

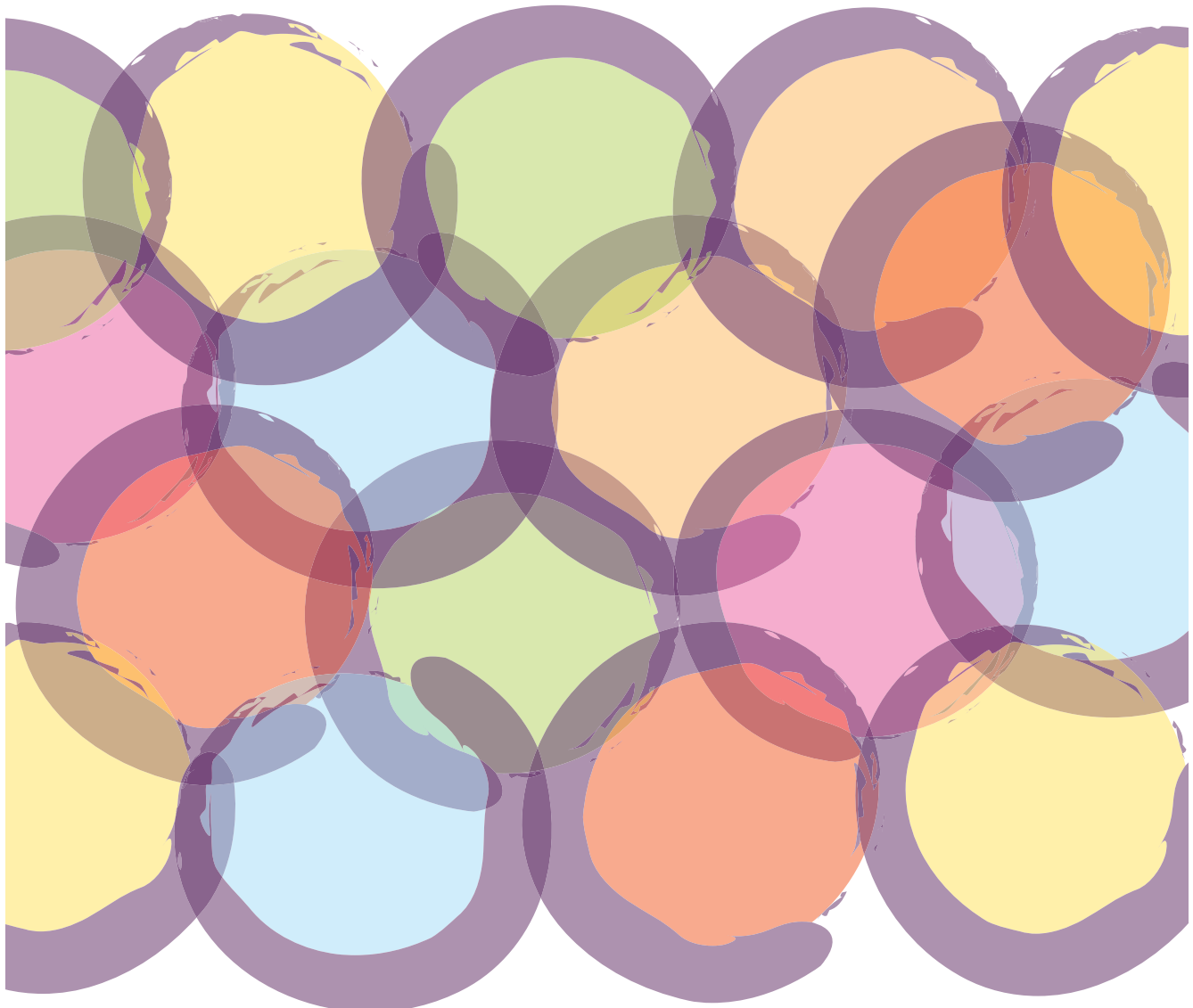


netmums

Birth Order Matters

New Research into the potential effects of Birth Order on Children
and their outcomes in life

Prepared by Siobhan Freegard
20th June 2009



Contents:

1. Introduction	3
2. Part One	4
Birth Order and Effect on the Child	
3. Part Two	6
Does a Mother's Birth Order effect her Parenting Style	
4. Survey Questions	9

Birth Order Report

New Research into the potential effects of birth order on children and their outcomes in life.

Includes how a mother's birth order position can affect her subsequent parenting style.

Introduction and summary

There are a large number of published studies on birth order, but they are inconsistent in their conclusions. Apart from a study that shows a slightly raised IQ in eldest children, it generally appears that experts cannot agree on how or if birth order has an effect on personality and outcomes in life.

However, we had noticed on Netmums that, in discussion on the forum many mums were concerned that they innately treated their children differently depending on their birth order, and worried what effect this may have. We therefore decided to look more closely at the issue and do some research around mothers' opinions and experiences and add our own conclusions to the debate.

Key conclusions

The findings and conclusions from this report are paving the way for Netmums to

- a) raise awareness in parents on their inherent beliefs and their self perpetuating potential
- b) to offer advice, guidance and support on positive, proactive and practical steps mums can take to re-balance these beliefs and reactions to offer each child the best possible opportunity to fulfil his or her academic potential while also having the least possible likelihood of depression and the best chance of happiness in adult life.

The Research - Methodology

Psychologist Dr Alicia Renedo advised Netmums on the formation of the research and a questionnaire was compiled around the issue of birth order, parents' attitudes and beliefs, potential effects on the outcomes of a child and on a mother's subsequent parenting ability.

9,326 mothers completed the online survey in May 09.

The results, conclusions and suggestions based on the conclusions are contained in this document. Dr Alicia has consulted with Netmums on this report.

Part 1 Birth Order and the effect on the child

1. Do Mothers believe Birth Order has an effect on their children?

Mothers were asked: *Do you think birth order (i.e. position in the family) has an effect on a person (think of you in your original family and/or your children).*

Of the 9,236 mums who answered this question 77% believed it does have an effect compared with 23% who believe it isn't relevant.

Comment:

Why does this matter? Over three quarters of mums believe birth order has an effect on their child's achievements in life, well being and personality, then we might assume that there will be element of self-fulfilling prophesy involved.

Regardless of what the experts believe, if mums believe it to be true then they may unconsciously encourage those outcomes. So what matters is not the child's positioning the family, but the way parents relate to the child in that position and the parental expectations.

If mothers adopt a deterministic parenting style, that perpetuates differences between children and somehow maintains the status-quo ("Why investing time and effort in my middle child if he will never achieve what the oldest one will?"). Beliefs permeate relationships with others, and these others

2. Do mothers have differing expectations for their children's academic success based on Birth order?

Mothers were asked: *If you have more than one child, which of them do you think will succeed most academically*

Oldest child:	35%
Middle child:	6%
Youngest child:	15%
None/cannot say:	44%

Comment:

Current research in other studies have revealed that eldest children tend to develop higher IQ's than their siblings. The theories as to why this might be suggest that it's because parents invest more time in the older child before the siblings are born.

However, this new research reveals a quite significant disparity between the parental expectations for academic success for their oldest child compared to younger siblings. We could conclude that parents put extra pressure on their eldest child to succeed academically. The next question gives some clues as to why this might be.

3. Does birth order effect how parents identify with a particular a child ?

Mothers were asked: *If you have more than one child, which of them do you identify with most?*

Oldest child:	39%
Middle child:	7%
Youngest child:	6%
None/cannot say:	38%

Comment:

A significant number of parents identify more with their oldest child. This could explain why they have higher expectations for that child and perhaps therefore why they feel justified in putting extra pressure on that child to succeed. Is there an element of parents projecting their own aspirations onto their eldest child?

4. Is there a detrimental effect to this on oldest children?

We asked: *If you have more than one child which one to think is more likely to be susceptible to anxiety/depression in their life?*

Oldest child:	45%
Middle child:	7%
Youngest child :	6%
None/cannot say:	42%

Comment:.

Does the resulting pressure on the child from higher parental expectation result in them being susceptible to depression or anxiety in later life? A key finding which has worrying repercussions but also an exciting area in which to be able to influence change.

5. So how does this effect a child's happiness?

Mothers were asked: *If you have more than one child, which of them do you think will be happiest in life?*

Oldest child:	7%
Middle child:	7%
Youngest child:	35%
None/cannot say:	51%

Comment:

Younger children are not subject to the same academic aspirations as their older brothers and sisters have a greater chance of finding happiness according to their parents.

So while an oldest children have a potential beneficial effect on intelligence levels, the downside of this extra attention seems to be that they don't tend to develop the happy-go-lucky attitude that their younger siblings often enjoy.

Part 2: Does a Mothers Birth Order effect her Parenting Style?

As part of this research we looked at how a mothers birth order can impact her subsequent parenting styles. These are summarised here:

1. Oldest-Child Mums

Oldest-child mums are the group most commonly perceived by friends as “strong, confident and decisive”.

Oldest-child mums are the most competitive and perfectionist mums; both in relation to (1) their child’s achievement & development and (2) their role as mothers.

They are the most demanding; both of their child and themselves (the ones that demanded themselves most when they had their first child). This is not surprising. Indeed, if you look at our data you can see that strongest pressure is on oldest children; this probably makes a very self-demanding/perfectionist person. Oldest-child mums are doing with their children what their parents did to them. The parenting style patterns repeat.

Oldest-child mums are the ones that punish most when their children don’t behave.

Oldest-child mums have the lowest economical aspirations for their children. They are the least concerned with them making lots of money

Oldest-children go on to become the most competitive parents in relation to their children’s achievements and with strongest feelings of self-failure as a consequence of their children not being the best/the first at achieving something. Oldest-child mums are the ones with the highest educational aspirations for their children.

When parents have high educational aspirations (and expectations) for their children, they might invest more time and effort in trying to influence those academic achievements. Also, the more parents believe that their parenting practices can affect their children educational performance the more active they will be in promoting the developmental achievement of their children. This is the case of oldest-child mums!

2. Middle-Child Mums

Middle-child mums and youngest-child mums were the most laid back and least worried about how they performed as mothers.

Middle-child mums are less competitive as mothers and are not so concerned with how well they perform in comparison to other mums. This is because their parents in turn did not put so much pressure on them.

The most commonly described as “Kind, calm and supportive” by their friends.

Middle-child mums are the most permissive of all. They are the most lenient with their children, but by contrast they seem to be the least interested in their children enjoying life and having fun. They are the least concerned with their children having lots of friends.

3. Youngest-child mums

When youngest children have kids themselves, they are the ones (compared to mums with different birth position) most interested in their children enjoying life.

The most commonly described as “Fun-loving, expressive and outgoing” by friends.

Indeed, all mum groups believe that their youngest child is the one that will be the happiest, and the one who will enjoy life most - here we can see the self-perpetuating pattern.

When they had their first child, youngest-child mums were the most needy and demanding of their mums’ support. They needed most support from their own mums when they had their first child. This is not surprising if you think that due to their birth position both enjoyed most attention from their parents when they were little.

Youngest-child mums are the ones that grant most autonomy to their children so that they can develop as independent and autonomous persons.

Youngest-child mums are the ones that praise their children most when they do well

Youngest -child mums are the ones that are most concerned with their children making lots of money

Youngest-child mums are the ones for which their children enjoying life, exploring the world and engaging in adventurous experiences is most important

Children having fun is most important for youngest-child mums.

Note: There is a trend amongst all groups; all of them believe that their youngest child will be the happiest of all. Indeed, there could be a self-fulfilling prophecy by which parents believe that the youngest child will be the happiest, these beliefs permeate their interactions, and thus influence the way the youngest child approaches life.

4. Only-Child mums

Only child-mums have the most strict and authoritative parenting style (followed by oldest-child mum)

Only-child mums are the most strict with their children and rigorous when it comes to them following rules. The group of mums that was most worried and uptight about not being the perfect parent they wanted to be was only-child mums

Despite being the most strict with their children, only child-mums report being the ones that give most freedom to their children.

Only-child mums seem to be the most demanding with themselves and their children; they want to be the best mums, they want their children to be the best the happiest etc. (that’s why they are strict).

Only-child mums are the ones that most strongly want their children to have fun (followed by oldest-child mums)

Most commonly described as “Quiet, reflective and analytical” . This is not surprising if you look at the context (family constellation) where they grew up (i.e. interacting more frequently with adults)

On the whole it seems that only-child mums are the ones that struggled most when they had their first child and the ones (together with youngest-child mums) in most need of support for coping with their new role as mums. It seems that for only-child mums emotional capital is a very important ingredient for a successful and happy life. They are the ones with strongest aspirations of emotional capital attainment for their children. Finding the right partner was most important for only-child mums

Key conclusions and advice for mums on how to redress any negative effects of birth order will be published on Netmums. www.netmums.com/birthordermatters

NETMUMS BIRTH ORDER SURVEY

1. **What was your position in your family?**
 - a. Only child
 - b. Oldest child
 - c. Middle child
 - d. Youngest child
 - e. It's complicated!

2. **If you have a long-term partner, what was their position?**
 - a. Only child
 - b. Oldest child
 - c. Middle child
 - d. Youngest child
 - e. It's complicated!

3. **My friends would describe me as:**
 1. Strong, confident and decisive.
 2. Fun-loving, expressive and outgoing.
 3. Kind, calm and supportive.
 4. Quiet, reflective and analytical.

4. **When you had your first child, what sort of a mum were you?**
 - a. A bit competitive: if someone else's child reached a milestone before mine I'd feel as though I was failing.
 - b. I was all over the place and really needed my mum around.
 - c. A bit uptight, actually, and worried that I might not be the perfect parent I'd like to be.
 - d. Overall, quite laidback: I've never worried about how 'well' I'm doing compared with others.

5. **Generally speaking, as a parent I'd say I'm:**
 - a. Fairly strict – I like them to stick to the rules
 - b. Pretty flexible – I'm bend the rules if it seems like the right thing at the time
 - c. A bit of a softie! I admit that I let them get away with too much sometimes!

6. **How accurate are the following statements in describing the way you bring up your child(ren)? If you don't feel your child is old enough for these to be relevant, think about how you think you'll treat them when they're a little older.**

- strongly disagree; disagree; I'm in between; agree, strongly agree

 - a. I think it's important to give them a lot of freedom.
 - b. I really expect them to follow family rules.
 - c. As they grow up, they'll be able to count on me to help them out if they have a problem.
 - d. Sometimes I really let them get away with things!
 - e. It's important to me that my kids and I do things that are fun together.
 - f. I believe they have a right to their own points of view.

- 7. Which of the following are your biggest priorities for your child(ren)? rank in order of importance**
- That they succeed academically
 - That they make lots of money
 - That they have lots of friends
 - That they have lots of adventures
 - That they have fun!
- 8. If you have more than one child, which of them do you identify with most?**
- Oldest child
 - Middle child
 - Youngest child
 - None/cannot say
 - I only have one child
- 9. If you have more than one child, which of them do you think will succeed most academically?**
- Oldest child
 - Middle child
 - Youngest child
 - None/cannot say
 - I only have one child
- 9. If you have more than one child, which of them do you think will be happiest in life?**
- Oldest child
 - Middle child
 - Youngest child
 - None/cannot say
 - I only have one child