

BE WELL

The Perks and Perils of Being Numero Uno

By **Debbie DeAngelo**
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Editor's note: Following is the first of an ongoing series of articles on health, fitness, and medicine by Erie health and wellness expert Debbie DeAngelo. This is also the first of two parts on the subject of birth order. The Jefferson welcomes Debbie DeAngelo to its stable of writers and researchers. The series will continue Monday, June 20.

From your first kiss to your first car, “firsts” are memorable. Perhaps none more so than your firstborn child.

Yes, I can see all you middle and lastborn children of the family rolling your eyes. After all, each of us seems to believe our other siblings received preferential treatment from Mom and Dad at our expense.

Birth order research yields some fascinating insight into family dynamics and individual characteristics. Your place in the family lineup molds your personality, career path, and choice of mate. One position in the clan isn't any better than the others – simply different.

Whether you're a firstborn yourself, are living with one or are parenting one, here is a bird's-eye view into understanding them. Keep in mind that firstborn traits can be exhibited in the first daughter or son of the family even if they aren't the oldest or if five or more years separate them from the next oldest sibling. And the lonely only child? Yep, them, too.

Personality

Firstborns enjoy a special relationship with their parents simply due to the timing of their arrival. Mom and Dad document every milestone, celebrate every achievement, and worry that growth and development are occurring on time. This sets the stage for many of their personality traits.

Since number one is lavished with attention, until number two comes along, they become used to being in the limelight and are more likely to be a confident adult. Parents also have high hopes and expectations for the little pioneer of the family, who then learns to become a role model. With the first child, parents tend to be “by-the-book” and very attentive. As a result, firstborns are perfectionistic and usually set ambitious standards for themselves. Since everyone relies on them, all of this responsibility may leave them feeling overwhelmed and exhausted if it isn’t reined in. Firstborns are serious-minded, goal-oriented, ambitious, people-pleasers who tend to see the world in terms of black and white and believe that rules are meant to be followed – not broken.

Career

Is it a coincidence that 21 of the first 23 astronauts were either the eldest of their families or the only children, and that the majority of presidents were either firstborns or the first sons of the family?

Whether at work or in the community, these movers and shakers are overachieving natural leaders. They are the ones people look to for guidance and solutions. Jobs which require attention to detail, analytical skills, and intellectual ability are well suited for firstborns. From engineers to newscasters to surgeons, these folks are driven and determined to exceed their goals – or die trying! If you want something done, and done properly, ask a firstborn.

Their diligence and desire to excel at everything they do sets them apart from many of their peers and brings much success. Unfortunately, this comes at a cost. Many firstborns have an underlying fear of failure and don’t often feel satisfied with anything they accomplish.

Relationships

As kids, firstborns are used to hanging with their parents and other adults. As their siblings arrive, they are thrust into the “little helper” role, and later, the “babysitter.” That’s why it’s typical for them to befriend people older and younger than themselves but have fewer peer relationships.

When it comes to choosing a mate, the best partner for a firstborn is a lastborn. The fun-loving baby can bring levity to the otherwise serious life of the oldest and help them to become more laid back and recognize the less serious side of life. In return, the baby benefits from this partnership by learning to shoulder some responsibility and becoming more focused. The oldest-youngest pairing also

works because one is used to being the caretaker and the other is used to being taken care of.

The firstborn partner notices when things need to be done or repaired around the house and makes sure they get done – one way or another. Due to their super organizational and supervisory skills, they are often perceived as bossy. You can add strong-willed, opinionated and critical to this list, too.

Birth order doesn't explain or rationalize all human behavior. However, it can give us perspective on why people are as they are. If nothing else, it can help us gain a better understanding of ourselves and each other.

Suggested Readings

Firstborns: "The First Born Advantage," Dr. Kevin Leman; "Oldest Daughters -- What to Know if You Are One or Have Ever Been Bossed Around by One," Patricia Schudy.

Middleborns: "The Secret Power of Middle Children," Catherine Salmon, Ph.D.; "Why Can't We Get Along? Healing Adult Sibling Relationships," Peter Goldenthal, Ph.D.

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