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Birth Order Traits: Your Guide to Sibling Personality Differences

Being the first, middle, youngest, or only child probably influences your behavior. Here's what you need to know about the link between birth order and personality traits.

By **Jocelyn Voo** Updated on July 30, 2020

You can bet your paycheck that your firstborn and second-born children are going to be different, says Dr. Kevin Leman, a psychologist who has studied birth order since 1967 and wrote [*The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*](#) (Revell). Psychologists like Leman believe the secret to sibling personality differences lies in birth order—whether you're the oldest, middle, youngest, or only child—and how parents treat their child because of it.

Meri Wallace, a child and family therapist for over 20 years and author of [*Birth Order Blues*](#) (Owl Books), agrees about this birth order theory. "Some of it has to do with the way the parent relates to the child in his position, and some of it actually happens because of the spot position. Each position has unique challenges," she explains.

Here's what parents need to know about birth order personality traits for oldest, middle, youngest, and only children.

Firstborn Personality Traits

Simply by being a couple's first child, a firstborn will naturally be raised with a mixture of instinct and trial-and-error. This often causes parents to become by-the-book caregivers who are extremely attentive, stringent with rules, and overly neurotic about the minutiae. This, in turn, may cause the child to become a perfectionist, always striving to please their parents.

Firstborns bask in their parents' presence, which may explain why they sometimes act like mini-adults. They're also diligent and want to excel at everything they do. As the leader of the pack, firstborns often tend to be:

- Reliable
- Conscientious
- Structured
- Cautious
- Controlling
- Achievers

Firstborn Strengths

The firstborn is accustomed to being the center of attention; they have Mom and Dad to themselves before siblings arrive. "Many parents spend more time reading and explaining things to firstborns. It's not as easy when other kids come into the picture," says Frank Farley, Ph.D., a psychologist at Temple University, in Philadelphia, who has studied personality and human development for decades. "That undivided attention may have a lot to do with why firstborns tend to be overachievers," he explains. In addition to usually [scoring higher on IQ tests](#) and generally getting more education than their brothers and sisters, firstborns tend to outearn their siblings.

Firstborn Challenges

Success comes with a price: Firstborns tend to be type A personalities who never cut themselves any slack. "They often have an intense [fear of failure](#), so nothing they accomplish feels good enough," says Michelle P. Maidenberger, Ph.D., a child and family therapist in White Plains, New York. And because they dread making a misstep, oldest kids tend to stick to the straight and

narrow: "They're typically inflexible—they don't like change and are hesitant to step out of their comfort zone," she explains.

In addition, because firstborns are often given a lot of responsibility at home—whether it's [helping with chores](#) or watching over younger siblings—they can be quick to take charge (and can be bossy when they do). That burden can lead to excess stress for a child who already feels pressure to be perfect.

Middle Child Personality Traits

If a couple decides to [have a second child](#), they might raise their second-born with less of an iron fist due to their previous experience. They might also be less attentive since there's other children in their lives. Therefore, the middle child is often a people-pleaser due to the lack of attention they get in comparison to older siblings and younger siblings.

"The middle child often feels left out and a sense of, 'Well, I'm not the oldest. I'm not the youngest. Who am I?'" says therapist Meri Wallace. This sort of hierarchical floundering leads middle children to make their mark among their peers, since parental attention is usually devoted to the beloved firstborn or baby of the family. What's more, "middle children are the toughest to pin down because they play off their older sibling," says Dr. Leman.

In general, middle children tend to possess the following birth order personality traits:

- People-pleasers
- Somewhat rebellious
- Thrives on friendships
- Has large social circle
- Peacemaker

Middle Child Strengths

Middleborns are go-with-the-flow types; once a younger sibling arrives, they must learn how to constantly negotiate and compromise in order to "fit in" with

everyone. Not surprisingly, Dr. Sulloway notes, middle kids score higher in agreeableness than both their older and younger sibs.

Because they receive less attention at home, middletons tend to forge stronger bonds with friends and be less tethered to their family than their brothers and sisters. "They're usually the first of their siblings to take a trip with another family or to want to [sleep at a friend's house](#)," says Linda Dunlap, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Marist College, in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Middle Child Challenges

Middle kids once lived as the baby of the family, until they were dethroned by a new sibling. Unfortunately, they're often acutely aware that they don't get as much [parental attention](#) as their "trailblazing" older sibling or the beloved youngest, and they feel like their needs and wants are ignored. "Middle kids are in a difficult position in a family because they think they're not valued," says Dr. Maidenberg, "It's easy for them to be left out and get lost in the shuffle." And there is some validity to their complaint: A survey by TheBabyWebsite.com, a British parenting resource, found that a third of parents with three children admit to giving their middle child far less attention than they give the other two.

Youngest Child Personality Traits

Youngest children tend to be the most free-spirited due to their parents' increasingly laissez-faire attitude towards parenting the second (or third, or fourth, or fifth...) time around. The baby of the family tends to have the following birth order traits:

- Fun-loving
- Uncomplicated
- Manipulative
- Outgoing
- Attention-seeker
- Self-centered

Youngest Child Strengths

Lastborns generally aren't the strongest or the smartest in the room, so they develop their own ways of winning attention. They're natural charmers with an [outgoing, social personality](#); no surprise then that many famous actors and comedians are the baby of the family, or that they score higher in "agreeableness" on personality tests than firstborns, according to Dr. Sulloway's research.

Youngests also make a play for the spotlight with their adventurousness. Free-spirited lastborns are more open to unconventional experiences and taking physical risks than their siblings (research has shown that they're more likely to [play sports like football](#) and soccer than their older siblings, who preferred activities like track and tennis).

Youngest Child Challenges

Youngests are known for feeling that "nothing I do is important," Dr. Leman notes. "None of their accomplishments seem original. Their siblings have already learned to talk, read, and ride a bike. So parents react with less spontaneous joy at their accomplishments and may even wonder, 'Why can't he catch on faster?'"

Lastborns also learn to use their role as the baby to manipulate others in order to get their way. "They're the least likely to be disciplined," Dr. Leman notes. Parents often coddle the littlest when it comes to chores and rules, failing to hold them to the same standards as their siblings.

Only Children Personality Traits

[Being an only child](#) is a unique position. Without any siblings to compete with, the only child monopolizes his parents' attention and resources—not just for a short period of time like a firstborn, but forever. In effect, this makes an only child something like a "super-firstborn": only children have the privilege (and the burden) of having all their parents' support and expectations on their shoulders. Thus, only children tend to be:

- Mature for their age
- Perfectionists

- Conscientious
- Diligent
- Leaders

Article Website: <https://www.parents.com/baby/development/social/birth-order-and-personality/>