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Establishing Order

Your children's birth order (oldest, middle, youngest) can have a significant effect on their development. Here's how to make sure everyone feels valued.

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hen someone asks if I have any brothers or sisters, I tell them I'm a middle child. Usually that prompts the questioner to say something along the lines of, "Oh, you must have middle child syndrome," while laughing. But in all this time, I never really knew what that was supposed to mean. It sounds like something negative—but how important is birth order, anyway? I asked some parenting experts just how much weight we should put on our kids' place in the family.

What's Middle Child Syndrome, Anyway?

"Middle child syndrome usually means the middle child has a specific kind of experience in the family, and that's how I look at all children in their birth order. A middle child often feels 'squeezed out,'" says Meri Wallace, LCSW, author of *Birth Order Blues: How Parents Can Help their Children Meet the Challenges of their Birth Order*, and a blogger for *Psychology Today*.

"A child who's clamoring for attention might be labeled as having 'middle child syndrome,'" adds Wallace. "Often you may have an older sibling who is always doing new things and requires a lot of the family's attention, and you have the younger sibling who requires a lot of help and attention. The middle child often gets lost in the shuffle. When I wrote *Birth Order Blues*, I interviewed lots of kids and adults to learn their experiences.

One little girl said to me, "At nighttime, dad is reading to my older brother, mom is taking care of the baby, and I sit in the hallway on a chair and wait."

While I don't have any memories that specific about being "left out," I think I did try to keep the peace, follow the rules and bridge the relationship between my older sister and younger brother. My parents seemed nervous about everything my older sister did, probably because it was the first child doing something new, and I remember thinking that my younger brother got away with a lot more, and his punishments seemed more lenient when he acted up. But my parents did a good job of trying to balance their time with us. Both parents took me to

sports practices and attended nearly every game as well as going to my school events, and they drove me to friends' houses and sleepovers.

"Family life is hard and complicated, because you have children sharing the resources, love and attention of the parents," says Wallace. "Whenever you have a situation of people sharing resources, it's difficult to make sure that everybody feels confident and equally loved."

But of course, as any parent knows, you can't be equally attentive to all your children, every minute. "You just want to try to make sure that each one has enough of you," says Wallace. "They need to feel that connection, because time equals attention, which equals love."

Parenting according to a child's order of birth can help parents be aware of what they could be doing more of. And that helps level the playing field a bit when it comes to making sure each child gets what he or she needs. Consider these typical characteristics of children born to different birth positions and how you can parent each child effectively.

Some studies show your child's birth order may have an influence over their personality and even IQ, but others say there's no correlation.

Oldest Child

TYPICAL TRAITS

"The firstborn tends to be very bossy, has to make all the decisions, and must feel like he's No. 1," says Wallace. The oldest child is often a leader and might also feel more pressure to be perfect, she adds.

"When the second child is born, the oldest may exhibit some troublesome behavior, because they're feeling displaced by a younger sibling," explains Wallace. "This happens to every firstborn. At some point, they're 'dethroned.' They were once No. 1—and now they're not."

PARENTING TIPS

Encourage your oldest to speak up about any feelings of anger or jealousy he may have about his sibling(s), advises Wallace. "These emotions are normal, and voicing them is better than keeping them bottled up inside." Since your firstborn is more likely to feel pressured to be perfect, make a special effort to assure him that he has your unconditional love, she says. "Reassure your oldest that you have enough love for her and your new baby." Make an effort to spend some one-on-one time with your eldest once the second or third child arrives. "Allow the firstborn time to play with their peers without their siblings' interrupting their space."

Middle Child

TYPICAL TRAITS

"The second-born child tends to be more flexible than her older sibling," explains Wallace. "They have an older sibling who wants to go first all the time, and [the second child] wants to be included. The second child is often a pleaser and wants to make sure that the older one likes him." The middle child is more flexible and will often let the older one go first to keep her happy so they can play together. Middle children also tend to be extremely

competitive with their siblings and need to establish their own unique identity, since they are neither the oldest nor youngest.

As a middle child, I tend to think of myself as pretty easygoing. I would rather keep the peace and have everyone enjoying themselves than to "win" at something. I'm fortunate that my older sister never seemed to mind me following her and her friends around. (I, on the other hand,

was more annoyed by my little brother following my friends and me around.)

Wallace's statement about establishing "my own unique identity" holds true with me. After college, I moved to New York City, focused on my career,

went on exciting trips and adventures and established myself as a writer. My siblings stayed closer to home—and while perhaps I thought this adventurous spirit "was just me," it might have to do more with my birth order.

PARENTING TIPS

Try letting your second-born go first once in a while—they need that experience, says Wallace. "This will help give them leadership skills that they'll need in the future," she notes. Since the second-born is often rushing to catch up to the firstborn, it's important for parents to praise the second child's abilities and celebrate his successes, even if when he wins the spelling bee or soccer championship it's the second time around for the family.

"Encourage this child's interests so they develop their unique sense of self," says Wallace. The second-born might want to do everything the older sibling does, but take the time to explore their talents—like an artistic skill—and encourage those, even if the older child didn't take drawing classes. Remind the middle child that they can't do everything their older sibling is participating in right now because of their age gap and that this is okay.

Youngest Child

TYPICAL TRAITS

Last-borns tend to be more rebellious and outgoing; they don't feel the perfectionist pressure firstborns may experience. According to psychologist Kevin Leman, Ph.D., in *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*, the youngest are often "uncomplicated, spontaneous, humorous and high in people skills. To them, life's a party. They're most likely to get away with murder and least likely to be punished." (Maybe that's why so many famous comics tend to be last-borns?)

I grew up thinking my younger brother got a lot of my parents' attention and wasn't sure if that was because he was the baby or the boy. Perhaps that was my perception as the middle child. But my fiancé—a last-born—fits the description of being funny, outgoing and social, with a rebellious streak.

PARENTING TIPS

Leman says the youngest often gets picked on and is more likely to get hand-me-downs than the older siblings. The parent should be conscious of this and make sure the youngest still gets new things that they own first, while creating their own sense of identity.

"Be on the lookout for older siblings' picking on the youngest one and make sure the baby of the family gets to be first during activities and practice his or her leadership skills as well," advises Wallace. Make sure they're still being given chores—like filling up the dog's water bowl or cleaning up their toys—so they have a sense of responsibility, even if they are small.

The baby of the family can sometimes be ignored and left to themselves, or they can be more likely to be mischievous and attention-seeking—oftentimes in the form of being entertaining, writes Leman. Even if the last-born seems like he or she is doing just fine on their own, make sure you're giving them attention and are aware of what they're getting into. It's a good way to make sure everyone in your family feels secure and happy.

A 2009 study found birth order influences who we choose as friends and spouses, often associating with those who have a similar birth position.