

Personality and the Birth-Order Theory

Birth-order theory is a sociological and psychological concept that describes the tendency for people born into a particular birth order in a family (oldest, youngest, middle, or only child) to have certain personality traits. It is believed that because parents treat children in each birth order differently, children develop distinctively different personalities. It is found that children from within each group often share some common characteristics.

First-Born Children

First-born children are oriented toward their parents and often share their parents' sense of values. As a result, they may be more conservative or traditional than other children. First-born children especially strive to please their parents and often have high expectations for themselves and others. As children, they may be given responsibility over younger siblings, further developing a strong sense of responsibility and ethics.

When they grow up, first-born children often become high achievers. They perform well in the academic, corporate, and professional fields. They often choose careers that require a high degree of precision, such as law, medicine, or architecture. Interestingly, more than one half of all American presidents have been first-born sons. (They may have had an older sister.) Two thirds of entrepreneurs are first-born children.

Middle Children

Middle children generally look outside the family for approval and acceptance. Consequently, they are less like the members of their own families. They may be less traditional and more independent. They often have improved social skills because they interact frequently with members outside their families. Middle children are quite often the most difficult children to both understand and raise. Middle children are quite often referred to as the "mysterious middle children." Although the personality traits of middle children are more difficult to pin down, they tend to be the opposite of their older siblings.

Middle children can listen well to others and diplomatically manage social situations. They tend to be peacemakers and get along well with others. Not surprisingly, middle children frequently assume managerial or leadership positions. They may choose careers that allow them to be creative, such as sales, art, advertising, or careers that require negotiating skills because of level headedness and the ability to be unbiased.

Youngest Children

The "babies" of the family often develop strategies to gain attention. They may act out in negative ways, such as behaving immaturely or acting self-centered, or in positive ways, such as being affectionate, empathetic, and caring. Last-born children can be playful, charming, or manipulative.

Last-born children frequently experience the most independence from family pressures. They tend to be creative and carefree. This may be caused by their parents' increasingly relaxed attitudes toward family rules. With each successive child, parents worry less about rearing children "perfectly." Careers in the

arts, entertainment, or sales are good matches for the free spirits of last-born personalities. They see no limits, such as Microsoft's Bill Gates, a famous last-born child.

Only Children

Only children are extreme versions of first-born children. They receive undivided attention from parents throughout their lifetime and can become selfish and dependent if their parents are overindulgent. Like first-born children, only children also seek approval from their parents. However, fear of disappointing their parents can turn them into perfectionists who are well organized but anxious.

On the other hand, only children are mature and sensitive to adult needs. They are generally self-sufficient, appreciate their privacy, and enjoy high self-esteem. They tend toward the same professions as first-born children, for example, law or medicine.