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Why first borns rule the roost

by Michael Grose

Birth order is a powerful influence on personality, because a family is the first group that a child belongs to. Finding their place is the key to gaining limited parental attention and resources. Like a constellation of stars that form their own patterns, children also form distinctive relationships within families, making it difficult to understand a child without knowing the whole family dynamic.

Families aren't level playing fields. If you're born first you received undivided parental attention, emotional and physical resources. Early in life, first-borns spend more of their time around adults than subsequent children. They're more likely to be influenced by their parents than children born in any other position. They are born first and those children who follow had better stick to their playbook for the sake of family harmony.

Only children, who are now large enough in number to enter birth order mainstream are first-borns who have never experienced dethronement. They remain the sole focus of parent attention and resources.

The flip side of being first

The flip side for first-borns is that they can pay a high price for their position of privilege. They are frequently more intense, more anxiety-prone and more inflexible than any other birth order position. They are also ground breakers, introducing parents to every stage of development from infancy to adolescence. First-borns live with a pressure that is unfamiliar to later-borns, so they frequently take fewer risks as learners to avoid the shame of making mistakes and disappointing their parents.

Seconds on the back foot

If you're born second you're instantly on the back foot. You probably get a left-over name and you have parents who share their time, energy and resources with another child. You also have to contend with an eldest sibling intent on keeping you in your place.

Second-borns don't experience the same degree of pressure as their eldest sibling and can easily slip under the radar of high parental expectation. Avoiding some of the pitfalls of perfectionism and anxiety that frequently afflict first-borns is a blessing for these free-spirited, flexible, justice-seekers. Though they may perceive themselves as victims of poor timing, second-borns enjoy greater levels of resilience and wider friendships circles than their eldest siblings.

Remember the youngest

As for a third and most likely youngest child, there's a good chance that most parents struggle recalling the finer details of their birth. They are in the fortunate position of having a sibling break their parents in for them and don't experience nearly as much pressure as their eldest siblings. Youngest children soon learn that it's hard to impress their parents, as they don't become overawed with potty training, a toddler's work of art or the transition from primary to secondary school. Their parents have seen it all before. Youngest children also receive less discipline and more freedom than their siblings, which probably explains why many youngest children believe that rules are for others, not them.

The Prince Harry effect

As families continue to shrink in size the nature of birth order is also changing. As well as the traditional first/only, second and youngest children there is a new birth order position – the second child who is also the youngest. While a second-born will never be referred to as the baby of the family like a third-born, they share many youngest children traits and tendencies such as extraversion, charm and risk-taking. Second child and youngest child traits are a potent mix for any agent of change, which is something Prince Harry is using to full effect.

In closing

Birth order knowledge provides parents with a rich vein of information about children. Now that families are shrinking and positions are being polarised, this window into kids motivations and personalities is easier than ever to assess and understand.

This is an edited extract from the book Why first borns rule the world and later borns want to change it. This fully updated and revised edition of the 2003 classic edition helps you delve deeper into the constellation of positions within a family, giving you a clearer picture of your own quirks and ambitions as well as helping you better manage, motivate and relate to children and young people.