Birthday Order Essay, Research Paper

subject = psychology

title = Birth Order

papers = Does birth order have an

effect on personality? Does being first born make people more responsible?

If someone is the middle born child, are they going to be more rebellious?

If people are last born are they more likely to be on television? Are first

born children inconsiderate and selfish or reliable and highly motivated?

These, and many other questions are being thoroughly studied by psychologists

(Harrigan, 1992). In 1923, the renowned psychiatrist Dr. Alfred Adler, wrote

that a person’s position in the family leaves an undeniable “stamp” on his

or her “style of life” (Marzollo, 1990). Research has shown that birth order

does indeed affect a child; however, it does not automatically shape personality.

If it did, life would be much more predictable and a great deal less interesting

(Marzollo, 1990). Yogi Bera, a famous baseball player, said “Every now and

then a reporter who thinks he is Freud asks me if being the youngest is why

I made it (playing professional baseball). I almost alw

ays say yes, but

I don’t think it had anything to do with it” (Harrigan, 1992).

Birth order

doesn’t explain everything about human behavior. Personality is affected by

many different factors, such as heredity, family size, the spacing and sex

of siblings, education, and upbringing. However, there is an awful lot of

research and plain old “law of averages” supporting the affect of birth order

on personality (Leman, 1985). There are four basic classifications of birth

order: the oldest, the only, the middle, and the youngest. Each has its own

set of advantages, as well as its own set of disadvantages. While the birth

order factor isn’t always exact, it does give many clues about why people are

the way they are (Leman, 1985).

If there is one word that describes first

born children it would be “perfectionist” (Harrigan, 1992). First born children

tend to be high achievers in whatever they do. Some traits customarily used

to label first born children include reliable, conscientious, list maker, well

organized, critical, serious, scholarly (Leman, 1985), self-assured, good leadership

ability, eager to please, and nurturing (Brazelton, 1994). Also, first born

children seem to have a heightened sense of right and wrong. It is common

in most books about birth order that first born children get more press than

only, middle, and youngest children. This can be explained by the fact that

the first born child is typically the success story in the family. They are

the ones that are extremely driven to succeed in “high achievement” fields

such as science, medicine, or law (Leman, 1985). For example, of the first

twenty-three astronauts sent into outer space, twenty-one were first born or

their close cousin, the only child, which we w

ill discuss later on. In fact,

all seven astronauts in the original Mercury program were first born children

(Leman, 1985). Also, first born children tend to choose careers that involve

leadership. For example, fifty-two percent of all U.S. presidents were first-borns

(Lanning, 1991). Researchers say that, in general, first born children tend

to have higher IQs than younger siblings. This is not because they start off

more intelligent, but because of the amount of attention new parents give to

their first child (Marzollo, 1990). Experts claim that a first born’s will

to succeed begins in infancy (Lanning, 1991). The extraordinary love affair

that many new parents have with their first child leads to the kind of intensity

that can probably never be repeated with a younger child. In the first few

weeks, a new parent imitates the baby’s gestures in a playful game. A rhythm

is established by mimicry of vocalizations, motions, and smiles. Think what

this cycle of action-reaction might mean to an infant:

“I’m pretty powerful,

aren’t I? Everything I do is copied by someone who cares about me .” After

a couple of weeks of game playing the infant develops a sense of “I recognize

you!” (Brazelton, 1994). This special parent-child interaction helps to instill

a deep sense of self-worth in first born children. In short, the parents put

their first born child on a pedestal or throne. Also, new parents are convinced

that their child is the cleverest child in the world when he or she rolls over

or says “Mama” or “Dada” (Jabs, 1987). Even though the child is a baby it

can still sense the profound sense of enthusiasm. So, first borns want to

maintain their parents’ attention and approval (Lanning, 1991). This is when

the arrival of a second child is often a crisis for the first child. They

are knocked off their pedestal by the baby (Leman, 1989). They are no longer

the center of mom and dad’s attention. This often causes them to become resentful

toward their younger sibling.

To reclaim the position at the center of their

parents’ attention, he or she will try imitating the baby. When the first

child realizes that his or her parents frown upon a two-year-old who wants

a bottle or a three-year-old who needs a diaper, he or she decides to aid

his or her parents in caring for the younger child (Jabs, 1987). Parents usually

tend to reinforce the older child’s decision to be more adult by expecting

him or her to set a good example for the younger child. These experiences

help to make the first born a natural leader. However, first borns are sometimes

so preoccupied with being good and doing things right that they forget how

to enjoy life and be a kid (Jabs, 1987).

Along with being the first child

comes pressure. Each achievement becomes a miracle in a new parent’s eyes.

However, when a mistake occurs it is viewed as an enormous failure in the

child’s eyes because their parents weren’t ecstatic, and so the child goes

to enormous lengths to make his or her parents happy with their performance.

Some parents may also burden the child with their own unfulfilled dreams and

with setting the standard for the younger children (Brazelton, 1994). Norval

D. Glenn, Ph. D., professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin,

explains that firstborns often suffer from pseudomaturity. They may act grown-up

throughout childhood, but because their role models are grown-ups rather than

older siblings, they may tend to reject the role of leader in early adulthood

(Marzollo, 1990). Also, a firstborn is not always “the most gracious receiver

of criticism”. An adult’s constant criticism of his or her performance may

cause the child to become a worried perfectionist. They m

ay come to fear

making mistakes before eyes that he or she feels are always watching them.

First born children may also come to hate any kind of criticism because it

emphasizes the faults that he or she is trying to overcome (Marzollo, 1990).

The first born child does not have unlimited time to view himself as the

child in the relationship with parents. When a sibling arrives, he or she

tends to eliminate the view of himself or herself as a child and he or she

struggles to be “parental” (Forer, 1969). In short, the first born child will

do anything to make everything perfect.

In addition to the labels mentioned

before, first born children also tend to be goal-oriented, self-sacrificing,

people-pleasers, conservative, supporters of law and order, believer in authority

and ritual, legalistic, loyal, and self-reliant. They are often achievers,

the ones who are driven toward success and stardom in their given fields (Leman,

1985). First born children can be found in great numbers in positions like

accountants, bookkeepers, executive secretaries, engineers, and, in recent

years, people whose jobs involve computers. First borns typically choose a

career that involves precision and requires a strong power of concentration

(Leman, 1985). Some first borns that have gone on to become famous leaders,

actors, scientists, novelists, astronauts, etc. include Mikhail Gorbachev (Russian

leader), Jimmy Carter (president), Henry Kissinger (diplomat), Albert Einstein

(scientist), Sally Ride (astronaut), Bill Cosby (actor), John Glenn (astronaut,

senator), Steven Spielberg (producer), Joan Colli

ns (actress), Clint Eastwood

(actor), Peter Jennings (TV journalist), and Bruce Springsteen (singer) (Jabs,

1987; Lanning, 1991; Marzollo, 1990).

In many ways, the only child is like

the first born child. An only child is a first born child who never loses

his or her parents’ undivided attention. He or she benefits greatly from his

or her parents’ enthusiastic attention, as long as it isn’t too critical.

The only child also tends to have the first child’s heightened sense of right

and wrong (Jabs, 1987). Leman’s “perfect” description of the “Lonely Only”

include all the labels that were included with the first born child. However,

preceding each word would be the prefix super (Leman, 1985). Where the first

born child is organized, the only child is superorganized. Where the first

born child is a perfectionist, the only child is a superperfectionist. Labels

that are often applied to only children include spoiled, selfish, lazy, and

a bit conceited. These labels tend to be applied because only children don’t

have to share with other siblings like the first, middle, or youngest children.

Dr. Alfred Adler, a famous psychologist, said that “The

Only Child has difficulties

with every independent activity and sooner or later they become useless in

life.” However, most birth order experts, as well as myself, being an only

child, disagree with Dr. Adler and the labels given to an only child. (Leman,

1989). Far from being people who are used to having things handed to them

all their lives, only children are among the top achievers in every area of

profession. For example some of the more famous only children include Franklin

D. Roosevelt (president), Leonardo da Vinci (artist), Charles Lindbergh (pilot),

Ted Koppel (TV journalist), Brooke Shields (model, actress), Nancy Reagan

(first-lady),

Frank Sinatra (singer), Danielle Steel (novelist), and John Updike (novelist)

(Jabs, 1987; Leman, 1989).

A problem that only children tend to have is when

eager parents interfere with their child’s development. For example, new

parents tend to jump in too early to help the child with everything he or she

tries. They can’t sit back and let the child struggle. What they don’t realize

is that frustration is a powerful learning tool. When a child fights to master

a task and succeeds on his or her own, their face lights up with pride. “I

did it myself.” If a parent tends to jump in to help at every little problem,

then the child could lose his or her will to try to do things by their self.

Only

children seem to be very on top of things, articulate, and mature. They appear

to have it all together. Yet, often there is an internal struggle going on.

Their standards have always been set by adults and are often high, sometimes

too high. Only children regularly have a hard time enjoying their achievements.

They feel as if they can never do anything good enough. Even if they succeed,

they often feel as though they didn’t succeed by enough. This is usually the

start of what experts call the “discouraged perfectionist” (Leman, 1985).

Also, many other special problems may develop with only children. These problems

are often classified as only children, who are “problem children.” For example,

the “special jewel” or “receiver” child often has a problem with the heliocentric

theory that states that our solar system revolves around the sun. The special

jewel or receiver child believes that the entire universe revolves around him

or her. This type of child generally develops when the parents gi

ve in to

their child’s every wish. It is important for this child’s parents to say

no. If the child says, “Mom, I want that !”, her mother should respond by

saying, “No, I will not buy that for you, but you may purchase it with money

you have earned yourself.” Once these children realize that they are dealing

with someone who won’t cave in to their every demand they become quite pleasant

(Leman, 1989). Another “problem child” is the “friend-snatcher”. The child

who never learns to share his or her toys, will also have a problem with sharing

friends as well. They become agitated when their friend tries to include other

people into the pair’s activities. They may try to bribe their “friend” by

offering them toys, food, and maybe even money. For this problem, experts

suggest confronting the child by proposing, that mabye, the reason he or she

is not having very good relationships with his or her friends is because he

or she is not willing to share friends with anyone. Suggest that they need

to try doin

g activities with more than two people and that they need to stop

being so posessive (Leman, 1989).

Next is the “target” child. This child

also has a problem with the heliocentric theory. This child magnifies his

or her importance in every situation and beleives he or she is the one being

singled out for unfair treatment. When life is unfair, as it often is, he

can sink into deep depression and bitterness. For example, if a teacher gives

them an “F” on a world history test, it’s because the teacher doesn’t like

them and not because they didn’t do a good job (Leman, 1989). These are often

problems of an only children who has been sheltered from society by their

overprotective

parents. Those who are well adjusted know from an early age that life is a

mixture of good and bad (Leman, 1989).

Middle children are the hardest to

classify because they are so dependant different variables, including the personalities

of their older and younger siblings and the number of years between them (Marzollo,

1990). “What happens to middle children depends on the total family dynamics,”

says Dr. Jeannie Kidwell, family therapist and research scholar (Jabs, 1987).

Middle children can be shy or outgoing, reckless or responsible, uptight or

laid back (Lanning, 1991). Any number of life-styles can appear, but they

all play off the first born (Leman, 1985). He or she may try to imitate the

first-born’s behavior. If they feel that they can’t match up, they may go

off in another direction, looking for their identity, often in the exact opposite

of that taken by his or her older sibling. The general conclusion of all research

studies done on birth order is that second borns will probably be somewhat

the opposite of first born children (Leman, 1985). In general, middle born

children suffer from an identity cris

is. They are always striving to be

different from their older and younger siblings. Middle children feel that

they are born too late to get the privileges and special treatment that firstborns

seem to inherit by right and born too early to enjoy the relaxing of the disciplinary

reins, which is sometimes translated as “getting away with murder” (Marzollo,

1990). Neither the achiever nor the baby, the middle child may feel that he

or she has no particular role in the family. They may look outside the family

to define themselves. This is why friends become very important to middle

children (Marzollo, 1990).

Middle children search to find their own identity

and define their personality. Because middle children have to fight for their

parents’ attention, they become highly competitive. This generally makes middle

children more successful in sports. Lacking the benefit of the exceptions

parents make for their first borns and last borns, middle children may learn

to negotiate, to compromise, and to give and take, valuable skills that will

help them succeed (Marzollo, 1990). They can become effective managers and

leaders because they are good listeners and can cope with varying points of

view. Also, experts have found that because middle children have had to struggle

for more things than their siblings they are better prepared for real life.

One big plus for middle children is a well developed sense of empathy because

they know what it’s like to be younger and older. However, all the competing

and negotiating may cause middle children to have an overall low self esteem

and a self-deprecating attitude (Marzoll

o, 1990).

Nevertheless, middle children

have many advantages. They can learn from the older sibling but can also regress

to be like the younger one, doubling their learning opportunities. Yet, they

may also have many mood swings between grown-up and baby-like behavior,

especially

during the teen age years (Brazelton, 1994). Leman (1989) says to “Remember,

the average teenager has only two emotional outbursts per year. The problem

is they last about six months each.”

Because slightly more than one third

of American families today have only two children, many parents find themselves

thinking in terms of the first born and second born. Middle and second born

children share many of the same characteristics. Like the middle child, the

second-born is likely to search for ways to be different from the first-born

child (Marzollo, 1990). Dr. Kidwell says, “Problems arise when a family has

very rigid expectations.” If the only thing that matters is straight A’s and

the first kid is doing that, the middle kid has a profound dilemma. He or

she needs something else to be known for (Jabs, 1987, p.29). Some famous middle

and second children who have found their own identity include Bea Arthur (actress),

Glenn Close (actress), Matt Dillon (actor), Linda Evans (actress), Jessica

Lange (actress), Cyndi Lauper (singer), Tom Selleck (actor), Mary Decker Slaney

(runner), Richard Nixon (president), Princess Diana (British royalty), George

Burns (comedian), Bob Hope (comedian) (Jabs, 1

987; Marzollo, 1990).

If

a group of psychologists randomly picked out ten youngest born children, chances

are that nine of them would have these characteristics: manipulative, charming,

blames others, shows off, people person, good salesperson, precocious, engaging,

and sometimes spoiled (Leman, 1985). By the time the youngest child is born,

his or her parents have become veterans in the field of child care (Lanning,

1991). They are more experienced and confident in their parenting practices,

and so they often decide to let the last born enjoy childhood as long as they

can (Marzollo, 1990). This is why youngest children tend to be more pampered

than older siblings. The youngest or “baby” of the family is often given an

extra dose of affection and attention, as well as an occasional exception from

the rules (Marzollo, 1990). This extremely positive upbringing helps to contribute

to the youngest child’s fun-loving, affectionate, and persuasive behavior (Marzollo,

1990). The youngest child can grow up to feel the most tre

asured, and the

most nurtured of all (Brazelton, 1994). Also, without the pressure of a younger

sibling gaining from behind, the youngest may grow up easy going and carefree

(Jabs, 1987). However, life isn’t all fun and games for the family baby.

The endless praise of last born children may leave them feeling that their

families do not take them seriously (Marzollo, 1990). For instance, a common

youngest child remark would be, “If I get upset or try to state my opinion,

nobody takes me seriously. To them, I’m the baby. They think I don’t know

a whole lot,” (Lanning, 1991). Youngest children often have feelings of insecurity

or long periods of self-doubt (Lanning, 1991). For example, a youngest child

grows up being coddled one minute as a darling little baby, but the next minute

she’s compared unfavorably with an older sibling. He or she is often unfairly

compared with older and stronger siblings.

According to Beverly Hills-based

psychiatrist Carole Lieberman, M.D., the self-image of the youngest child may

become confused (Lanning, 1991). As a result of conflicting experiences,

youngest children can be extremely self-confident in someways and insecure

in others (Leman, 1985). For the most part, youngest children learn to cope

with the problems of self-doubt. In fact, youngest children often go on to

become quite successful, thanks in part to their originality and determination

to prove themselves to the world (Lanning, 1991). Often, they express their

unique view of the world through the visual or literary arts. People-pleasing

fields, such as art, comedy, entertainment and sales are full of youngest children

(Lanning, 1991). Some examples of famous youngest children include Ronald

Reagan (president, actor), Eddie Murphy (comedian), Paul Newman (actor), Mary

Lou Retton (gymnast), Billy Crystal (comedian), Yogi Bera (baseball player),

Ted Kennedy (politician), and Kevin Leman (psychologist)