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Birth Order: A Fight for the Paramount Ordinal Position Among Siblings

by Eileen Corley

(English 1102)

A simple topic, which is often ignored and not analyzed enough, can be considered very informative and controversial at the same time. Birth order has affected the way children and their siblings interact for centuries. The ordinal position of birth and the effects it has on a personality depend on spacing, the sex of the child, physical, mental, or emotional differences, and sibling deaths. Throughout research, the constant sibling competition within families has become evident. Parental time, attention, love, and approval are all necessary factors in a child's life while birth order personalities and behavior has been researched to be predictable, to a certain point. Family plays an essential part in every child's life and the experiences and lessons learned through family relationships become the most influential. Birth order, a controversial aspect of family life, has affected the personalities and behavior of children for centuries, as well as the family in the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* by Gregory Maguire. The first-born, middle-born, and last-born children all have different personality traits and characteristics that make each of them a contributor to the others rival.

A first-born child can be described in many styles and different opinionated points of view. Researchers have gone to some of their greatest lengths to identify the tendencies of a first born child, however, the explanation for their personality traits could not be more blatant. The first-born child behaves in such ways because their ordinal position leaves them being the first child in the family to experience anything. In any given situation, the first time something happens, a special memory will be tied to the moment forever. The first time a child rides a bicycle, goes to school, makes the basketball team, goes to a high school dance, or gets accepted to college, are seen as special milestones in their life. A child born first is treated differently from the beginning; however, the parents primarily can be to blame for the special treatment because they are inexperienced in parenting a child. In the research book, *The New Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are* author Kevin Leman explains, "Oldest children serve as "guinea pigs" for parents who have never done this kind of thing before...Everything about a first born child is important" (87). Parents having their first child are typically one side ambivalent, anxious, over protective, and inconsistent while the other side can be strict, demanding, always pushing, and encouraging better performance for their child. As a result, a first-born child tends to be a perfectionist, driven, reliable, and a natural leader. These characteristics seem nothing less than sensible in comparison to their dotting, loving, ambivalent parents giving everything to them with no expectations of something in return.

The birth of a second child causes turmoil for the first-born child. Depending on the spacing of age between the two children, the first-born is most likely going to feel "dethroned", in a sense. In the article "Sibling Rivalry: When the Family Circle Becomes a Boxing Ring" Jane E. Anderson explains that the addition of another child to the family poses a threat on the first-born because a new sibling means less of everything for them; less time spent with their parents, less attention for a good accomplishment or a disappointment, and feeling as though they are not as important as they once were (1). This explanation from Anderson suggests the idea that a first-born may start to experience envy or jealousy at the arrival of a second child. Normally, a first-born begins to have a rebellious, attention-seeking attitude when their brother or sister arrives; and although the explanation is somewhat obvious, the personality tendencies for a first-born to want to be the best and have the most are fueled by the arrival of their new sibling. In certain scenarios, an older sister has to cope

with the threat of having a newborn sister. Girls appear more timid about the idea of a new girl sibling because they want to be “Daddy’s girl or Mommy’s girl”, and the thought of a new girl in the family puts everything they thought they had going for them on hold. In the research book *First Child, Second Child...Your Birth Order Profile* authors Bradford Wilson, PH.D. and George Edington, M.A. point out, “As the big sister in a two-girl family you had a problem...Her more extroverted and careless approach to life almost invariably appeared to earn more rewards for her than your high standards were ever able to gain for you.” (215). This excerpt from the researchers explains the reasoning behind the jealous older sibling. The first-born is threatened by the second-born simply because having a sibling is brand new to them.

In connection with the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, Elphaba Thropp, the Wicked Witch of the West also becomes known as the first-born child in the family. She has a prickly personality, does the things she wants to do, and is successful throughout her life. Elphaba is considered out of the ordinary when it comes to the mold of a first-born. Her parents, Frexspar and Melena do not have the important “first priority” sense of urgency for Elphaba that an ordinary parent has for their first-born. She came out of the womb with green skin and her appearance seemed to puzzle the thoughts of every person around, even her own mother, Melena and supposed father, Frexspar. She had a nanny from the moment she was born, who seemed to care more for her well-being than her parents acknowledged. As an example of Elphaba’s poor treatment from her family, the novel states, “Nanny knew Melena might still think about killing the child, but somehow she doubted it” (30-31). This quote suggests that the earlier thoughts of Melena wanting to drown Elphaba may still be intact. Throughout the beginning of the novel, Melena and Frexspar make similar suggestions aimed towards wanting Elphaba to be gone and out of their concern. Melena is quoted saying, “We can always drown the baby and start over” (29); while Frexspar suggests, “‘Who even knows if she’ll live long enough to grow into a nickname.’ Frexspar sounded as if he hoped this would be the case” (24). Although Elphaba’s father turns out to be the Wizard of Oz and not Frexspar later in the novel, both of the people that should be the most excited about the newborn baby have no real concern for her. Elphaba also expresses her ongoing jealousy towards her sister Nessarose. She became jealous of her when she was born but did not begin to form a relationship with her until they went to school together at Shiz University. The novel describes Nessarose and her voice, “She was as Elphaba had said: gorgeous, pink, slender as a wheat stalk, and armless...’Hello, good sir,’ she said, nodding her head very slightly. ‘The valises are on top. Can you manage?’ Her voice was as smooth and oiled as Elphaba’s was serrated” (131). The second-born sister is the one that the first-born will look at and feel the need for a competition. Nessarose is described as being something beautiful, and clearly Elphaba envies her sister in a way.

The middle-born child can be seen as the most dreadful position in the line of birth; being the middle child often means a long life of being ignored. Commonly known for having what is called “second child syndrome”, middle children tend to feel insecure. The arrival of a second child is seen as a threat to a first-born and as a competition to the second-born. Leman states, “Any time a second-born child enters the family, his life-style is determined by his perception of his older sibling” (152). The middle child behaves based on the example the first-born sets and tries from there to compete for the upper hand of their parents. Sharing never seems to be an issue for a middle-born; since the beginning they have had to share their parents’ affection with their older sibling, so their cooperation and “go-with-the-flow” attitude is expected. The middle child may also be the social butterfly of the family; the child that spends time with friends often and makes their peer group first priority in their life. In any family, the middle-born feels ignored, but this unintentionally happens as a natural effect from having multiple siblings. The first-born does everything the first time for the children and the last-born does everything the last time, which leaves the second-born stuck in the middle with hardly as much attention and glory as the other two. The middle-born children tend to be mediators, compromising, independent, loyal to peers, and affectionate. The personality trait for

being a mediator seems rather obvious, because they fall in the middle. Their personality tends to fall in this direction because they could never have Mom and Dad to themselves. They seem to learn to negotiate and compromise; and of course, become somewhat of a manipulator. A girl born second to a first girl causes an extreme uproar, as one could imagine. Wilson and Edington explain, “mightily your sister wished that you had never been born. Hell hath no fury like a first-born dethroned and made to face the downfall by her father’s preference for her rival” (242). In any family, the first-born girl becomes bitter about the arrival of a brand new sister because she now has a brand new competition to face.

With regards to the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, Nessarose Thropp characterizes the middle-born child. She demonstrates certain personality traits that are typical for a middle child but also behaves in ways that seem anything but normal for the second born. She is sociable, beautiful, and somewhat of a trouble maker. Despite her physical ailments, she seems as though she carries herself with a respectable confidence; she was far from ignored and had a very privileged life. The novel describes, “‘Your father’s favorite?’ ‘Oh, that’s easy,’ said Elphaba...’ That’s Nessarose. You’ll see why when you meet her. She’d be anyone’s favorite” (136). Typically, the middle-born is not considered a favorite child in the eyes of their other siblings. Nessarose has a certain charisma and grace about her that appeals to every person she surrounds. Elphaba explains, ‘He never called *me* pet,’ said Elphaba, raising her glass to her sister. ‘But we all know he told the truth, as Nessarose is the pet in the family. Hence those splendid shoes’” (150-151). Nessarose is a praised child in the Thropp family. Possibly because of her beauty or her constant need for attention because of her condition. Nessarose’s popularity and close relationships with peers make Elphaba envious. The novel states that Glinda tries her best to get Elphaba to talk about her sister, because Nessarose’s arrival will surely enlarge their social circle (134). Throughout the rest of the novel, the characters group of friends expands largely because of the arrival of Nessarose. The novel later suggests Nessarose’s father is Turtle Heart, a visiting Quadling glassblower, and although this means Elphaba and her do not share the same father, they seem to get along well. Nessarose treats her family with the utmost respects and cares for them unconditionally; especially her younger brother Shell, whom she shares the same father.

The last-born has a very definite circumstance in any family with multiple children; the child may be born last but certainly not the least. Commonly, the later-born children have everything they would ever need to earn in life simply handed to them. In an August 23, 1994 article from *The Wall Street Journal*, “Family Matters: Blame the Birth Order for History’s Revolts,” David Stipp explains, “Youngest children, firmly enthroned, often become spoiled and lazy. But they tend to feel inferior to their siblings and sometimes become competitive” (2). This statement by Stipp justifies the idea of a last-born being impatient and temperamental, as well. Of course, with everything made so easy for a young last child, these personality traits should be expected to develop. Normally, a child in this ordinal position has a tendency to be sociable and have a large group of friends. *First Child, Second Child...Your Birth Order Profile* explains that last-born children are the most gregarious of any birth order position (187). Last-borns experience emotional highs and lows, which can make them appear to be driven high spirited individuals at the beginning of the week, and a helpless basket case by the end of the week. *The Birth Order Book*, quoted earlier, states, “Last borns are treated with ambivalence—coddled, cuddled, and spoiled one minute; put down and made fun of the next” (185). Their rollercoaster of emotions may tribute to this certain ambivalence the later-born lives with, but tends not to be the entire explanation. The baby of the family tends to have an open-minded, manipulative, charming, precocious, and affectionate personality. The youngest child most likely becomes somewhat of a class clown; carefree and vivacious, also with an attitude of “just do it!” and worry about what will happen later. The last-born children are difficult and token troublemakers.

Concerning the novel *Wicked*, Shell Thropp represents the last-born child as well as the only

boy. Although the novel does not cover much material on his profile or characteristics because he is not a big character in the novel, enough information was given to conclude that he is a classic last-born. Shell tends to be reckless, a smart mouth, and a troublemaker. His qualities match up closely with the description of a standard last child and of course, the perfect representation of the favorite child. For example, a conversation between Glinda and Elphaba states, “And who was your mother’s favorite? ...’don’t know. Would have been Shell, probably, since he’s a boy” (136). Shell carries out the expected favoritism from the parents, as well as the jealous attitude from the siblings. He shares the same father, Turtle Heart, with Nessarose, making them closer in sibling relation than Elphaba; and while this may seem that Elphaba and Shell have no sibling relationship, each share a surprisingly close relationship with one another. Elphaba has a conversation with Glinda about Shell and his personality. She is able to describe him and his characteristics very well, even though there is a significant age difference between them. The conversation between the two explains that Shell is simply male, white, and whole, a typical boy that is a little dull but only because he didn’t grow up with a mother, according to Elphaba (135). Shell had a different experience growing up simply because there was confusion with who his biological father as well as his upbringing by his nanny. He is described as being “stubborn as sin stains” (310). Shell Thropp fits the ordinal position in which he was placed perfectly and without question, the most predictable of all the Thropp siblings.

In conclusion, birth order and the effects on a child’s personality, as well as the research justified, has affected sibling relationships for years. While many children tend to fit the traditional ordinal mold, exceptions to each birth order position may develop. First-born, middle-born, and last-born children have seemingly different personalities based on their upbringing, personal experiences, and order of birth. Evidently, children born will have a competitive nature toward their siblings. Birth order has been considered as a factor which plays a part in personalities and behavior of children for years, as well as the characters in the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. Research may influence a point of view on how predictable a child’s personality will be, because of their order in birth, or not, but each family circumstance can be different. Every child has a legitimate amount of previous examples to base their affiliation with their personality and behavior on according to birth. In the years to come, birth order will continue to affect the relationships between siblings and their ability to timidly admit their love towards each other; although there may be a secret hope one sibling is not as spectacular as the other.

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