



# *Adlerian Overview of Birth Order Characteristics*

Developed by Henry T. Stein, Ph.D.

| <b>POSITION</b> | <b>FAMILY SITUATION</b>   | <b>CHILD'S CHARACTERISTICS</b>  |
|-----------------|---|---|
| <b>ONLY</b>     | Birth is a miracle. Parents have no previous experience. Retains 200% attention from both parents. May become rival of one parent. Can be over-protected and spoiled. | Likes being the center of adult attention. Often has difficulty sharing with siblings and peers. Prefers adult company and uses adult language. |
| <b>OLDEST</b>   | Dethroned by next child. Has to learn to share. Parent expectations are usually very high. Often given responsibility and expected to set an example.                 | May become authoritarian or strict. Feels power is his right. Can become helpful if encouraged. May turn to father after birth of next child.   |
| <b>SECOND</b>   | He has a pacemaker. There is always someone ahead.  | Is more competitive, wants to overtake older child. May become a rebel or try to outdo everyone. Competition can deteriorate into rivalry.      |
| <b>MIDDLE</b>   | Is "sandwiched" in. May feel squeezed out of a position of  | May be even-tempered, "take it or leave it" attitude. May have trouble finding a place  |

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|                             | privilege and significance.  | or become a fighter of injustice.  |
| <b>YOUNGEST</b>             | Has many mothers and fathers. Older children try to educate him. Never dethroned.  | Wants to be bigger than the others. May have huge plans that never work out. Can stay the "baby." Frequently spoiled.                          |
| <b>TWIN</b>                 | One is usually stronger or more active. Parents may see one as the older.  | Can have identity problems. Stronger one may become the leader.  |
| <b>"GHOST CHILD"</b>        | Child born after the death of the first child may have a "ghost" in front of him. Mother may become over-protective.               | Child may exploit mother's over-concern for his well-being, or he may rebel, and protest the feeling of being compared to an idealized memory. |
| <b>ADOPTED CHILD</b>        | Parents may be so thankful to have a child that they spoil him. They may try to compensate for the loss of his biological parents. | Child may become very spoiled and demanding. Eventually, he may resent or idealize the biological parents.                                     |
| <b>ONLY BOY AMONG GIRLS</b> | Usually with women all the time, if father is away.  | May try to prove he is the man in the family, or become effeminate.  |
| <b>ONLY GIRL AMONG BOYS</b> | Older brothers may act as her protectors.  | Can become very feminine, or a tomboy and outdo the brothers. May try to please the father.  |
| <b>ALL BOYS</b>             | If mother wanted a girl, can be dressed as a girl.   | Child may capitalize on assigned role or protest it vigorously.  |
| <b>ALL GIRLS</b>            | May be dressed as a boy.   | Child may capitalize on assigned role or protest it vigorously.  |

*(This table is a broad simplification of Adler's theory. Other early influences may have a greater impact on personality development.)*

See *The Style of Life Tree*.)

## GENERAL NOTES

1. The psychological situation of each child in the family is different.
2. The child's **opinion** of himself and his situation determines his choice of attitude.
3. If more than 3 years separate children, sub-groups of birth order may form.
4. A child's birth order position may be seized by another child if circumstances permit.
5. Competition may be expressed in choice of interests or development of characteristics.
6. Birth order is sometimes not a major influence on personality development. The other potentially significant influences are: organ inferiority, parental attitudes, social & economic position, and gender roles.
7. For more comprehensive information about birth order, read: *What Life Could Mean to You*, by Alfred Adler; *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, edited by Heinz and Rowena Ansbacher; and *Lydia Sicher: An Adlerian Perspective*, edited by Adele Davidson.
8. Adler speculated that birth order differences would begin to disappear when families became less competitive and autocratic, and more cooperative and democratic.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

■ [Theme Pack 1: Birth Order - "How Position in the Family Constellation Influences Life Style"](#)

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