

BIRTH ORDER AND PERSONALITY

Background

According to Adler, the order of birth—whether a child is first or later born—is a major influence in personality formation. Parental attitudes change with the arrival of more children, and the younger siblings face a different family environment than that experienced by the firstborn or the only child.

When the second child is born, the firstborn suffers *dethronement*—a loss of special attention and favored status. Adler claimed that all their lives, firstborns seek to recapture this power and status they had lost. The middle child often benefits from more relaxed parents and from the skills learned by having to keep a balance between older and younger siblings. The youngest is never dethroned, is spurred on by the older siblings, and is often the family “pet.” Pampering is the greatest danger faced by the youngest, since habits of dependency make adjustment to adulthood difficult.

The only child has the advantages of the firstborn (without dethronement) and of the youngest. Special attention from parents and increased adult company speed maturity, but parental expectations can add a burden. The only child also frequently suffers from the world’s failure to focus full attention upon him or her.

Adler did not consider the *order of birth* as an inflexible rule of personality development. Rather, he considered it a factor in an individual’s development of a *style of life*.

Definitions

order of birth: the placement of siblings in a family—firstborn, middle, youngest, only child—that influences one’s *style of life*.

dethronement: the displacement from special status that the older child (especially the firstborn) experiences upon the birth of a younger sibling.

PRESENTATION

Demonstration

Ask all *firstborn* children to stand, then say: “According to Alfred Adler, you are the pioneers among your brothers and sisters. You break the ground for your siblings and make life easier for

them by relaxing your parents’ anxieties and expectations. Your reward? *Dethronement*! Losing your special status with your parents to the demands of a new baby.”

Next, ask all the *middle* children to stand, then say: “Adler would say that you have a favored position in the family. By learning to keep a balance between older and younger siblings, you learn the skills of maintaining relationships.”

Ask the *lastborn* children to stand, then say: “While you will never suffer *dethronement*, you do have to react to the domination of your older siblings and the babying of all.”

Finally, ask the *only* children to stand, then say: “You enjoy and suffer the fact that you are both firstborn and lastborn. You have gotten special attention but also special pressures. You have to learn to deal with both.”

Discussion

“Why did Adler say that all children *strive for superiority*?”

(Recall the previous lesson—because of the need to compensate for their *feelings of inferiority*.)

“How might a firstborn child develop *feelings of inferiority* simply because of his or her *order of birth*?”

(Elicit the concept of *dethronement*.)

“How might the *firstborn* compensate for *dethronement*?”

(When jealous rage and its tactics fail, by identifying with the parents, by achieving, by seeking throughout life a return to the special status lost with the birth of the younger sibling.)

Instructions

Tell the class that, according to Adler, all children are affected by their *order of birth*. Explain that you will give them each a summary of the consequences of birth order, which they will use to identify certain personality characteristics of each child in the birth order. They will create a personality profile of the firstborn, middle, youngest, and only child on the form you will distribute. (See the following student activity sheets.)

Note: You might pair students off or form small groups to compete for the most accurate profile.

Birth Order and Personality

CONSEQUENCES OF BIRTH ORDER

1. **Firstborn:**

- Sense of self-importance after having parents exclusively for a time.
- "Dethroned" when sibling arrives, seeks "compensation."
- Parents are tense with first child and expect much.
- Serves as "parent" to younger siblings.

2. **Youngest:**

- Parents relaxed, demand less.
- Cannot compete with older siblings.
- Dominated by all others in the family.
- Babied.

3. **Middle:**

- Advantageous position: none of the pressures put on the oldest by parents, none of the domination suffered by the youngest.
- Learns to lead and direct without having to assume responsibility as quickly as the oldest.

4. **Only Child:**

- Has full possession of the parents without "dethronement."
- Has no older, more competent siblings.
- Does not have to serve as parent to younger siblings.
- Parents are tense and expect much.