BIRTH ORDER AND LIFE ROLES

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By

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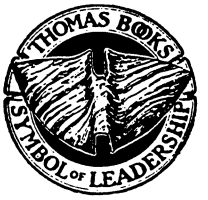

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To Those Who Gave Me My Place in the Family:

My Mother and My Father, Jo Ann and William
My Sister, Bette
My Brothers, Ken and Roland

INTRODUCTION

I WAS the first child of my parents. I was followed by a brother and a sister and then, after a long period of time, by another brother. While these facts were not of great importance to the world in general, they seemed very important to me.

The sequence of events meant that I held the position in the family of *oldest* child. For some reason that might have to do with the fact that I later became a clinical psychologist. I experienced my role as oldest child with considerable conscious recognition of what it meant to be in that place in the family. As oldest child I had many advantages. It was always my place to head up the sibling line in the family whether it was for the largest number of cookies or to have the first sight of the annual Christmas tree. Being oldest was a source of much pride and with it went a feeling of strength.

But there were also disadvantages which became more apparent as I grew older. Being oldest meant more responsibility relative to the other children at any one time. Of great significance to me was the feeling that I was, as my mother said, a "guinea pig" for my parents in raising children. It seemed to me that I was perpetually striving with my parents over matters that the younger children in the family would find already solved by me when it came their turn to want greater freedom, more adult clothes, or whatever the subject of struggle was between adolescent and parent.

When I became an adult, it seemed to me that I could perceive a continuation of many childhood attitudes and behavioral tendencies which had first appeared in my relationship with my two brothers and sister and my parents in my place as oldest child. I felt that these attitudes came into play in my relationships with my other adult friends. It seemed even more apparent to me that they influenced my relationship with my husband and later with my children.

I was not the first person, of course, to wonder if the sibling place in the family might not have an important part in the devel-

opment of human beings. The first statistical evidence presented in print seems to have been that of Sir Francis Galton who, in 1874, said he had found that eminent male scientists were far more likely to be first children in their families than later children.[1] Many following studies were made particularly by persons in the field of education who hoped to find relationships between the learning or school behavior problems of children and their places in the family as only child, oldest child, middle, or youngest child.

As a student of psychology I learned how contradictory and inconclusive the results of these studies were considered to be by the savants in the field.

However my interest in the matter continued. While teaching a college class in adolescent psychology, I decided to make an informal search of the psychological literature for studies of sibling relationships to see if I could find any confirmation of some of my hypotheses concerning the effect of growing up in a certain family place.

I was delighted to find evidence for some consistent differences, especially between first-born and later-born children. First-born children, who include both only children and children with younger siblings, were found to tend toward more easily aroused anger than were later-born children. First-born children who had younger siblings were consistently revealed to be more likely to display jealousy than were only children who had no siblings.

The findings were sparse, but they were encouraging. These two results were in line with psychoanalytic theories about the development of personality. Who but the first-born child could be expected to be tense and angry with parental pressures constantly on him as he grew up? Who but the oldest child could be expected to be jealous? Had not younger brothers and sisters moved in to take his place with his parents and to share his possessions? It was of special interest that the only child, also a first-born, tended not to display jealousy to any great degree. The only child, of course, is not subject to competition from siblings. It seemed to me that these findings gave some support to the possibility that the position of the individual in the childhood family might be of great importance in determining some of the child and adult characteristics of that person.

As I continued in my practice as a clinical psychologist, I found the people with whom I worked presenting me with what seemed to be increasingly clear evidence of the effect on them of having been raised in a certain place in the family.

Persons raised in certain family positions repeatedly described the same effects coming out of each of those positions. As they became more conscious of those effects, they often reacted with an insightful, "But of course!"

Best of all, the increased self-understanding seemed relatively easily followed by a change in attitudes and behavior which improved their relationships with other people. To take just one example, a man was able recently to so reorganize his perception of himself as a youngest child trying to be a responsible husband, that he changed his behavior and saved a very shaky marriage. This case of "psychotherapy" required one hour of discussion between therapist and patient.

My clinical observations of the effect of sibling relationships have not been limited to those involving persons with whom I have worked in a professional capacity. I have gathered information from the majority of persons with whom I have come in contact. These have included students, colleagues, other members of community and social groups to which I belong, my children and their friends, my own siblings and their family members. As my friends know, I have been unceasingly aggressive in questioning them about their relationships with brothers and sisters, and I hope they know how much I have appreciated their patience with me. My justification, if there is one, for this prying behavior is that most people seem to welcome the opportunity to talk about their sibling relationships.

Through the years, in addition to my own observation and study, I have also benefited from the interest and wise communications of my husband, Dr. Bertram R. Forer, concerning what he has seen of the influence of early sibling relationships and place in the family on many persons with whom he has come in contact as a clinical psychologist.

I continued to watch the literature for pertinent studies, and it has been my pleasure to see scientific attention change from great skepticism to an acceptance of family position as an authentic and

provocative subject of serious experimental approaches. The number of studies increases greatly each succeeding year. I have in my files summaries of more than five hundred attempts to probe some aspect of the effect of sibling relationships on the development of the individual. The worldwide nature of the interest in the subject is shown by the fact that these studies have been made all around the globe: in India, small Guatemalan villages, Kaiwan, Scandinavia, and in the United States, to name a few locations. However, I have found few books devoted to the subject. As far as I know, this book is the first attempt to integrate much of the available research findings with impressions obtained in a clinical setting.

An interesting source of additional information for me has been that of autobiographies. These not only reveal childhood relationships with parents, brothers and sisters, but they offer us a means of seeing how these relationships might influence adult behavior, feelings, and attitudes of the writers.

As a result of having taken these multiple and varied approaches to the study of the effect of family position and having found many consistent results, I am able to present to you material in which I have considerable confidence. While the information must be considered preliminary in view of the tremendous amount of research still required, it will serve to direct your attention to what may be one of the most potent forces in shaping your life.

Since I have obtained information from many sources, I have been able to combine specific details in such a way that no one individual or family is described, except in the case of examples taken from published autobiographies. The names of such real persons are given in full. In the constructed examples, first names are usually used, but any name that is used is taken from the plays of Shakespeare.[2]

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2. SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM: *Complete Works.* New York, Collier, 1925.

CONTENTS

BIRTH ORDER AND LIFE ROLES

Chapter I

HOW YOUR BIRTH ORDER INFLUENCES YOUR LIFE ADJUSTMENT

WHEN we are born into a family unit or brought into it through adoption or as a step-child, we take a certain place in the family hierarchy. We become *only* child, *oldest* child, *middle* child, or *youngest* child.

The first and most obvious effect of taking a certain position in the family is the relationship we have with respect to the people already there. If there are only adults present, we are in a very close and often intense relationship with them, as anyone knows who has had a child or who has watched first-time parents hovering over their infants. This constant and close relationship gives the first child in the family an opportunity to imitate and learn from these adults to the fullest possible extent. The first child imitates their physical mannerisms and learns speech from them. He learns many more things and much of the learning takes place on an *unconscious* level. That is, neither the parents nor the child verbalize that thus and so is the way to do something. The child observes and imitates.

Our parents are the models for us in learning how to be human beings. And whether what they have to teach us is good or bad, comfortable or uncomfortable, learning from them starts us on our way toward becoming civilized people. This is a fact that is sometimes recognized with dismay by persons who have been dissatisfied with their parents. After criticizing them intensely, such persons are likely to have to accept the unwelcome recognition that they are much like those parents they have been criticizing.

Becoming a civilized human being involves a great deal more than learning how to walk and how to talk and how to handle a knife and fork at the table. It involves learning ways of relating to other people, incorporating the values and standards that make

one fully a human being. Much of this basic learning takes place during our nursery years and while we are in a close relationship with our parents.

Usually we have two parents. They not only differ in sex but they differ in many other ways. Each of them has learned his or her own pattern of behavior, attitudes toward other people, values and standards which motivate them to feel and to act in certain ways. The first child in the family has two choices of imitation or identification in any one area. He can be like his father in one aspect, but like his mother in another. He tends to pick up more of the characteristics of the parent of the same sex, especially those patterns of behavior that have to do with physical action. A boy will tend to walk and move like his father and a girl to be like her mother in these characteristics. In emotional and other psychological characteristics, identification is more variable and complicated. In any event, identification is usually with characteristics of a parent if there are no other children in the family.

From the beginning the parents treat the child in accordance with his place in the family and soon the child recognizes that place. He is *the child* in the family, and he tends to think of himself as a child in relation to adults. The only child never has any reason to change such perception of his role and he tends to carry into adulthood a strong feeling of being a child in relation to other people.

The first child, who becomes the older or oldest child, does not have this unlimited time to view himself as the child in the relationship with his parents. When a sibling arrives, he tries to suppress the view of himself as a child and he struggles to be *parental.* We shall find that in both childhood and adulthood the older or oldest child's emphasis upon being "parental" offers him both advantages and problems.

Children who follow the first child in the family come into a situation where the relationship with the parent is, except in most unusual cases, shared with another child. The parents themselves have been changed by the preceding child or children in many ways. They are more experienced as parents. They may not welcome their later children with as much delight as they did their first child,[1] but they are probably less tense and anxious about being able to care for them properly. The later children enjoy

many advantages as a result of having more relaxed parents. They benefit from the tendency of parents to try out ideas on their first child and to be more tolerant with later children. After testing judgments about matters ranging from when to toilet train a child to attitudes taken about dating, parents are relatively certain of approaches to take with later children and they are usually more relaxed (and exhausted) ones.

The first child serves as a barrier between later children and the parents. He is one of the models for his siblings. Later children in a family do not feel the same dependency on the parents for sustenance and companionship as did the first child. They have a "peer" to turn to when the parents are not available. Consequently they do not have such intense feelings of loneliness when the attention of the parents is directed elsewhere, nor do they seem to feel so inadequate when they do not meet the standards of their parents.

Extremely important in differentiating later children from first children is the extent to which direct identification with the parents is diluted for the later children. The later children seem more content to move gradually from child to adult. They do not seem to try as hard, as does the oldest child, to be parental and adult even during childhood.

These, then, are some of the differences in relationship with parents that result from having different places in the family hierarchy. Now let us look at some of the other areas of behavior which are affected by the child's order of birth in the family.

The child becomes known as the family's only child, oldest child, middle child, or youngest child, depending on his birth order. He is thought and talked about as having that place in the family. Both in his mind and in the minds of other people an important part of his identity is his family position.

The other members of the family assume certain attitudes toward each child in terms of his birth order. Parents usually expect their oldest child to be more capable and more responsible than the younger children. The oldest child comes to think about himself in the same way. These ways of seeing himself, of thinking about himself because of his sibling role become part of his self concept.

Older or oldest brother or sister tends to develop a self-concept