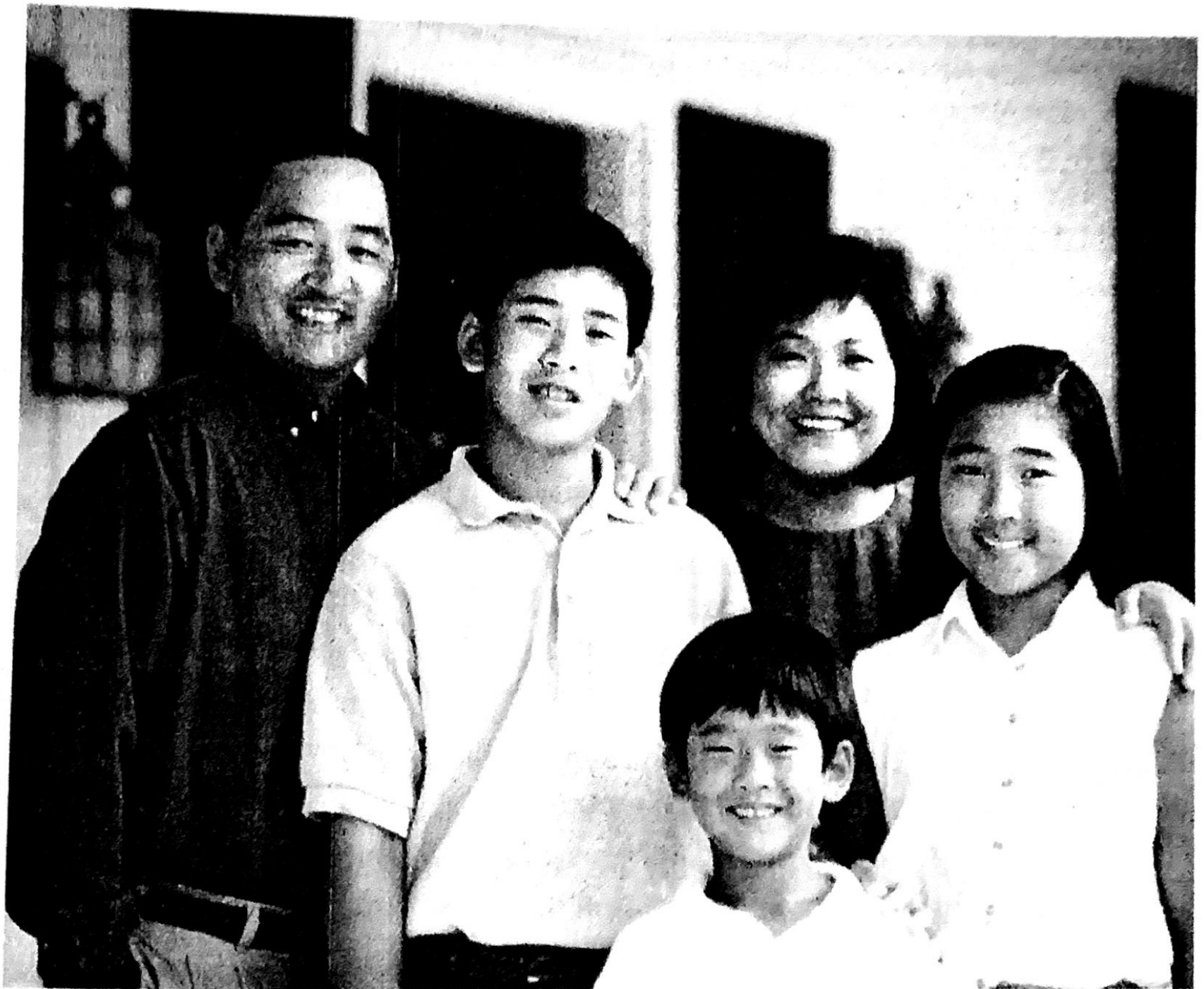


# Birth Order and Your Place in Life

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- Do children raised in the same family end up with similar personalities? Why or why not?
- What shapes a child's personality?

## PART 1

# INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC, READING, AND DISCUSSION

### **A** Reflection

Make a list of the children in your family, from oldest to youngest, and include your name in the list. Write each name on a different line. Then look at the adjectives and phrases in the box. Write these words next to the names they describe. (A word may apply to more than one person, but assign it to the person who comes to mind first.)

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capable  
confident  
fast learner  
flexible  
independent  
parental  
protected by parents  
responsible  
sometimes lonely  
tattletale\*  
unusually dependent on parents

**tattletale:** one who "tattles," or reports, to adults when someone else misbehaves

 **Follow-up** Compare your list with a classmate's. Are there any similarities in the descriptions you chose for the oldest child? The youngest?

### **B** Discussion

Read each statement, and write *A* if you agree with it and *D* if you disagree. Then discuss your answers in pairs or small groups.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 Older children in a family are often parental and bossy toward the younger children.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2 Parents are more relaxed and less excited about their second- and third-born children.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3 Older children are more responsible because the younger siblings depend on them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4 Youngest children are often spoiled\* because of all the care and attention they receive. They may pout\* when they don't get their own way.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5 In smaller families there is little competition among the children for their parents' love and attention.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6 When there is a fight between an older and a younger sibling, parents will usually take the side of the younger one and protect him or her.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7 Parents are less strict\* with their first children than with their later ones.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8 Most children who are difficult and demand a lot of attention will grow up to be difficult people.

**pout:** *act or look bad-tempered and silent*

**spoiled:** *harmed by too little discipline and too much attention*

**strict:** *setting many rules that must be obeyed*

### **C** Preparing to read

#### NOTES ON THE READING .....

It is interesting to notice that in a family with several children, the children are usually very different from each other. To explain the differences, some psychologists point out that even with the same parents, each child's environment is a little different. Furthermore, each child reacts to his or her environment differently because of differences in personality.

In "How Your Birth Order Influences Your Life Adjustment," Lucille K. Forer explains the differences between siblings by looking at their birth order. According to this reading, whether one is an only child, the oldest, a middle, or the youngest child determines to a great extent the kind of person that one will become.

This chapter from a book is written in an academic style, and uses many long sentences. You will find it easier to read by breaking up very long sentences into meaningful parts like this:

The first and most obvious effect / of taking a certain position in the family / is the relationship we have / with respect to the people / already there.


#### PREVIEWING THE VOCABULARY .....

Before reading, preview the vocabulary in context. Read these key sentences based on the selection and choose the best meaning for the underlined words.

- 1 When we are born into a family unit or brought into it through adoption or as a step-child, we take a certain place in the family hierarchy.
  - a. history
  - b. house or apartment
  - c. system of power and authority

- 2 The first child imitates the parents' physical mannerisms and learns speech from them.
  - a. learns
  - b. copies
  - c. looks at
- 3 A first child learns many things, and much of the learning is on an unconscious level. That is, neither the parents nor the child verbalizes that thus and so is the way to do something.
  - a. say
  - b. argue
  - c. show, demonstrate
- 4 If there are only adults present with a child, the adults are in a very close, intense relationship with the child, as anyone who has watched first-time parents hovering over their infants knows.
  - a. leaving unattended
  - b. keeping others away from
  - c. standing nearby and watching closely
- 5 The only child never has any reason to change this perception of his role, and he tends to carry into adulthood a strong feeling of being a child in relation to other people.
  - a. love
  - b. strength
  - c. understanding
- 6 When a sibling arrives, the first child tries to suppress the view of himself as a child and he struggles to be parental.
  - a. continue
  - b. exaggerate
  - c. stop; keep hidden or secret
- 7 Later children benefit from the tendency of parents to try out ideas on their first child and to be more tolerant with later children.
  - a. suffer
  - b. receive an advantage
  - c. understand their place in the family
- 8 After testing judgments about matters ranging from when to toilet train a first child to attitudes about dating, parents are more relaxed with later children.
  - a. results
  - b. students
  - c. decisions

- 9 The first child serves as a barrier between later children and the parents. Later children see less of their parents than the first child did.
- messenger
  - wall; obstacle
  - line of communication
- 10 Later children do not feel the same dependency on the parents for sustenance and companionship as did the first child.
- company
  - food and care
  - rules; discipline
- 11 Because they have an older sibling to turn to, later children do not feel as lonely or as inadequate when they do not meet the standards of their parents.
- follow the rules
  - become exact copies
  - reach the expectations
- 12 Since later children do not have as much direct identification with their parents, the children do not try as hard to be adult during childhood.
- dislike of their parents
  - feeling of being like their parents
  - feeling of being different from their parents
- 13 Older children tend to develop a self-concept that includes the belief that "I can do many things better than my siblings can."
- loneliness
  - self-confidence
  - view of themselves
- 14 Since she feels she can do many things better, she feels more adequate than other people in many situations.
- busier
  - more patient
  - more capable

 **Follow-up** Check and discuss your answers in pairs or with the class.

## D Reading for overall meaning

Read the selection at a quick but comfortable pace. As you read, think about this question:

*How accurate is the author's description of your birth order? Explain.*

# How Your Birth Order Influences Your Life Adjustment

.....  
*Lucille K. Forer*

When we are born into a family unit or brought into it through adoption or as a step-child, we take a certain place in the family hierarchy. We become *only* child, *oldest* child, *middle* child, or *youngest* child.

The first and most obvious effect of taking a certain position in the family is the relationship we have with respect to the people already there. If there are only adults present, we are in a very close and often intense relationship with them, as anyone knows who has had a child or who has watched first-time parents hovering over their infants. This constant and close relationship gives the first child in the family an opportunity to imitate and learn from these adults to the fullest possible extent. The first child imitates their physical mannerisms and learns speech from them. He learns many more things and much of the learning takes place on an unconscious level. That is, neither the parents nor the child verbalizes that thus and so is the way to do something. The child observes and imitates.

## Relationship with Parents

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From the beginning the parents treat the child in accordance with his place in the family, and soon the child recognizes that place. He is the child in the family, and he tends to think of himself as a child in relation to adults. The only child never has any reason to change this perception of his role and he tends to carry into adulthood a strong feeling of being a child in relation to other people.

The first child, who becomes the older or oldest child, does not have this unlimited time to view himself as the child in the relationship with his parents. When a sibling arrives, he tries to suppress the view of himself as a child, and he struggles to be parental. We shall find that in both childhood and adulthood, the older or oldest child's emphasis upon being "parental" offers him both advantages and problems.

Children who follow the first child in the family come into a situation where the relationship with the parent is, except in the most unusual cases, shared with another child. The parents themselves have been changed by the preceding child or children in many ways. They are more experienced as parents. They

*continued*

may not welcome their later children with as much delight as they did their first child, but they are probably less tense and anxious about being able to care for them properly. The later children enjoy many advantages as a result of having more relaxed parents. They benefit from the tendency of parents to try out ideas on their first child and to be more tolerant with later children. After testing judgments about matters ranging from when to toilet train a child to attitudes about dating, parents are relatively certain of approaches to take with later children, and they are usually more relaxed (and exhausted) ones. 35

The first child serves as a barrier between later children and the parents. He is one of the models for his siblings. Later children in a family do not feel the same dependency on the parents for sustenance and companionship that the first child did. They have a "peer" to turn to when the parents are not available. Consequently they do not have such intense feelings of loneliness when the attention of the parents is directed elsewhere, nor do they seem to feel so inadequate when they do not meet the standards of their parents. 40 45

Extremely important to differentiating later children from first children is the extent to which direct identification with the parents is diluted for the later children. The later children seem more content to move gradually from child to adult. They do not seem to try as hard, as does the oldest child, to be parental and adult even during childhood. 50

## **How Children See Themselves and Others**

The child becomes known as the family's only child, oldest child, middle child, or youngest child, depending on his birth order. He is thought and talked about as having that place in the family. Both in his mind and in the minds of other people an important part of his identity is his family position. 55

The other members of the family assume certain attitudes toward each child in terms of his birth order. Parents usually expect their oldest child to be more capable and more responsible than the younger children. The oldest child comes to think about himself in the same way. These ways of seeing himself, of thinking about himself because of his sibling role, become part of his self-concept. 60


Older or oldest brother or sister tends to develop a self-concept that includes the belief that "I can do many things better than my siblings can. I am more adequate than other people in many situations."

The middle child comes to think of himself as sometimes better able to do things than other people because he is usually more capable than his younger sibling or siblings. Sometimes, though, he must turn to his older sibling or to his parents for help, and so he comes to think of himself as able to obtain help when he needs it. 65

The youngest child tends to think, "I am less able to do many things than other people. But I need not be concerned because there are always others around to take care of me." 70

The role we take as the result of being in a certain place in the family not only causes us to think about ourselves in certain ways, it also causes us to think about other people in certain ways. The oldest tends to expect other people to be relatively less capable. The middle child has less specific expectations about the capabilities of other people. The youngest may see others as more adequate while the only child tends to think, "I am most secure when there are parents around to take care of me, but when they are not there, I have no one to turn to for help. So I'd better learn to take care of myself as much as possible." 75 80

The place in the family establishes for the child a specific role to be played within the family group. It influences him to develop certain attitudes toward himself and toward other people and helps him develop specific patterns of behavior.

 **Follow-up** Now answer the question below:

*How accurate is the author's description of your birth order? Explain.*

**E Reading for more detail**

Read the article a second time. This exercise will help you read for more detail and bring your experience to the reading.

- 1 As you read, take notes by filling in the grid with phrases that characterize each birth order.


Oldest child:
Later children (both middle and youngest):
Middle child:
Youngest child:
Only child:

- 2 Think of family members or friends for each of the birth orders. How well do the author's descriptions fit them?



- 3 Which birth order results in the most responsible child? The least responsible?
- 4 In what ways might an only child become more independent than a middle or youngest child?
- 5 *Key words* Make a list of six words or expressions that seem important to the article. Be ready to explain what each word means and why it is important. Here is an example.

unconscious: without being aware, without knowing. This is an important word because it explains how children learn their birth-order behavior, without parents realizing they're actually teaching this to the child.

 **Follow-up** Discuss your answers in pairs, in small groups, or as a class.