

READ

Read this article about birth order.

Does It Matter When You Were Born?

Let's see if you can answer this question: There are two men, one named Sam and the other named Jerry. They're quite similar. Sam is a perfectionist, and so is Jerry. Jerry, always a high achiever, was president of his high school class. So was Sam. Neither man went to college, though both did become successful businessmen. Jerry has always been an innovator. This has made him a leader in most of his enterprises, just like Sam. Sam always tries to obey rules. Jerry does too. Jerry has never liked liberal ideas. Nor has Sam. The question is why they are so similar.

"Wait!" you say. "I know what the explanation is. They're identical twins. That's why they're so similar." Sorry, but that isn't it. They're not twins, or even related to each other, but they are both firstborns. Sam and Jerry are examples of what researchers call the birth-order theory. According to this theory, the order in which children are born plays a significant role in the formation of their personalities and in the way they ultimately turn out.¹ Does this sound like some crazy new idea? It isn't. It's been around for a while.

The main idea behind the birth-order theory is simple: Firstborn children enjoy a special relationship with their parents simply because they were there before any other children were. When other children come along, firstborns understand that these new arrivals represent a challenge to their special relationship. For this reason, firstborns tend to be conservative, rule-oriented, and opposed to change. They want to keep things as they are. Other children in the family have a different challenge. They must somehow adapt to the family dynamic and find a niche in their parents' affections. They sense that they have to become different from the oldest child, so they do. They learn to do whatever helps them establish their own identity.

¹ turn out: develop in the end

One of the main supporters of the birth-order theory is Frank Sulloway, a researcher who did a twenty-six-year study of about 7,000 famous people in history and then performed a computer analysis. What he learned from the analysis led him to develop his theory that first-, middle-, and lastborns have very different characteristics. It is evident that firstborns are usually self-confident, assertive, and conscientious. They can also be jealous, moralistic, and inflexible. Winston Churchill, John Wayne, Oprah Winfrey, Saddam Hussein, and Joseph Stalin were all firstborns. Based on this idea, we might expect powerful political figures, such as U.S. presidents, to be firstborns. They often are, says Sulloway.

Sulloway observes that lastborns are usually more social, agreeable, and open to new and even revolutionary ideas. This is because, sensing the power of the already-established relationship between the oldest sibling² and the parents, they have to turn outward to establish their place in the world. Famous lastborns include Joan of Arc, Thomas Jefferson, and Leon Trotsky.

What about families in which there are more than two children? If there are three children in a family, the middle child is usually more flexible than the other two and often has a talent for compromise. Famous middle children include Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jennifer Lopez.

A family in which there is only one child is the least predictable configuration, Sulloway says. An only child³ isn't as inflexible as a firstborn. The fact that they are the sole child in the family, however, causes only children to identify with their parents as firstborns do.

Perhaps you're thinking this is all just too much of a generalization. That there are exceptions to the birth-order theory is clear. A child's temperament has a great deal to do

² sibling: brother or sister

³ only child: the single child in a family

with how he or she turns out. Shy children, for example, may not become leaders even if they are firstborns. Sulloway notes that there have been famous firstborns who became revolutionaries as well as laterborns who became conservatives. Still, the theory of birth order is compelling even if its accuracy is controversial.

If we assume that there is some validity to the birth-order theory, how can parents achieve the best possible relationships with their children? What they should do, Sulloway says, is give each child unique time and attention. Whether or not they can significantly change the influences of birth order is an open question, but they will maximize the quality of those relationships.

AFTER YOU READ

A VOCABULARY Complete the sentences with words from the box.

compelling	conscientious	innovator	sole
configuration	enterprises	niche	temperament

1. A person's _____ are his or her plans, businesses, and accomplishments.
2. A person who introduces something new is called a(n) _____.
3. A(n) _____ situation is one that attracts strong interest or attention.
4. A child who finds a(n) _____ in his or her parents' affections finds a suitable place.
5. A(n) _____ person is one who gives great attention or dedication to something.
6. The arrangement of children in a family is termed its _____.
7. The _____ child in a family is the only child in that family.
8. A child's _____ is his or her nature.

B COMPREHENSION Read the statements. Check (✓) True or False.

	True	False
1. Both Sam and Jerry are firstborns.	☐	☐
2. The birth-order theory appeared very recently.	☐	☐
3. Firstborns tend to be conservative.	☐	☐
4. Powerful political figures are often lastborns.	☐	☐
5. Middle children are usually rebellious.	☐	☐
6. A family with only one child is the least predictable of the types.	☐	☐
7. According to Sulloway, there are no exceptions to the birth-order theory.	☐	☐
8. According to Sulloway, parents should give each child attention.	☐	☐

C DISCUSSION Work with a partner. What forces do you think influence a person's character and personality? Discuss.