

Birth Order and Parenting

Have you ever wondered how your children can come from the same parents and upbringing, yet be so completely different? Part of the reason may be because of their birth order. There are some tendencies that we can observe in children who are the oldest in their families and other characteristics that we often see in the youngest children.

Looking at children without siblings, many people would report that they are very privileged since there is no competition for affection, money, gifts or attention. These children may be very dependent on others because, as the child, little responsibility falls upon them. Parents can help boost their child's self-confidence while bonding at the same time by allowing the child to help with daily chores. This also helps the child develop important skills learned through role playing and assisting parents. It's a win for everyone; bonding, learning, communication, and parents get a helping hand!

Children without siblings also learn to play independently which fosters their imagination and creativity. As well, since these children interact mainly with adults, they often have well developed social skills. Parents can help with the overall development of their only child by providing opportunities for play dates and group activities so that their child can also learn cooperative skills, form peer relations and gain self-confidence. Programs such as "Come Play with Me" and many others at Family Services of Central Alberta will help achieve this.

With this information in mind, we can understand part of the picture with first-borns. They had their time of being an only child, only for it to be interrupted by the birth of a baby brother or sister. After the birth of a sibling, these children often work to gain their parents' attention by obeying the rules and being extra good. However, if these efforts are unsuccessful, they may start to misbehave since this method is almost always effective at gaining parental attention. As they grow, they may either become very responsible and competent or become discouraged and regress. If they are becoming discouraged, you may see an increase in 'baby talk' and clinging to parents in an attempt to mimic the younger sibling's behaviour which successfully gains attention.

Once they adjust to their new sibling, they may mimic their parents and be very protective of their baby brother or sister. This trait commonly extends into adolescents and adulthood where they typically take on a lot of responsibility and like being in positions of control in an effort to help and protect others.

From the perspective of the middle child, they may not be allowed to do all the activities that the oldest can, and they also may not have all the same privileges that the youngest does, which is why we often hear them explain that life is unfair. This all being said, the middle child is often very flexible and has a range of capabilities because they

have exposure to both an older and younger sibling. Although they may act out and become viewed as the “difficult child”, they actually have many skills at their disposal. Parents can help these middle children better their view of life by explaining that they have the best of both worlds.

The youngest child, similar to the middle child or second-born, is constantly trying to do what the other siblings are doing, which may lead them to believe that everyone is more capable than they are. This may sound similar to an only child. In fact, the youngest child often acts like an only child, maybe because they are often alone once the older children are of school age. Similar to an only child, they may expect others to do things for them. These children may often be viewed as the ‘baby’ and will be treated as such. On the other hand, another common trend seen in the youngest child may be strength and independence. They are tough because they try to keep up with older siblings and are thus prone to injury and independent because they want to do things themselves to be like their older siblings.

So although each birth order presents unique challenges that parents need to be aware of, they each also provide individual strengths and assets that help our children develop and grow. Parents can speak with each of their children to help them understand that they are unique and try to avoid comparisons within the family.

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