

WHAT FAMILY ARE YOU FROM ANYWAY? BIRTH ORDER AND FAMILY DIFFERENCES

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As the only girl in a family of three siblings you are constantly amazed at the difference between your two older brothers, Josh and Brent. It seems to you that coming from the same set of parents there would be a greater similarity, but alas, no matter how you look at it, Josh and Brent look like they came from not only two different families but at times it seems they do not even live in the same universe! How different are they you ask?

Josh who is 17 is always involved with anything physical and has lettered in three sports. He takes his studies seriously and was a member of the debate team last year. He is outgoing and can really be the life of any party when he decides to be. Dad is enjoying coming to most of his games since he, too, participated in sports as a child. In most ways you could say that Josh is a model child, one that would make most any parent happy they had decided to have children in the first place.

Brent, 15, is often found in his room in some kind of “mind meld” with his computer. He is not very interested in joining the family for Josh’s games- in fact, he isn’t even interested in sports in the least. He thinks school is boring, barely gets acceptable grades and only seems to communicate when something major goes wrong in the family. Being quite reserved, Brent is not the type to engage you in a conversation about anything- let alone be interested in debating you about any topic. He is content to go with the flow, usually taking a kind of back seat to Josh.

In spite of any genetic differences between these two individuals, a key element within the sociological perspective that may illuminate some understanding of their differences is the concept of social context. Josh and Brent are both “socially imbedded” within the family, they do not operate as islands in the middle of nowhere, but as human beings interacting with and being influenced by others. How do they interpret their environment? How does their environment shape their choices or the range of their choices? What roles have they decided to play within this family? These and other similar questions regarding the development of roles and behavior can be understood at least in part through the psychology of Alfred Adler, which since the early part of the 20th century has undergone much application in child rearing and school settings as well as spawning a large amount of research.

Adlerian psychology emphasized a number of key elements in the development of a self:

- a. Individuals have a need to feel connection in some way with others
- b. Each person strives to find a “place” within a social setting where he or she can develop an identity
- c. How each person determines their place can be influenced by the reactions of others and their own interpretation of other’s attitudes
- d. Each individual will strive to establish this position, whether it is through positive, functional means, or through dysfunctional or negative means
- e. Each individual experiences their social setting differently through their own perception
- f. Within the family each individual in a sense has a different set of parents due to their social placement within the family
- g. Is the family atmosphere cooperative or competitive? Is there a particular gender that is valued more than the other?

Developing out of some of these elements came an important perspective to understanding the differences between Josh and Brent. Each family became seen as an entity which forms a kind of “Family Constellation” consisting of a father and mother with children who may be born creating a birth order which can be used to gain insight into the experiences of each of the children. Each child

is then seen as having their own unique social experience within the context of this family and each child sees and experiences the family differently from the perspective of their ordinal place. To focus on how these positions provide different experiences creates a key that can help unlock an explanation for the differences between two children within the same family such as Josh and Brent.

As we look at the experiences of a first born child, a second born child, a youngest child, an only child or a child within a large family with many siblings it must be remembered that the person is attempting to achieve a place in the family, to connect with others and responds not only to the expectations and treatment of their parents, but also that of other family members and siblings. These “perceptual conclusions” then form the basis for some of the behaviors, traits and attitudes that different children will manifest within the family.

Some guidelines for determining where a child actual fits within a family context are as follows:

- a. In families with larger amount of siblings there is not just one constellation of an oldest child, several middle children and then a youngest. These families often break into two or more separate constellations.
- b. If there is 4 to 5 years difference between you and the next child up or down in your family, you may function as on oldest or an only child.
- c. If a child had other step brothers or sisters added, determine how the constellation was for the most influential years, and make a judgement on that basis.
- d. In large families of children determine if they divided into groupings for play or interact and look for who manifest leadership qualities within that grouping.

Remembering that each child decides his or her place within the family based upon their own perceptions of where they fit and the expectations of other family members we will now look at some general insights into each position.

FIRST CHILD OR OLDEST CHILD-

First children tend to be very authority conscious, leadership oriented, bossy and are often held up as the family example or hero. They have the unique advantage of having a period of time where they had all the parents’ attention and did not have to share it. They are the “family guinea pigs” in the sense that parents are first- time parents when they are born. They tend to be demanding of themselves and others, perfectionists who do not like making mistakes and often rise to leadership positions in organizations. They generally like responsibility and have usually been given a good amount of it early in life. Many respond to their parents’ expectations and some in less functional families actually take over the role of the parent. They are independent and like to be in charge. Many oldest children with siblings spent time caring for younger children which further developed their sense of responsibility. Oldest children sometimes will take responsibility for things that had little to do with them. They can also blame themselves excessively when things do not go well in the family. There are lots of photos in the family albums of first born children!

MIDDLE CHILDREN-

A middle child, and particular a second child, has to make a choice of whether to follow in the footsteps of the oldest and compete or to establish some other sense of identity on their own. They can suffer from being compared to the oldest. They hardly ever get to do anything first. In families with a competitive-type atmosphere these children can spend endless hours trying to compete with or keep up with the oldest, leading to feelings of discouragement or they can strike out in an opposite direction in establishing their place or identity. When these children are in photographs they are usually pictured with other siblings. Middle children can develop of sense of being the “peacemakers” in the family, they are usually cooperative and are often “not seen” by others. They have an issue with fairness since the

oldest has received privileges before them and sometimes they are compared to them regardless of whether they do good or bad things. Middle children often feel like they receive more chores. When a second child is born it is said they he or she will “dethrone” the oldest, creating another child for the parents to pay attention to. This can lead in some cases to jealous behavior toward the second child. Sometimes middle children are teased and treated badly by oldest children. Middle children have the advantage of watching someone else grow and then learning from their success or failure. As they grow middle children tend to not rise to as great of leadership positions in organizations as do oldest children, but they are experienced by others as solid, dependable workers who are loyal and easy to get along with. As future spouses they “roll with the punches” better than most other positions.

YOUNGEST CHILDREN-

Folk wisdom would have us believe these folks are the spoiled ones. They are referred to as the “babies” of the family and still can have that term applied to them even as adults! They are often given more attention than the middle children and sometimes held back in the growing up process. They can have some identity challenges since all those who have gone before them may have already done all the things that can give them a place. Other family members tend to give them too much service in that they are ready to give them advise, tie their shoes for them all the time when they are little and take care of them. They are almost always in the position of being taken care of. They sometimes feel a lack of confidence in their own decisions. Youngest children often have less expectations than the older children and are disciplined differently. They have many others to watch to see how they would like to act. Youngest children sometimes feel dependent on the other members of the family and lack confidence in their own decisions. They have little experience in caring for others unless the family sets up experience for them. They can learn to manipulate others in the family into doing what they would like. They can be the last one to find out anything that is being planned or any forthcoming change within the family. They are sometimes treated as though they do not have the competence or maturity to handle things. In most families they have more access to financial resources and experience their parents as being more relaxed than the other siblings do.

ONLY CHILDREN:

The experiences of Oldest children and Only children are similar, except the only child has the advantage of remaining the center of the parents attention permanently. They have all the resources of the family focused toward them, but they also have all the expectations of the family to live with. Only children tend to associate with adults as they grow up, missing significant cooperative experiences with other children. They often feel alone. Some feel as though they had to grow up too fast. They are leadership oriented and responsible, but like the oldest do not care for making mistakes. They are highly independent and individualistic. In families where siblings are many years apart there can be “functional onlys” where each sibling functions separately from all others as though they were each isolated from one another. Only children can find a real difference between the “center of attention” world of their home and the “your one of the bunch” world outside the home. They sometimes lack the skills of interaction with the group. Only children will often rise to leadership positions as adults, having lived in the adult world all their lives.

TWINS AND DISABLED CHILDREN:

The resulting place in the family for twins depends primarily upon how each perceives him or herself and upon the atmosphere within the family. Identical twins can have some special difficulty in families where identity is primarily a competitive effort. In some cases twins will act more like a first and second child or follow a pattern where one is dominant the other recessive. Both of these point to the interpretation each person makes of their role and how to achieve their place. Disabled children function according to the atmosphere of the family and the attitudes of the family members. The natural tendency to focus on the needs of the disabled child give them a position similar to a youngest child in

some families. The expectations of adults as perceived by the child often is a key in how he or she will establish their place.

SO WHAT ABOUT JOSH AND BRENT?

We might assume that Josh is responding to the usual expectation from his parents that he be the leader of the siblings and also an example. He is getting reinforcement from his father for his participation in sports. He has been given that special attention initially and is responding to a leadership role. His interest in debate may be reinforced by his ordinal place in the family since being right may be important to him as well as relying upon authority to establish the correctness or incorrectness of a given position. His continued excelling maintains his special place as a child which is making his family proud.

Brent on the other hand has a dilemma on his hands. Does he try to compete with Josh for attention in sports or in grades? How does he get a sense of identity separate from Josh? He chooses to excel in computer skills since perhaps he can achieve some things first in this area separate from his brother. In most ways Brent appears to have decided he is not up for competing with Josh for a favored place in the family and may be actually trying to invent his own ways of receiving some attention and focus. Even his lower grades may be a way of moving the focus of his parents towards him. If you talked to Brent you might get insight into his behavior by having him talk about his parents expectations and how he views his older brother.

APPLYING BIRTH ORDER THEORY TO YOUR LIFE:

Using the information listed above you will first need to determine what your position is in the birth order of your family. Determine whether there was any preference given to girls or boys in your family. Was your family a competitive type or a cooperative type? As you think about your own experiences, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What was expected of you in your family when growing up?
2. How were you treated by your parents and other brothers and sisters?
3. What advantages and disadvantages do you feel your position gave you?
4. What conclusions about relationships and people do you think you came up with out of being in this position?
5. Do you think you can identify a particular "style" that comes out of being in this position, or maybe an approach to things or a philosophy of life?
6. If you are presently married or in a cohabitation relationship, how do you think the birth order of you and your partner affects what is going on in your relationship?
7. How are your experiences or approaches within the workplace related to your experiences within the family?

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