

Birth Order and Intelligence

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What does birth order have to do with intelligence? For years, researchers have noticed that, on average, later-born children seem to score lower on standard IQ (intelligence quotient) tests than do their older siblings. The further down the birth order you are, the lower your IQ is likely to be. The common explanation is that parents only have a limited amount of time and energy to spend teaching their children. Children who are further down in the birth order get less parental stimulation, and as a result wind up with lower IQs.

This theory makes sense, particularly if you are a firstborn child. But as it turns out, it's probably dead wrong. A recent article in *American Psychologist* argues persuasively that birth order has *no effect at all* on IQ. I bring this up because, as the baby of my family, I have always been a bit irked by the "later equals slower" theory. More important, though, I think that this issue highlights how [scientific research can lead us astray](#)--and how, if we're lucky, better research can point us back in the right direction.

Getting into the research

The idea that later-born children have lower IQs is based on the findings of hundreds of studies, all carried out in much the same way. Basically, the researchers take large numbers of people, or subjects, and measure their IQs by giving them a standard general intelligence test. (IQ itself is a controversial topic, but let's leave it at that for now.) The researchers average the IQ scores across families of various sizes (that is, all the one-, two-, and three-child families, etc.) and also each birth position (all the first-, second-, and third-born children, etc.). When they look at the numbers, they find two trends: the larger the family and the later the birth order, the lower the IQ. Thus, they conclude, being born later in the family lowers your IQ.

But these studies suffer from a serious design problem: They mix birth order and family size, which are really two very different factors. For example, all of the "number 5" children come from families with at least 5 or more children, so when you compare the scores of the number 5's with the scores of the number 4's, say, you're actually comparing people from families with five or more children against people from families with four or more. Thus, you're not just comparing birth order, you're also comparing family size. In research jargon, you'd say that the factors of birth order and family size are *confounded*. In other words, even though you want to study birth order, your research design may be giving you information not about birth order at all, but rather about family size.

Getting at the truth

Recognizing this potential problem with almost every study on IQ and birth order, how do you get at the truth? The answer is, design a better study! That is exactly what J.L. Rodgers and colleagues did in their article "Resolving the Debate Over Birth Order, Family Size, and Intelligence" (*American Psychologist*, June, 2000). Instead of taking unrelated people as their subjects, these researchers used a large sample families enrolled in a long-term study called the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Because their sample included all the children from each family, they were able to measure how children compared to each other *within* each family. In this way, they were able to separate out the factors of birth order and family size that had been mixed up (confounded) in the previous studies.

Here's what they found: When they looked *within* families, there was absolutely no connection between birth order and IQ. In this large and carefully chosen sample, fifth-borns were on average no duller (nor any brighter) than fourth-borns, who were in turn no duller or brighter than [firstborns](#). Other research, using similar methods, shows similar results.

What about family size?

This is a sticky issue: Although birth order wasn't related to IQ, family size was. For many years, social scientists have observed that there is a relationship between larger family size and lower IQ when you look at large-scale population studies. (Much of this research is reviewed in *Family Size and Intelligence*, a 1989 book by Judith Blake.) Of course, many people from very large families have high IQs, and there are plenty of people from smaller families who don't! It is only when scientists take a few giant steps back and look at whole populations or groups of populations that the association becomes meaningful. When it comes to your colleagues and friends, or your own family, all bets are off!

How can you explain the apparent fact that, *on average*, children from larger families have lower IQs? One theory, which makes some sense to me, has to do with social class. Social class and its extremes--wealth and poverty --are a hard reality in the United States and in most other places in the world. Parents from lower social class backgrounds tend to have larger families (perhaps in response to higher infant mortality; as infant mortality in a culture drops, so does the number of births.) Children growing up in poverty tend to have lower IQs (again, *on average*; many very brilliant people started life in poverty). So, on the population level, social class might be the link between larger family size and lower IQ. Does this mean that people who choose to have larger families are condemning their children to have lower IQs? Of course not!

The moral?

As the baby of three, I was relieved to learn that birth order doesn't have any bearing on IQ. Wait 'til I tell my older brother! More to the point, as a parent you don't need to be concerned that each new child is somehow destined to be less intelligent than the one before.

Finally, in general, this little exercise points out that scientific studies don't always mean what we think they mean. Often, a small problem in the design leads to a very large error in the results, or in their interpretation. As research results become more and more accessible to parents, it very important that you take a healthy dose of skepticism along with your latest serving of scientific "fact."

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Birth Order Personalities

*by Cliff Isaacson
and Kris Radish*

As a family grows, each child develops his or her own coping strategies depending on their position in the family. The coping strategies they display may be to please, to be perfect, to be strong, to try hard, or to hurry, depending on their position in the family.

Since Birth Order is made up of coping skills, the nature of the home life determines the intensity of Birth Order Personality. The more harmonious the home, the less coping is necessary and the more benign the Birth Order Personality. In families where children must cope with abuse, neglect, substance abuse, chaos, overprotection, unreasonable control, frequent punishment, and unreasonable demands, they develop very strong Birth Order characteristics. Since these children become the adults seen in counseling, Birth Order effects can be more clearly observed in them than in the general population.

Here's the deal, and it's one that worrisome parents will love, especially if they think that some minor mistake they made may have ruined a child's life. Children develop Birth Order strategies for coping with siblings rather than in response to their parents. Of course, any traumatic or terrible family situation will have an effect on children just as a positive and supportive family experience will remain inside of them. But Birth Order Personalities, the particular ins and outs of each one of us, develop as a result of our interactions with our brothers and sisters.

Gender does not enter into the development of Birth Order because Birth Order Personalities are established so early in life. When the oldest child becomes a First Born through loss of love to the new baby, it does not matter what the baby's gender is. For the Second through the Fourth Born, the gender of the older sibling makes no difference because it takes the same strategies to cope with an older brother or sister at age two or so, when the Birth Order Personality is developed.

Interestingly enough, every child can be the same Birth Order Personality if it is Only Child. One family had six Only Children because whenever a baby was born, a member of the extended family who was a nun came in to help the mother. Having done this each time a baby was born, she kept the older one from losing attention to the baby. Having Only Children can make for a chaotic household as they all struggle against intrusion, express their feelings loudly, and throw their tantrums.

Personality Characteristics

Here are some general rules of thumb that will help you sort through this entire process of understanding yourself through Birth Order Personality.

1. Except for the First Born and Only Child, children develop Birth Order characteristics by coping with the next older child.
2. The Only Child has to deal with being by him- or herself.
3. The First Born must cope with the loss of attention to the Second Born.
4. The Second Born must constantly cope with the attention-seeking First Born.
5. The Third Born must cope with a perfectionist Second Born.
6. The Fourth Born must cope with a strong-willed Third Born.

Out of these unique relationships each child will then develop his or her own Birth Order characteristics. See, and you thought it would be easier if you could only have been the first-born. Think again. It was a jungle growing up, for all of us. But jungles are lots of fun if you have the right equipment. The challenges and pleasures of being in a family, learning how to cope, and, most important, learning how to survive are lessons that are now part of all of us and lessons that have helped us become adults.

The dynamics of a family, especially the ways in which children relate to each other, has an overwhelming effect on our personality. Ask any adult right now about something he or she remembers learning from an older or younger sibling, and you will unearth dozens of stories. Researchers throughout the world have determined in study after study that the early years of a child's life are the most important. Children are like little sponges; they soak up actions, thoughts, and relationships as if they were dying of thirst. This is just as true when it comes to Birth Order Personality. Although it's fairly impossible to remember what it was like when we were one and two years old, what did happen and how we reacted to it has really set the pace for our entire lives.

Just so you know, in case you have the phone in your hand and are getting ready to call the older brother who used to torture you so you can say, "See, I told you you would ruin my life by being so rotten to me when we were kids," try to remember that he didn't have it any easier. Also, remember that once you turn into an adult, you are supposed to be able to figure out how to behave, act, react, and deal with whatever negative bits and pieces of your life that might need a bit of fixing.

Birth Order Personality offers you the chance to do just that. Remember and know in your heart that the formation of your Birth Order Personality was a natural and normal series of events. If you are a Fourth Born, it was not wrong or bad for you to have to figure out how to cope with your strong-willed Third Born sibling. You did what you had to do, and those Personality traits that you developed in the process have made you the unique and charming individual you are today. If you take some time to think about your growing-up years, some of these coping mechanisms will leap right to the front of your mind. There are millions of First Born men and women walking around who can still feel the sting of what they perceived as the loss of their parents' affection to that newborn baby.

It is important to remember that chronological birth order does not always determine a child's Birth Order Personality, although the majority of men and women actually do have the same chronological birth order and Birth Order Personality. For example, an only child often has an Only Child Birth Order Personality, a chronological first-born often has a First Born Birth Order Personality, and so forth. There are some exceptions, especially because of the role played by secondary characteristics. However, most of us have a Birth Order Personality that reflects our chronological birth order.

Exceptions to Birth Order Personality

Here are some of the rules that deal with exceptions to Birth Order Personality:

1. With the exception of Onlies, Birth Order Personality is set by age two. It cannot be changed after that period. Celebrate it; it is a great gift and you are one of a kind.
2. If there are five or more years between the first and second child, the Birth Order will start over, with the first-born remaining an Only Child and the second child also being an Only Child -- unless there is a third-born, who will cause the second-born to become a First Born Personality.
3. If a mother has help in the house preventing the firstborn from losing attention to the new baby, the firstborn will retain his or her Only Child Birth Order personality.
4. A third-born will have a Third Born Personality even if there are as many as fourteen years between the second-born and third-born.
5. A fourth-born will be a Fourth Born Personality even if there are as many as ten years between the fourth- and third-born.
6. Twins organize themselves into consecutive Birth Order Personalities. It does not seem to matter which twin was born first. If Mom went wild and had triplets, or more than triplets, the same rule applies (except that this mom would be a saint).
7. If the mother is a Third Born Personality, she could determine the Birth Order Personality of the oldest child, making a boy into a Third Born Personality or a girl into a Fourth Born Personality. The other siblings would then follow in order.
8. Although day care situations do not seem to create Birth Order Personalities, other exceptions to these rules can occur when a child is two or younger and spends time with a day care provider's children.
9. A child who dies may or may not affect the other children's Birth Order Personalities. Specialists need to look at individual situations to determine if that deceased child counts in the family's Birth Order Personality makeup.
10. Birth Order is recycled in larger families. When the fifth child comes on the scene the Fourth Born ignores him, hoping with all her heart to be able to pass on the feeling of being unwanted. So the Fourth Born does not respond to the fifth child, does not play with the fifth child, or interact

with him. Without interaction with the Fourth Born the fifth child, by default, develops the personality of an Only Child. If there is a sixth child, the fifth child can feel the loss of love to the baby and thus become a First Born. In large families Birth Order can repeat from First through Fourth more than once.

11. In harmonious families the Birth Order of children can be quite mild. They do not have to develop the coping strategies they might have needed in more dysfunctional families. The Only Child does not have to struggle with intrusion because he or she is given the time to play alone. The First Born gets attention as well as the younger siblings. The Second Born gets recognized for his or her accomplishments, the Third Born is made to feel safe and the Fourth Born is included in family discussions. The patterns of Birth Order personality are still there but they do not cause problems.

These rules can really help you think about your own Birth Order Personality and the Personalities of the people you deal with.

Understanding Birth Order Personality

You can never change your Birth Order Personality. If you are an Only Child, First, Second, Third, or Fourth Born, that's what you are going to always be. But what you can understand you can learn from. Once you know your Birth Order Personality, you can make adjustments to your behavior and react to things in ways you never thought possible. You can adopt new and positive strategies for success in friendships, marriage, and your professional life.

Knowing people's Birth Order Personality enables you to interpret correctly what they are saying. You know how to interpret an Only's words by putting them in the right context. You learn to express your own opinion first when talking with a First Born. You can avoid feeling hurt at suggestions from a Second Born as you realize this person wants to help you achieve perfection rather than find fault with you. You can avoid taking the comparisons of a Third Born as putdowns and treat them as interesting ways to make connections. You can enjoy repartee with the analytical Fourth Born who might approach a subject from unusual angles.

You establish rapport with people as you reflect their Birth Order characteristics to them. Watch the Only light up when you remark on her being organized, the First Born when you tell him you like his goals, the Second Born on your observation that she pays attention to details, the Third Born as you comment on his creativity, and the Fourth Born as you notice how well she thinks things through. Everyone likes to be understood by someone else.

Birth Order Personality gives people a way to understand behaviors that might otherwise seem more than confusing.

Birth Order Personality really can be a road map into the sometime puzzling world of human behavior.

Birth Order Lessons

Here's one fascinating Birth Order Personality lesson that can be learned about getting things done.

Lesson from the Only Child: Get organized. That means setting a starting time and an ending time for doing something. You are more apt to get things done when you have a time for doing it.

Lesson from the First Born: Get others' thoughts. You cannot think of everything yourself.

Listening to others gives you a head start.

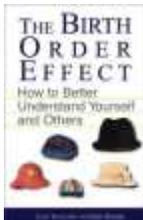
Lesson from the Second Born: Pay attention to details. Rather than being overwhelmed by the big picture, just look at all the details of the job. As you examine details you become aware of what you can do.

Lesson from the Third Born: Compare. Compare whatever you are dealing with to something else. The comparison will generate new ideas for you.

Lesson from the Fourth Born: Analyze. In dealing with an issue, ask yourself "what if" questions to expand the realm of possibility. The "what if" questions will stimulate your subconscious with new possibilities that may occur to you at any time.

Understanding Birth Order Personality can be a totally liberating experience. This look at yourself and your personality offers a diagnosis, not a prescription. Birth Order is not identified so we can say, "You are an Only Child and you have to live with it." That's not the point at all. The message really is, "This is the pattern you have been living. This is how you can transcend it."

It's a positive, simple approach to making your own life better. Understanding yourself will provide you with the ability to make the most of your experiences and your relationships.



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