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A Look At The Affects Of Birth Order On Personality, Mental Health, Intelligence, Self-Esteem, Happiness, And Resilience

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Have you ever watched a Tik Tok or Instagram reel about how the oldest is always the responsible perfectionist? Or how the middle child is always the people pleaser? Well in this paper we will dive into whether or not birth order actually affects personality and intelligence. We'll also explore associations between birth order and mental health, self-esteem, resilience, and happiness. Birth order is something nobody can control, and humanity is always curious about the things that we can't control, so there has been a lot of research on the effects of birth order.

This curiosity about the influence of birth order has created many theories. According to Roher et al. (2015) Frank Sulloway proposed one of the most widely known theories about birth order in 1996 called the Family Niche Theory of birth-order effects. His theory suggests that birth order effects are similar to Darwin's theory of evolution. He says siblings adopt certain personality traits and roles in the family to reduce competition and improve cooperation between siblings and family members. These differences in personality based on birth order can be measured in terms of the Big Five personality traits. The Big Five personality traits are: extraversion (how outgoing a person is), neuroticism (how emotionally stable someone is), agreeableness (how kind and considerate a person can be), conscientiousness (how well someone can control their impulses), and openness to experiences (how willing someone is to try new things). This theory, while seemingly logical and probable, has been difficult for scientists to either prove or disprove.

According to Roher et al. (2015), Sulloway's hypotheses were confirmed by several empirical studies. However, many other studies testing his theory confirmed only part of his theory was true or found no evidence that any of his hypotheses were true. All these different results show just how difficult it is to determine birth order effects on personality. There are

many factors to consider, such as how socioeconomic status, age gaps, genes, etc. affect personality. Scientists also have to consider how they are going to measure a person's personality and the differences between siblings' personalities. Many scientists used surveys that participants would fill out to rate their personality. This introduces potential bias because participants might not answer honestly or view their personality differently from what it truly is. Therefore, Julia Roher, Boris Egloff, and Stefan Schmukle decided to try to control these factors and settle the debate over whether or not birth order affects personality in their research study.

Roher, Egloff, and Schmukle (2015) conducted a study with multiple large groups of people from different parts of the nation and used different types of research designs in their study. This ensured that their results would be as accurate and likely as possible. Roher et al. (2015) found that there was no significant effect between birth order and personality for four of the five Big Five personality traits. The four traits that they found that birth order had no effect on are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (emotional stability). The only effect of birth order on personality that they could find was openness, more specifically, intelligence. They found a small decrease in intelligence between siblings, with the oldest sibling being slightly more intelligent than the younger siblings. This lack of evidence for Sulloway's theory seems to disprove his theory (or at least the parts that discuss extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability). This study also demonstrates how unlikely it is that birth order affects personality in any major way.

Even though birth order is unlikely to have any major effect on personality, there is evidence that birth order impacts intelligence. Damian & Roberts (2015) are two scientists who conducted research on how birth order influences intelligence. They used three different scales (verbal, mathematical, and spatial) to measure different aspects of intelligence. They found that

birth order does affect intelligence to some degree. Their research showed that firstborns were a bit more intelligent than siblings born after the firstborn. However, before you get too upset about not being born first, you should know that the difference between firstborns and siblings born after the first born is only about 0.6 IQ points. Their research doesn't really support the idea that birth order affects intelligence. The effect is very tiny and is not likely to have a large impact on most people's intelligence or lives. Again, we see that being born first or last is not likely to have a huge impact on someone's life.

We've looked at how birth order may affect personality and intelligence, but what about mental health, self-esteem, resilience, and happiness? Fukuya et al. (2021) investigated just that. They conducted research on the effects of birth order on mental health, self-esteem, resilience, and happiness on Japanese children 9-10. As a warning, there may be some cultural differences between Japan, and other cultures and these results are for children not adolescents or adults, so the results could change over time. In their research they found that birth order had virtually no effect on self-esteem, but that the forgotten middle child stereotype may have some truth. Middle-born children did have the lowest happiness score and felt closer to their friends and less close to their parents compared to other groups. Fukuya et al., also found that last-born children are the least likely children to have mental health issues and are the most resilient children (2015).

Fukuya et al. (2015) found that being the youngest sibling may be the best outcome if you could choose when you were born. This could be because older siblings act as role models and demonstrate how to develop good social and emotional skills, which help protect against mental health problems and problems with peers. Usually, children with siblings also spend more time with their older siblings than they do with their parents. When children interact with their

siblings it helps them to understand others' emotions, thoughts, and intentions. Plus, playing and fighting with siblings develops the ability to regulate emotions and learn problem-solving skills. Overall, the youngest sibling gets the most opportunities to learn and develop these skills compared to older children and only children.

Another reason that being the youngest might be the best is that older siblings often act as second caregivers. They can provide a sense of security and comfort when parents don't necessarily do (Fukuya et al., 2015). Mariñas et al. (2020) did a research study on how a five year or more age gap changes the sibling relationship. They found that the oldest sibling often acts as a role model to the younger sibling(s) and change their attitude to become more authoritative over time as they act as a sort of second parent. When the new sibling is born, it changes the family dynamic, which can cause sibling jealousy, behavior issues, emotional issues, and lower self-esteem. When parents treat siblings differently it might affect older siblings more and the youngest sibling the least because once the oldest is out of the house the different treatment is less noticeable. The oldest sibling is also often expected to act as a role model for the younger siblings which isn't necessarily fair and can add stress that the youngest sibling doesn't have.

However, the researchers did want to point out that other studies "reported that last-born adolescents and adults have an increased risk of mental illness in the US, the UK, Norway, and Sweden, which is inconsistent with our findings" (Fukuya et al., 2015). This could be because the positive effects of birth order change in adolescence and adulthood or be because of cultural differences between western countries and Japan. Either way, more research needs to be done to understand why the differences are happening. Overall, their research shows that being the youngest child in childhood seems like the best position to have as you're less likely to be mentally ill and not have the stress of being a role model to your younger siblings.

Despite how interesting the idea of birth order affecting personality is, there is not enough concrete evidence to support this theory. There is some research to support the theory that being the oldest child means that you will have a higher IQ, but the difference in IQ's is minimal and more research needs to be done to understand why this is and to fully confirm that birth order affects intelligence. Also, being the oldest is not all it's cracked up to be. The oldest is often under more pressure to be a role model to their siblings. The youngest sibling on the other hand always has an older sibling as an example and has more opportunities to play and problem-solve with their sibling(s), so they have more opportunities to practice their social development.

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