



Family Issues Facts

A FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

Birth Order

Bulletin #4359

Many researchers think that where we are in relationship to our brothers and sisters helps influence how we develop.

Birth Order Helps Make Us Unique

“Birth order” refers to whether we were perhaps the first child born in a family or maybe one of many, or maybe even the last. Many researchers think that where we are in relationship to our brothers and sisters helps influence how we develop. Thinking about birth order is one way we get some good clues as to why we are the way we are. Of course, there is no way to always accurately

predict how one person may turn out — we are all too different, complex, and unique. What we can be sure of is the following:

1. Living in a family is a unique and distinctive experience.
2. A person’s family exerts more influence on him or her than any other organization, institution, or experience.
3. In any family, a person’s order of birth has a lifelong effect on who and what that person turns out to be.
4. No matter what spot we

occupy in the family, there are many forces that can intervene and turn things around for us.

Where Do You Fit?

To get us started on understanding birth we will use three lists that Kevin Leman has put together, that group characteristics of each of three major birth positions.¹ Pick out the list of characteristics that fits you best.

- Perfectionistic, reliable, list-maker, well-organized, critical, serious, scholarly
- Mediator, fewest pictures in the family photo album, avoids conflict, independent, extreme loyalty to the peer group, many friends
- Manipulative, charming, blames others, shows off, people person, good salesperson, precocious



If you identified with the characteristics in the first list, you may be an only child or a first-born. If the second list fits you better, chances are you a middle child. And if the last list fits you best, you may be the youngest or baby in the family.

Birth order is not a simple system stereotyping all first-borns as having one personality, with all second-borns another, and last-born kids a third. Instead, birth order is about tendencies and general characteristics that may often apply. Other things also influence birth order.²

Spacing is an obvious factor. Whenever there is a gap of five or more years between children, it often means that a “second family” has begun. So a child born third in a family constellation but whose next older sibling is seven years older, may develop first-born tendencies. This doesn’t mean he wouldn’t have any characteristics of a middle or last-born child, but is likely to also be quite “adult” — conscientious and exacting — because he had so many older models.

Sex: One way birth order characteristics can change is by the sex of the child. The first born of any gender is more likely to take on first-born characteristics. Sometimes work or chores are assigned based on sex. In a very traditional home the oldest male usually gets the “manly” chores such as cutting the lawn, digging weeds, hauling trash, and helping Dad. His younger sister would be assigned the “mother’s helper” jobs: ironing, housecleaning, doing the dishes, and so on. In larger families, when sex differences create someone “special” (like three boys and one girl) it can put pressure on the children immediately above or below that special person.

The *physical makeup* of the children can turn birth order upside down or at least tilt it a bit sideways. Examples here could include

- two closely spaced boys with the youngest being significantly bigger;
- a first-born girl who is extremely pretty and a second-born girl who is extremely plain;

- a child in any birth order who has a serious physical or mental disability.

Twins: Twins are often an interesting mix of competitor and companion. The “first-born” often takes the assertive role of leader while the “second-born” follows along. In a family constellation, twins are bound to cause pressure, especially on any children born after them.

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 4-5.

² The following paragraphs on birth order variables are taken from Leman, pp. 20-36.

Firstborns

Characteristics: perfectionistic, reliable, conscientious, list-makers, well-organized, critical, serious, scholarly; achiever, self-sacrificing, people-pleaser, conservative, supporter of law and order, believer in authority and ritual, legalistic, loyal, and self-reliant.¹

Firstborns may be more highly motivated to achieve than their younger siblings or may choose professions such as science, medicine, or law. A greater number of firstborns also choose careers as accountants, bookkeepers, executive secretaries, engineers, or jobs involving computers. Firstborns typically go for anything that takes precision, strong powers of concentration, and exacting mental discipline.²

A common characteristic of a firstborn is confidence in being taken seriously by those around him. It’s no wonder that firstborns often go on to positions of leadership or high achievement. Fifty-two percent of United States presidents were firstborns (only four have been babies of their families).³



All the attention, the spotlight, and the responsibility add up to PRESSURE. A lot of the pressure on the oldest child comes in the form of discipline and, in too many cases, punishment. Firstborns often feel they had to “toe the mark” while younger siblings had it easier, at least to some degree. Right along with getting the most discipline, the firstborn gets the most work — they are frequently the first to be called for the extra housework or errands that other siblings can’t or won’t do. Firstborns are often also forced to follow in father’s or mother’s professional footsteps.⁴

¹ Leman, K. (1985) *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, p. 43.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

Middle-Borns

The general characteristics of the middle-born child are the most varied and contradictory of all the birth positions. Characteristics may include being a mediator *or* one who avoids conflict, being independent *and* extremely loyal to a peer group, and frequently being the child in the family who gets “lost.” This child may be shy and quiet *or* friendly and outgoing, impatient and easily frustrated *or* laid back, taking life in stride. A middle-born may be very competitive or very easygoing, the family “black sheep” *or* the peacemaker.¹

“Branching off” is a powerful force in shaping middle-borns. This principle says the second born will be most directly influenced by the first born and the third born will be most directly influenced by the second born. “Influence” means that each child looks above and sizes up the older sibling. If the second born senses



Making the Firstborn Birth Order Work¹

- 1. Take smaller bites of life.** Firstborns are known for getting themselves involved in too many things. They frequently wind up with little time for themselves.
- 2. Work on saying no.** Many firstborns are pleasers — they like the approval of others and almost always accept invitations, requests, etc. One of the best ways to know how to say no is to know your limits.
- 3. Lower your sights a little.** Remember that as a firstborn your parents probably had higher expectations for you than anyone else in the family. And the natural result is that you have high expectations for yourself. You expect to be first, best, perfect. Do a little less and enjoy life more.
- 4. Enjoy your natural curiosity.** Firstborns are known for asking a lot of questions, wanting all the details. Don’t apologize for this trait, which is a sign of a leader who can size up the situation, be able to outline what has to be done, and then apply a logical, step-by-step process to solve the problem.
- 5. Take your time.** As a firstborn, you are likely to be a cautious, careful person. Don’t let people pressure you into jumping into things when you would prefer to take the time you need to make your decision.
- 6. If you are the serious type, try to develop a sense of humor.** Learn to laugh at your mistakes. At least be more accepting of the fact that you are bound to fail now and then. Mistakes are a great way to learn and improve.
- 7. Never apologize for being conscientious and overorganized.** As a firstborn, you need structure; you need your “to do” lists. The trick is not to be driven by them.

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 54-56. Used with permission of Fleming H. Ravell, a division of Baker Book House.



Making the Middle Birth Order Work¹

- 1. Nurture your natural people skills.** Middle-borns probably have certain people-oriented social skills because of all the negotiating and mediating they had to do while growing up. Use these skills to see both sides and deal with life as it really is.
- 2. Enjoy your uniqueness.** If you are the free-spirit type, fight to keep your unique qualities. Keep in mind that business and companies are often looking for someone with new ideas and the independence to try them.
- 3. Express yourself.** Middle children sometimes feel like no one will listen to them since they may have grown up feeling that their family never listened to them. Instead of apologizing for your opinions, or failing to offer them at all, share your ideas with others.
- 4. Focus on meaningful relationships.** If the “socially skilled, lots of friends” label fits you, rejoice and enjoy it. But don’t spread yourself too thin. No one can maintain a limitless number of relationships and keep them meaningful.
- 5. Don’t compare.** Don’t get sucked into playing comparison games. You understand better than anyone that there are always people who are above or below in terms of ability, interest, appearance, athletic skill, etc. Comparisons are futile and usually pointless.
- 6. Consider taking the lead.** Don’t get the mistaken idea that firstborns are the only people who can rise to positions of leadership. Middle children often make excellent managers and leaders because they understand compromise, negotiation, and giving something for something else (the art of *quid pro quo*).

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, p. 97. Used with permission of Fleming H. Ravell, a division of Baker Book House.

he can compete with the older sibling, he may do so. But if the older sibling is stronger, smarter, etc., the second born typically shoots off in another direction. The general conclusion of all research studies done on birth order is that second-borns will probably be somewhat the opposite of the firstborns. Because later-born children “bounce off” the ones directly above them, there is no way to predict which way they might go or how their personalities might develop.²

“I just didn’t get much respect” is a key distinguishing phrase for middle borns. Middle children often describe their birth position as “out of place,” “misunderstood,” “fifth wheels,” or as “leftovers who always got bypassed and upstaged by the younger or older siblings.” Friends become very special to the middle-born child — it’s how they obtain the cherished rewards and recognition that motivate all children. The middle born is independent and is extremely loyal to his peer group. Because of their birth order, middle-borns learn to negotiate and compromise and frequently work to avoid conflict.³

¹ Leman, K. (1985) *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, p. 89.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-94.

Last-Borns

Youngest children in the family are typically the outgoing charmers, the personable manipulators. They are also affectionate, uncomplicated, and sometimes a little absent-minded. Their “space cadet” approach to life gets laughs, smiles and shakes of the head. A typical characteristic of the last-born is that he is more carefree and

vivacious — a real “people person” who is usually popular in spite of (because of?) his clowning.¹

There is also another mainstream of qualities in most last-borns. Besides being charming, outgoing, affectionate, and uncomplicated, they can also be rebellious, critical, temperamental, spoiled, impatient, and impetuous — the “dark side” of the last-born. Last-borns carry the curse of not being taken seriously, first by their families and then by the world.

The tendency is to let the last born sort of shift for himself. It's not unusual for babies of the family to get most of their instruction from their brothers and sisters in many areas. Obviously, receiving instructions from older brothers and sisters does not ensure that last borns are getting the facts of life (or anything else) very straight. Last-borns are used to being put down.²

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, p. 101.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., pp. 116-117.

Only Child

Like firstborns, single children are often treated like little adults — sometimes to the point of feeling they never had a childhood. The labels describing firstborns also fit the only-born; but preceding each label — perfectionistic, reliable, conscientious, well-organized, critical, serious, scholarly, cautious, conservative — add the word *super*.¹

When the only child falls victim to perfectionism, she usually moves toward one of two extremes. Either one of these roads can lead to becoming the “discouraged perfectionist.”

He may become very critical, cold-blooded, and objective, never

Making the Last-Born Birth Order Work¹

1. **Accept responsibility for yourself.** Are you still passing the buck? You're not a little kid anymore, so why continue acting like one? It's time to grow up and take charge.
2. **Think neat.** Many last-borns are disorganized, even messy. Learn to pick up after yourself.
3. **Give of yourself.** While last-borns are usually people persons, ironically they struggle with self-centeredness. Offer to help others, then follow through and quietly do it without fanfare. Helping others — sharing your money, time and energy — is a great cure for self-centeredness.
4. **Beware of being too independent.** Work on admitting your faults. Don't blame others for your situation even if you think they caused it.
5. **Always be aware of your gifts: being funny, charming and persuasive.** Use these correctly and you will be an asset in any situation. Beware, however, of being a carrot seeker, always working for that pat on the head, and always asking, “What's in it for me?”
6. **Share the applause.** If you love the limelight, be advised that other people like a little of it now and then, too. When talking with others, always concentrate on asking them about their plans, their feelings and what they think.
7. **Before marriage, try dating first-borns.** You may find them the most compatible. After marriage, to any birth order, remember that your wife is not your “mommy,” or your husband is not your “daddy.”

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 116-117. Used with permission of Fleming H. Ravell, a division of Baker Book House.



tolerating mistakes or failure on his part or on the part of others. Or she may become everybody's rescuer, the one who agonizes over the problems of others and always wants to move in, take over, and solve everything. Discouraged perfectionists are usually very structured people who hold very high expectations for themselves and others.²

What Can the Discouraged Perfectionist Do?³

1. Start each day by giving yourself permission to be imperfect (perfection isn't achievable). Make a conscious effort to go easy on criticizing yourself and others.
2. Learn to accept. There is no way you can change anybody else's behavior. Stop trying.
3. Memorize "I was wrong," "I'm sorry," and "Will you forgive me?" and use them often.
4. Don't be so quick to put yourself down, and when others criticize, don't be so quick to react. Perfectionists are sensitive — be aware of your sensitivity, admit it and cope with it patiently.
5. Take small bites of reality. Perfectionists often overwhelm themselves with the BIG picture, so work at doing one thing at a time.

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 58-59.

² Ibid., p. 59

³ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

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Making the Only Child Birth Order Work¹

1. **Pay attention to all the ideas in Making the Firstborn Birth Order Work** (see page 3).
2. **Exercise extreme caution.** Be ruthless with yourself in regard to making too many commitments and expecting too much of yourself.
3. **Make time for yourself.** Is time and space for yourself really built into your schedule? Most only children are the type who need some time for themselves.
4. **Choose friends wisely.** As a rule, only children get along better with people much older or much younger than themselves. Try to arrange experiences with both groups because these are the personalities you are most likely to click with and the people who will give you more strokes and argue with you less.
5. **Do a self-inventory.** Only children are often labeled selfish and self-centered because they may never have had to learn to share with brothers and sisters. Take an honest inventory of your life. How self-centered do you act around your spouse, friends or fellow workers? What specific things can you do to put others first, help others more and be less critical of others?

¹ Leman, K. (1985). *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 78-81. Used with permission of Fleming H. Ravell, a division of Baker Book House.

For more information on family issues, contact your county Extension office or the University of Maine Cooperative Extension family living office, 5717 Corbett Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5717 (207) 581-3448/3104 or 1-800-287-0274.

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