

THE PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAM

BIRTH ORDER CHARACTERISTICS

People are often amazed at how different their memories and those of their siblings and parents are about their childhood experiences. "Siblings" is a term used for brothers and/or sisters in a family. Every member of the family may have been present or involved in a particular situation that occurred and everyone may have a slightly different version of the story. Their stories may differ in what happened, why it happened, and what it all meant. Differences in what each person remembers of a certain event do not necessarily imply that someone is being untruthful, confused, or forgetful. Each person can truthfully have a different memory of the same event because they each have a different experience of the event. Each child in a family experiences things from a different point of view. Birth order is one of the most significant factors that influences our own experiences of growing up and subsequently our general life experiences.

Birth order is the order in which children are born into a family. There are many birth order characteristics that help to explain some of the ways in which children experience things differently. For example, although many parents try to treat their children basically the same, birth order does have an affect on how parents actually treat the child. Parents usually change their expectations and are more relaxed in their child rearing after the first child. After the first child they are more experienced as parents and will automatically behave differently towards and treat following children somewhat differently.

The firstborn child has a different life situation than the rest of the children in the family. The first child had mom and dad to themselves before the intrusion of other siblings. Thus their world changes when other children are born into the family. The oldest

child may be asked to help with younger ones which gives them a different perspective and experience as a child.

Parents are often more guarded with their first child, having stricter rules and more concerns with safety and health. Inexperienced first time parents are simply not as sure and comfortable with the first child. They may not know what to do about crying, feeding times, sickness and so on. They tend to spend much more time and energy taking care of, and watching the growth of this child closely, to assure themselves they are doing things right. The oldest child grows up initially having a lot of Mom and Dad's attention.

This close attention suddenly changes upon the arrival of a new baby in the household. Mothers and fathers of new babies are often exhausted from caring for an infant. The physical strain of pregnancy and delivery on mother prevents the mother from being as available to others as she used to be. Father may also be exhausted, as well as both being emotionally stressed at this time. The oldest child is no longer the center of attention having been dethroned by a strange little baby. Once they had all of mom and dad's attention, and now they have to compete with a baby to get attention. Most often there doesn't seem to be enough attention to go around. The attention that the oldest child does get, often lacks in quality.

In looking at this situation from the point of view of the dethroned child, their life has dramatically changed and this creates new stress and challenges for the child. The child still wants and needs attention from the parents but discovers that the things that used to get them attention no longer work in the same way. The child is challenged with finding new ways of attracting the attention they want and need. One very common way children try to get attention is by mimicking the baby. When an older child takes up, or goes back to behaviors they had outgrown, and starts acting like the younger child or baby to get attention, it is referred to as regression.

Common examples of regression are bed wetting, wetting clothing, and sucking thumb, pacifier or bottle. The child may act helpless,

pretending not to be able to do some of the things they used to do in order to get mom or dad to help them and give them attention. All of these are normal reactions for the older child when a new baby arrives.

After all, they seem to work to get the baby attention. However, some of these behaviors can be very frustrating for parents. There are things parents can do to help minimize regression. By showing the older child that they are still very important and special, they help to ease the child into acceptance of this new situation. The older child can be encouraged to help with the baby by bringing diapers, bottles or carrying other things. They need to be complimented whenever they attempt to help out. Parents need to use patience and compassion in dealing with the older child. Sometimes in trying to help, the child may do things that are not safe or are not helpful at all. They are often very curious about the new baby and want to explore what this child is all about. When older children are forbidden to touch, play with, hold or participate with the new baby, they feel separated from their parents and the baby. They may act out their hurt feelings by withdrawing, or by becoming angry and aggressive. Sometimes they may poke at, pinch, or hit the baby, or even their parents. Rather than harshly correcting the child and forbidding them from being with the baby, parents need to redirect their behavior.

Parents can calmly express their concern that the baby might be hurt and redirect the behavior by showing the child how to gently touch and love the baby. Parents who encourage the older child to participate with the baby, and supervise them together, take care of the safety needs of the baby and the emotional needs of the older child at the same time. The older child's curiosity is satisfied in a safe way. Doing this will help to reduce the amount of jealousy that the older child may experience. If the older child is invited to participate, complimented for their efforts and reminded how big and competent and special they are, things will go smoother for everyone in the family. Each family has it's own way of forming, growing and

interacting. The family and it's members are referred to as the family system or constellation. With the addition of each new member, the constellation changes. The interactions between each individual member in the family are influenced by the interactions of the other members.

Each member has their own way of relating to others in the family and the family has it's own way of relating to individual members as well as those outside of the family. Many families have separate constellations within the family. Some of the siblings may be in a constellation with other siblings. Some constellations are made up of the boys, or the girls, or the middle children in the family. In particular, the siblings are strongly influenced by each other, and the addition of each new member to the family changes how the influence is felt. Every time a child is added to the family, the sibling constellations change. Some members may be dethroned from their previous position in the family. Others may have another child added to their constellation in the family.

Each child may move through the family system and fit into different constellations or niches throughout the families development. The first born child not only has the distinction of being first, but also having been the only child for a while. An only child in a family has different characteristics from children in families who have siblings. Some children come into the family and maintain the position of baby of the family for a long time. They may be moved out of that position when a new child is added to the family. They may move into the group of the middle children. The more children in the family, the more moves and adaptations each child has to make. The following list shows some of the various characteristics for some of the birth order positions.

OLDEST CHILD	MIDDLE	BABY
responsible	unfair	compared
bossy	peace makers	competitive
pressured	flexible	manipulative
demanding	accepting	resentful

competitive	competitive	competitive	domineering
goal-oriented	smooth living	perfectionistic	
survivor	artistic		
rule bound		demanding	
leaders		head strong	
high achievers		adaptable	
cautious		experimenter	
conservative			
guinea pigs			

We will explore how many of these characteristics are developed and how they are related to the child's position and experience within the family. All of these characteristics or traits can have both positive and negative aspects.

If there is a span of five or more years between children, the birth order traits start over. In a family with six children for example, ages 14, 12, 11, 5, 3, and 1, there are two constellations of siblings, the oldest three and the youngest three. The 12 year old is a middle child and the 11 year old, although a middle child by age is the youngest or baby of the family. Because there is a six year difference to the next child, the 5 year old will carry traits of the oldest child. The 3 year old will be another middle child and the 1 year old will be the baby of that group.

The oldest child usually tries to live up to the standards desired by the parents and are high achievers. They often have a sense of being the child that represents their family and are pressured to do a good job of it. They conform to family rules and regulations. They often want to be better than the other siblings in some area. They can be bossy of the younger children and often enjoy being leaders. Because they are the oldest and no one blazes the trail ahead of them they are often cautious and conservative. As parents begin to learn how to raise children and try out new things, the oldest often feels as though they were the guinea pigs. They may be competitive in order to stay on top and be number one.

The second born child will exhibit extreme personality differences from the oldest child. They need a very different approach to getting attention and their own way of making their mark

in the family and the world. They are not as concerned with rules and regulations and are more flexible and friendly. They tend to demand less of their parents attention. They are however, also in a position of always trying to catch up to, or keep up with, the oldest child.

Middle children often view things in their life as being unfair. Their position in the family can easily lead them to interpret things this way. They do not hold the same position as the oldest child. They are often the ones who get hand-me-down clothes and toys rather than new things.

By the time the youngest is born, things are worn out and the youngest gets new things. They never have a sense of being on top in the family in the way that the oldest child and baby do. They always have to compete for attention and sometimes compete with several other children. The middle-of-three child will usually have either the strongest or weakest personality in the family. In large families, the middle children are usually cooperative and reliable. They do not expect extra attention or privileges and are less competitive in the family.

The baby in the family has a very special niche. Often the family continues to view them as the baby well after they are grown up and independent. They are frequently not taken seriously. They are often competitive in order to prove how accomplished and un-baby-like they are. They can be demanding and headstrong and use manipulation to get what they want. They have difficulty in settling down and are rarely quiet. Play is enjoyable for them and they are more likely to feel safe enough to experiment with many things.

The only child is in a unique and difficult position in the family. They have no other siblings to relate to, and develop peer relationships with. There are two distinct ways for them to find their niche with their parents. They must attempt to fit in with the adults although they are not adults themselves, or else they remain the helpless and inferior baby. They adapt traits of both the oldest child and the youngest child. They often have difficulty in relating with other children, neither understanding their sissy ways, or not

feeling a sense of belonging with other children. They may be responsible, independent, and controlling. They have high expectations and often learn to be manipulative. As a child, the only child develops a strong need to have time alone. They are on their best in one-on-one situations and are very special and creative. They are often lonely and sometimes use imaginary friends to develop peer relationships and have companions. The only child who learns to adapt to the adults around them grows up very fast. The only child who remains in the baby mode has a very difficult and long process in growing up and becoming independent and capable.

Each position in the family has its own unique experience. There are many factors that can cause a child to change or experience different positions in the family. The birth of a child, or the death of a child will cause movement in the sibling order. Serious illness, or the absence of a child in the family will also cause changes in the order.

The increasing number of divorces, remarriages and various living together arrangements of families also influences the child's sense of position in the family. Whenever children from two different households are combined in their living arrangements, changes can occur in their sense of belonging and their sense of position within the family. In a blended family, children who were previously the oldest, may suddenly find themselves as a middle child or even the baby of the family. These transitions can be stressful and very difficult for children as well as other family members. This will be addressed more thoroughly in another study guide.

Parents can be more successful with their children by understanding and accepting that each child is different and special. Each child has a different view of the world based upon their position in the family and their experiences. As parents learn to recognize and understand this, they can deal more effectively and empathetically with their children.

STUDY QUESTIONS - STUDY GUIDE NINE
BIRTH ORDER CHARACTERISTICS

1. Siblings is a term used for:
 - a) cousins
 - b) nieces and nephews
 - c) brothers and/or sisters in a family
 - d) any children living in a household

2. Each child in a family experiences things from:
 - a) the same point of view
 - b) a different point of view
 - c) an unrealistic point of view
 - d) basically the same view as their grandparents

3. Birth order is the order in which:
 - a) children are born into the family
 - b) the order of importance of children in the family
 - c) how many children are born in a family
 - d) the only way children find their position in the family

4. Parents usually change their expectations and are more relaxed in their child rearing after:
 - a) the second child is five years old
 - b) the first child
 - c) they have a son rather than daughter
 - d) they become rich

5. The oldest child grows up having _____ had a lot of mom and dad's attention
 - a) never
 - b) always
 - c) later
 - d) initially

6. After the arrival of a new baby, the oldest child is no longer the center of attention and is _____ by the baby.
 - a) elevated
 - b) encouraged
 - c) deported
 - d) dethroned

7. where the oldest child once had all of mom and dad's attention, now they have:
 - a) no attention at all
 - b) to compete with the baby for attention
 - c) no way to get any attention
 - d) no need for their parent's attention

8. One of the very common ways children try to get attention is by:
- a) yelling a lot
 - b) crying all of the time
 - c) withdrawing
 - d) mimicking the baby
9. When an older child takes up behaviors of a younger child or baby that they have outgrown to get attention it is referred to as:
- a) transgression
 - b) regression
 - c) aggression
 - d) babying
10. Which is not a common example of regression?
- a) thumb sucking
 - b) bed wetting
 - c) breaking things intentionally
 - d) acting helpless
11. Regression is a _____ reaction for the older child when a new baby arrives.
- a) dangerous
 - b) unhealthy
 - c) normal
 - d) welcome
12. Parents can help to ease the older child's acceptance of a new baby by _____
- a) keeping the older child and baby separated
 - b) not having the older child help out with the baby
 - c) showing the older child that they are still very important and special
 - d) ignoring regression in the older child
13. Older children want to touch, hold, or participate with the new baby, because they:
- a) want to hurt the new baby
 - b) are curious about the new baby
 - c) like to upset their parents
 - d) believe the baby is a doll or toy
14. Parents who encourage the older child to participate with the baby and supervise them together take care of the safety needs of the baby and:
- a) get a rest at the same time
 - b) put too much burden on the older child
 - c) the emotional needs of the older child too
 - d) parents do not need to spend time alone with the older child

15. The family and it's members are referred to as the:
 - a) family system or constellation
 - b) family group
 - c) dynamic
 - d) siblings

16. Every time a child is added to the family, the sibling constellations:
 - a) change
 - b) stay the same
 - c) develop
 - d) resist

17. The first born child not only has the distinction of being first, but also _____
 - a) always being the most important
 - b) being the only child for a while
 - c) never having been the baby
 - d) being the least important to the parents

18. The more children in the family, the more moves and _____ each child has to make.
 - a) growth
 - b) development
 - c) adaptations
 - d) positions

19. All of the birth order characteristic have _____
 - a) only negative aspects
 - b) only positive aspects
 - c) aspects are neither positive or negative
 - d) both positive and negative aspects

20. If there is a span of _____ or more years between children, the birth order traits start over
 - a) one
 - b) two
 - c) five
 - d) seven

21. The oldest child usually tries to live up to the standards desired by the parents and are _____

a) low achievers	b) high achievers
c) non competitive	d) conformists

22. Because they are the oldest and no one blazes the trail ahead of them, they are often _____
 - a) aggressive
 - b) cautious and conservative
 - c) rebellious and defiant

- d) non competitive
23. The second born child will exhibit _____ the oldest child.
- a) very similar personalities as
 - b) a much more likeable personality than
 - c) extreme personality differences from
 - d) a less interesting personality than
24. The second born child is in the position of always trying to catch up to, or keep up with, _____.
- a) the baby
 - b) the parents
 - c) the oldest child
 - d) the only child
25. Middle children often view things in their lives as being:
- a) simple
 - b) competitive
 - c) unfair
 - d) boring
26. In large families, the middle children are usually:
- a) highly competitive
 - b) uncooperative and unreliable
 - c) loners
 - d) cooperative and reliable
27. An only child will try to find their niche with their parents in two distinct ways, they either attempt to fit in with the adults or:
- a) withdraw from their parents
 - b) remain the helpless and inferior baby
 - c) become super competent with other children
 - d) avoid contact with other children
28. An only child adapts traits which are characteristic of both the oldest child and the _____ child.
- a) middle
 - b) youngest
 - c) not yet born
 - d) the second to the oldest
29. As a child, an only child develops a strong need to have:
- a) no other children around them
 - b) others share things with them
 - c) time alone
 - d) all of their time occupied
30. A child's position in the family will change because of which of the following:
- a) divorce or remarriage of parents

- b) birth of another child
- c) death of a child
- d) all of the above