have no more expectations for the children, so they spoil and pamper the youngest without condition (p. 66). Last born are also sometimes described as comedians, jokers, and mascots.

Overall, the characteristics of later born children are according to Smilgis (1997), they are more likely to resist authoritarian figures, are catalysts of change and revolution, like to question the status quo, and are more likely to pioneer radical breakthroughs (p. 28). Another set of characteristics that used the Big Five personality dimensions to determine them according to Sulloway in the article by Cichomski, Herrera, Wieczorkowska, and Zajonc (2003), “ Later-borns are,..., more adventurous, altruistic, cooperative, easygoing, empathetic, open to experience, popular, rebellious, risk-taking, sociable, and unconventional” (p. 142). These above characteristics make it very easy to point out second or later born children from first borns. The characteristics are very opposite of each other.

### Personality Development

Personality development based on birth order is a topic that has been a point of contention in the realm of psychology. There are two states of mind regarding this topic. The first idea is that birth order has a huge impact on <https://assignbuster.com/birth-order-and-personality/>

personality development and of course the second idea is that there is no impact on birth order on personality development.

Several prominent researchers have supported the idea that birth order impacts personality development. Frank J. Sulloway in his book reports that there is a systematic and significant effect of birth order on personality. Sulloway (1996) observed the research and came to the conclusion that it shows consistent trends (p. 74). In an interview he did, Sulloway explains how birth order affects personality by saying, “ Personality is not transmitted from parent to offspring with any high degree of reliability because siblings are going out of their way to be different from one another and this tendency reduces the correlation” (Shermer, interview, 1996). Another researcher, Dreikurs (1950) illustrated birth order as “ the only fundamental law governing the development of the child’s character: he trains those qualities by which he hopes to achieve significance or even a degree of power and superiority in the family constellation” (p. 41). The research of these men did present a clear picture that birth order has a truly important impact on personality development.

The idea that birth order has no affect on personality development also has its own set of supporters. Alfred Adler, the father of the birth order theory, had some of his own concerns with the idea. Adler said, “ There has been some misunderstanding,..., of my custom of classification according to position in the family. It is not, of course, the child’s name in the order of successive births which influences his character, but the situation into which he is born and the way he interprets it” (as cited in Harrigan, 1992, p. 68). This quote shows that Alder realized that that his theory of birth order was

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somewhat too simple and without complexity. Ernst and Angst, two researchers who studied 34 years of birth order research, came away very unimpressed from their study. Their conclusion is stated in an article by Harrigan (1992),

“ In short, birth order didn’t consistently predict which sibling is most likely to be an extrovert, feel pain, take risks, lack self-esteem, select certain marriage partners, feel guilt, adopt conservative political views, get frustrated easily, need autonomy, or suffer psychological problem. Only a few of the studies they considered gave even marginal support to the idea that birth order influence is a factor in shaping personality,” (p. 69).

The conclusions of Ernst and Angst and the known thoughts against birth order by the father of the theory itself show favorably to the idea that birth order has no bearing what so ever on personality development.

### Birth Order and Its Relation to Education

As we have seen there are many contradicting views to whether

### Conclusion

The idea of birth order affecting personality development has and still somewhat is a point of contention in the field of psychology. Some people have strong beliefs that birth order does have a considerable affect on personality, while others believe that rarely any affect is made on personality. More studies need to be done to determine who is truly right, but a true winner may never be determined. For now, the characteristics of

firstborn and later born children are out there and people can make their own decisions about this very interesting theory.

While perusing over the various topics that I could do for my paper, I suddenly was struck by a very interesting thought. This thought was why am I the way I am and my siblings are different from me. Why are we not similar? I have always had a curiosity about this idea. I have always gotten along well with them, but we are truly different from each other. So I decided to find out what factors influence my personality. After searching through some possible factors, birth order just struck a chord with me. It made some sense to why we are vastly different. Through my research on birth order and personality, I have come across many insights into the differentials of my siblings and I.

From my research I was able to garner the characteristics of firstborns and then later born children. The characteristics, in general, for first borns are that they strongly identify with power and authority, are more assertive, like to be dominant and quite ambitious, prefer a life of routines, they accept conventional values, and are more likely to make technical breakthroughs instead of radical ones. The research for the characteristics of later born children was quite clearly opposite of firstborns. Later borns tend to resist authority, prefer change to routine, question the status quo, champion upheaval, and tend to make radical breakthroughs.

After gathering just the characteristics, it was already clear to me that birth order might have had some affect on my personality development. I am clearly a middle child, fits the general later born characteristics to a “ T” too.



I don't purposely try to but I tend to butt heads on occasion with my dad, who is the authority figure in my house. I love to be different and am truly a nonconformist. Another characteristic of later borns, but specifically of middle children, are that we are very loyal to a peer group and I'm not different as I'm very loyal to my friends. My brother on the other hand is a pure first child because he follows the characteristics of a first child pretty much to the "T". He loves to be in control over his siblings and tends to be assertive when he wants something done. He prefers a life of routine instead of one filled with change. Lastly, my brother is very accepting of normal values and usually conforms to what people think and always goes with the majority. Then we come to the youngest of the three children in my family, my sister, she is a mixture of both my brother and me. However, she has more of the characteristics of a later born child than first born child. While she accepts conventional values and is definitely like my first born brother in that she conforms to what is thought of as proper and right, but that's pretty much where the similarities end. She butts heads with my father quite a bit, is very loyal to her peer group, and thoroughly enjoys change. As can be seen from the three of us, birth order has had a certain affect on each of our personalities.

Lastly, the general argument of whether or not birth order has an effect on personality development is a topic that has neither a winner nor a loser. There are a couple prominent researchers who strongly believe that it does. Most of these people who believe in the birth order theory are called Adlerian psychologists. However, there is several researchers who after having gone over some of the best known work on birth order and personality, have come

to the conclusion that birth order has very little or no impact on personality development. Even the founder of the birth order theory had his own doubts. In my own thinking, I would say that birth order plays a role in the development of personality. My thinking is based on how well I fit the characteristics of a later born and how well my brother and sister both fit the first born and later born characteristics in which they fall.

To conclude, I enjoyed finding information about this topic. I also believe that if more time and effort was put into determining whether birth order affects personality development, we could find a clear-cut winner to this competition.