

Have you ever thought about what your family experience would be if you were an only child? How about if you were the oldest instead of the middle child or the fourth child, or maybe the baby of the family? This is a question that has been asked not only by individuals contemplating a different family system but also by scientists interested in the psychology of birth order.

Each child experiences the family differently. The first child has the parents all to himself to bask in the glow of first love. The new baby has a special place in the family and this extends to grandparents who have awaited their first grandchild with much anticipation. Parents are honed into every move the first baby makes... first smile, first step, first tooth. Parents are more likely to see themselves, their hopes and dreams, in this first child.

All this attention can have a profound effect on the first-born for the remainder of his life, who may be more like the parents than any other child in the family. The downside to first child is that this is new territory for the parents. There is a lot of anxiety, experimentation and uncertainty involved. This can come out as over-protective and indulgent, alternating with high expectations and let down when expectations aren't met. It's not uncommon for the oldest sibling to express how easy the younger ones have it. The strings loosen as each child enters the picture.

We might draw the conclusion that being the baby of the family is the way to go if you want freedom to do your own thing but of course there is a downside. The youngest is always the baby of the family, not only in the eyes of the parents but by the whole family. Long into adulthood they will still introduce themselves as "the baby of the family." They receive lots of attention and every family member feels responsible for "looking after" the baby.

This can be problematic when baby grows up because, having been pampered and treated as special her whole life, she may develop an expectation that everyone in life will treat her the same way. This can lead to unsuccessful adult relationships and feeling let down. The youngest may develop a feeling of incompetence that comes from being the last to learn what others already know. This can cause low self-esteem in later years.

The middle child has the best chance to find her own way. Middle children are betwixt and between and can get lost in the crowd or lead the parade. They don't have that special first or

last place in the family. Family pictures can run from 3,000 for the first child, 10 for the middle child and 2,000 for the baby. Less visibility, less pressure.

First, in between, or last all babies are a special gift.