The Power of Birth Order

How on earth did your kids turn out to be so different from each other? It may have to do with where they sit in the family tree.

By Linda DiProperzio from Parents Magazine

Each time Elizabeth Moore returns from the supermarket, she expects her sons to help her unload groceries from the car. Her oldest, 13-year-old Jake, is always the first to help, while her youngest, 8-year-old Sam, complains the whole time. Meanwhile, her middle son, 10-year-old Ben, rarely makes it out of the house. "He gets held up looking for his shoes. By the time they've turned up, we're done," says the West Caldwell, New Jersey, mom. "It amazes me how different my children are from one another."

How do three kids with the same parents, living in the same house, develop such distinct personalities? A key reason seems to be birth order. Many experts believe that a child's place in the family is intertwined with the hobbies he chooses, the grades he'll earn in school, and how much money he'll make as an adult. "For siblings, the differences in many aspects of personality are about as great as they would be between a brother and a sister," says Frank Sulloway, Ph.D., author of Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives. Birth order isn't the only factor that contributes to how a kid turns out, but giving it consideration can help you understand your kids' personalities -- so you can help them succeed in their own unique ways.

The Firstborn

Famous Firstborns
Zac Efron, Beyoncé Knowles, Dakota Fanning

Innate Strengths
The firstborn is often used to being the center of attention; he has Mom and Dad to himself before siblings arrive (and oldest children enjoy about 3,000 more hours of quality time with their parents between ages 4 and 13 than the next sibling will get, found a study from Brigham Young University, in Provo, Utah). "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 (firstborns were more likely to make at least $100,000 annually compared with their siblings, according to a recent CareerBuilder.com survey).

Common 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. Maidenberg, 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. "I'm constantly reminding my oldest daughter, 9-year-old Posy, that I'm the mom; I should be the one worrying about everyone else," says Julie Cole, a
mother of six from Burlington, Ontario. "I don't want her to be a little grown-up, but it's also easy to give her responsibilities; I really can trust her."

Necessary Nurturing
Firstborns are constantly receiving encouragement for their achievements, but they also need to know it's okay if they don't succeed at everything, says psychologist Kevin Leman, Ph.D., author of The Birth Order Book. So tell your eldest about that time you didn't make the cheerleading squad or got fired from your first job -- any situation in which you tried something and it didn't work out exactly as you planned. Be sure to emphasize why it was okay in the end and how you learned from your mistakes. You want her to see that making a few of her own is nothing to worry about and can actually be a good thing.

The Youngest
Famous Youngest Kids
Cameron Diaz, Prince Harry, Blake Lively

Innate 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 (Stephen Colbert is the youngest of 11!), 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).

Common 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 sibs. "My youngest is carefree and doesn't worry about details," says Freedom, Pennsylvania, mom of five, Christine Kiefer. "I expected more from my oldest when he was his age."

Necessary Nurturing
The long-term result of too much babying could be an adult who is dependent on others and unprepared for the world. So don't underestimate your child. Youngests are masters at getting out of chores and are often seen as "too little" to participate. But even a 2-year-old can manage tasks like putting away toys, so be sure she has responsibilities. "Keep a consistent set of rules that all of the kids must follow," says Dr. Maidenberg. "If you don't make them follow the rules, you really can't be angry when they get into trouble."

The Middle One
Famous Middle Children
Anne Hathaway, Joe Jonas, Owen Wilson

Innate 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, mid 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. Tracie Chuisano, a mom of three from Wilmington, North Carolina, sees these traits in her middle son: "I let him stay over at a friend's house in the second grade, even though I'd thought his older brother had been too 'young' for it."

**Common 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.

**Necessary Nurturing**
Find small ways to put your middleton in the spotlight. The biggest complaint among middle children is that they aren't "heard" within the family. But making simple gestures -- like letting her choose the restaurant or the movie that everyone goes to -- can mean the world to her. "A lot of the time, middle children end up deferring to the oldest's wants and the youngest's needs," Dr. Maidenberg says. So do what you can to make her feel empowered.

**Special Order**
Experts weigh in on what you should know if you've got a singleton or twins (or…TRIPLETS)

**All in One**
You've probably heard that "lonely onlies" grow up selfish and socially inept. Not true, says Dr. Frank Sulloway: "Only kids learn people skills from their parents and peers." In fact, most only children turn out to be movers and shakers with similar traits to firstborns: They're ambitious and articulate. And since they spend so much time with their parents, they're comfortable interacting with adults. The downside: Onlies may have difficulty relating to kids their own age. "So make sure your child spends time with his peers from early on," says Dr. Michelle Maidenberg. Sign him up for playgroups, sports teams, and other organized activities -- so he's guaranteed lots of kid time.

**Double Happiness**
Even if they have other sibs, twins (and other multiples) generally grow up as an entity unto themselves -- because that's how others see them, says Dr. Kevin Leman. The firstborn twin typically acts as the older child in the twosome, while the secondborn will have traits of a younger sib. Outside of their relationship, however, they often get lumped together as "the twins." This can be a source of frustration when twins get older and each seeks to carve out an individual identity. So encourage your duo to develop their own passions. While they might prefer to do things together, it's important for each kid to establish his or her own interests and personality.