

Consider taking the lead. Don't get the mistaken idea that firstborns are the only people who can rise to positions of leadership. Middle children often make excellent managers and leaders because they understand compromise, negotiation, and giving something for something else (the art of quid pro quo).

Case study of a Family Constellation



The following case shows very clearly the mechanisms and the expressions of competition between children.

Nine-year-old Billy was such a wonderful little boy. He had lost his father four years ago, and he managed to be a great solace and help to his mother. Very early he assisted her not only in housework, but also in taking care of six-year-old Marilyn. Even at his tender age, Mother could discuss any problem with him, and he actually assumed the function of the "man of the family." The only point where Billy did not do so well was at school. He had few friends and was not very much interested in school work. That is not surprising when we consider that in school Billy could not have the extraordinary position which he enjoyed at home.

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One can easily imagine the type of girl Marilyn was. She was so unruly that Mother did not know what to do with her any longer and asked for help. She was untidy, unreliable, noisy, disturbing, and annoying—a real "brat." Mother could not understand how in the entire world the two children could be so different! It was hard for her to understand the connection between Billy's goodness and Marilyn's difficulties.

We had the following discussion with both children



Nurture your natural people skills. Middle-born probably have certain people-oriented social skills because of all the negotiating and mediating they had to do while growing up. Use these skills to see both sides and deal with life as it really is

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together.

First, we asked Marilyn whether she thought Mother liked her. Her answer was, as could be expected, a shaking of the head. Then we explained to her that we were sure that Mother loved her very much but that because she, Marilyn, did not believe it, she acted in such a way as to make Mother constantly angry at her. As a consequence, Mother paid attention to her only when she misbehaved (destructive attention-getting mechanism) and that made her feel still more disliked. If she would try to behave differently, she would find out that Mother loved her, too.

This discussion took place in the presence of Billy. Then we asked him whether he wanted Marilyn to be a good and nice girl. He immediately shouted, "No!" We asked him why he didn't want it. He became embarrassed, groped for some answers, and finally said, "She won't be good, anyhow." Then we explained to him that maybe we

could help her and he could help her, too, and so we might succeed in making her a good girl. Would he like it? Somewhat uncertainly, he said, yes, he would like it. I looked at him and told him, frankly, I didn't believe that he meant it seriously; I was sure that his first "no" was more sincere and accurate. But why didn't he want her to be good? Perhaps he could tell me. He was thoughtful for a while. And then he came out- "Because I want to be better."

Once the competition between the first and second child is established, a third child may be adopted as an ally by either the first or the second. Only rarely does the third compete with both, forcing the first and second into an alliance with each other-a situation which may occur, for example, if the older two are girls and the youngest a boy. The fourth one can side with any of the older children, according to circumstances. Whichever way the division of forces has been aligned can be recognized easily by each child's subsequent character development. The two siblings most different in their qualities, interests, or emotions are those who as children were competitors. This fact reveals where within the family lie the battlefronts, the recognition of which is necessary for the understanding of any child.

This family interaction, which puts each child in a characteristic "family constellation" as Adler 3 calls it, is more important for the development of

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personality and character than any other single factor such as inheritance. Here is an example:

Father, mother, and six children make up the family. The competition originated in the relationship of a "superior," domineering father, interested in politics and literature, and the mother, a typical housewife, compensating for her social and intellectual inadequacy by domestic dominance over the children. The first child, Sally, a daughter, is played by her father against the mother. The mother finds an ally in her second daughter, Beatrice. Sally is a good student, but despises housework and is in constant opposition to her mother. Beatrice is very much interested in housework, a very mediocre student, and much interested in her feminine appeal.

A few years later identical twin girls are born. Their physical similarity necessitates their wearing different-colored stockings and ribbons to facilitate recognition. Identical twins generally have a peculiar psychological relationship. They identify themselves with each other to such a degree that very often they regard themselves as only a half of one, frequently developing identical life styles which then bring an amazing similarity in their fortunes.

In our case, however, something rather unusual happened.

The strong competition between the two older sisters caused a division between the twins. One, Ruth, who was, incidentally, the senior by thirteen minutes, was claimed by Sally as an ally, while Beatrice sided with the "younger" twin, Diana. As a consequence, Ruth developed like Sally into a good student and bad housekeeper, while Diana, like Beatrice, became a mediocre student, good housekeeper, and much interested in her appearance. The third couple of children were a boy and a girl. The boy, Tom, was not only again the "older" of the two, but also, as a boy, desirous of special superiority.

The whole family was split into two groups-in characters, in interests, and behavior: Father, Sally, Ruth, and the boy against Mother, Beatrice, Diana, and the baby girl. Tom, with the support of his oldest sister and father, challenged the superiority of even his much older sister, Beatrice, trying to bully her. The twin Ruth excluded Diana from her own relationship with girls, and refused to take her with them because she was "too young" (thirteen minutes younger!). Friction, discord, and mutual suffering made miserable the life of these otherwise capable and pleasant human beings.