

Exercise 9

Read the information. Then answer the questions. Do the following statements agree with the information given in the text?

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

- Quickly look at the passage to get an idea of what each paragraph is about.
- Scan the passage to find the paragraph which relates to each statement.
- Decide whether the statement is correct according to the information in the passage.
- If there is not enough information in the passage to decide whether the statement is TRUE or FALSE, it must be NOT GIVEN.

How birth order might affect a child's personality

In the last few decades of the 20th century, a considerable number of books were published in Europe and the USA on the theme of birth order, and how it affected personality. These books seemed to put forward a similar argument: that a child's brothers or sisters – their *siblings* – could have as much, or even more, influence on their development than their parents, and that this influence could have far-reaching consequences. Furthermore, the authors described the personalities of children in the same way: first-born children would naturally be leaders, 'middle' children would be the family diplomats, and the youngest in the family would be charming but often lazy and rebellious.

These books were popular, and not just with the public, but with certain companies who were interested in matching 'first-born, middle-born, and last-born' employees with particular roles. Since then, there has been a change of thinking, and those kinds of book are no longer at the top of bestseller lists. It is now felt that explanations and descriptions of *siblings*' behaviour were often simplistic and too general, and not really based on any hard evidence. Researchers are still interested in birth order and how it affects children's development, but are developing new theories.

The findings from a recent Canadian study suggest that the first-born sets the pattern for the siblings who follow. It found that if the child was easy-going and 'well-

'behaved', it would make the parents feel better about their own parenting skills. This positive feeling grew further if the first-born performed well academically and got good reports from teachers. Such an experience for parents meant that they would have the same expectations of the following children, and would actively encourage them to develop their abilities. However, as Dr Anna Stevens, a senior child psychologist, states: 'My research shows that when the first-born child is "difficult" – when they seem to be angry, moody and upset all the time, or refuse to do what their parents tell them – the parents may consider themselves to be "bad parents". As a result, they may not make much of an effort with the next child, expecting them to demonstrate the same difficult behaviour.'

But how true is the idea that the personalities of first-born, middle-born and last-born children will be defined by their relationships with their siblings? Clara Solway, a child and family development specialist, makes an interesting point. 'We found that last-born children tend to be independent-thinkers and rather rebellious,' she says. 'This confirms our theory that their behaviour is not connected to their relationship with older siblings. It's more to do with the way their parents treat them.' She explains that because many parents are so familiar with the first-born, middle-child, youngest-child stereotypes, they *expect* their youngest to behave in a rebellious way. As a result, they act in a way that actually encourages that kind of behaviour to develop, even though they don't realise it.

Child therapist and author Edward Croft claims that our early experiences shape our self-image. 'We form ideas and beliefs about ourselves based on what we are good at, and how others treat us. It is common for a child to notice any differences in how parents treat them and their siblings. And if they believe that a brother or sister is the favourite, this will almost certainly create a sense of inferiority. And that kind of feeling often continues into adulthood.'

However, this does not automatically mean that the 'preferred' child will receive only benefits from their status. As Croft explains, 'Children who please their parents, and enjoy the attention they receive, sometimes fall into the habit of trying to please everyone. In later life, this can include people at work, management for example.' So how is this a bad thing? 'If you are constantly trying to please other people, you may not know what your own needs and desires are, and so become directionless in life.'

Recently it has been suggested that it is the size of the family, rather than the birth order, that has the greatest impact on individual development, for many different reasons. Michael DeHora, a senior researcher at the City Institute of Societal Development, points out that 'In large families, with both parents working, older siblings often find themselves taking on responsibilities for taking care of the younger

ones.' There's considerable evidence, he claims, to show that siblings who are caregivers and teachers in their family become skilled at reading and communication, and gain confidence as a result. However, it is also the case that such responsibility at an early age can increase their levels of anxiety if they feel under pressure.

One other interesting area of research is connected to acquiring new vocabulary. Researchers have for a long time pointed out that first-born children are quick to learn and use new language, and will acquire, for example, 100 words several months earlier than their siblings. The traditional view was that the vocabulary of younger children was poorer because their parents spent less time interacting with them. However, a Norwegian study has just disproved this idea. Carried out over fifteen years, the study has shown that younger children do catch up, and eventually acquire the same number of words as older siblings. The reason for this is that the older siblings often take on the role of teacher, and the younger children learn entire phrases just by listening to and copying them.

1. Authors writing in Europe and the USA towards the end of the 20th century had very different opinions about the impact of birth order on personality.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
2. Companies in the late 20th century advertised for first-born children to apply for particular posts.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
3. A Canadian study showed that when first-born children did well in school, their parents' confidence increased.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
4. Dr Anna Stevens advised parents to give second-born children extra support.
 - True
 - False

- Not Given
- 5. Clara Solway was surprised by the results of her study into the behaviour of last-born children.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
- 6. Edward Croft's research shows that children develop a dislike of siblings who their parents seem to prefer.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
- 7. Children who try hard to please parents will probably be more successful later on in life.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
- 8. Older children in larger families can become stressed when they have to take care of younger siblings.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given
- 9. A Norwegian study suggests that children who are born second are in the end likely to have an equally good vocabulary as their older sibling.
 - True
 - False
 - Not Given