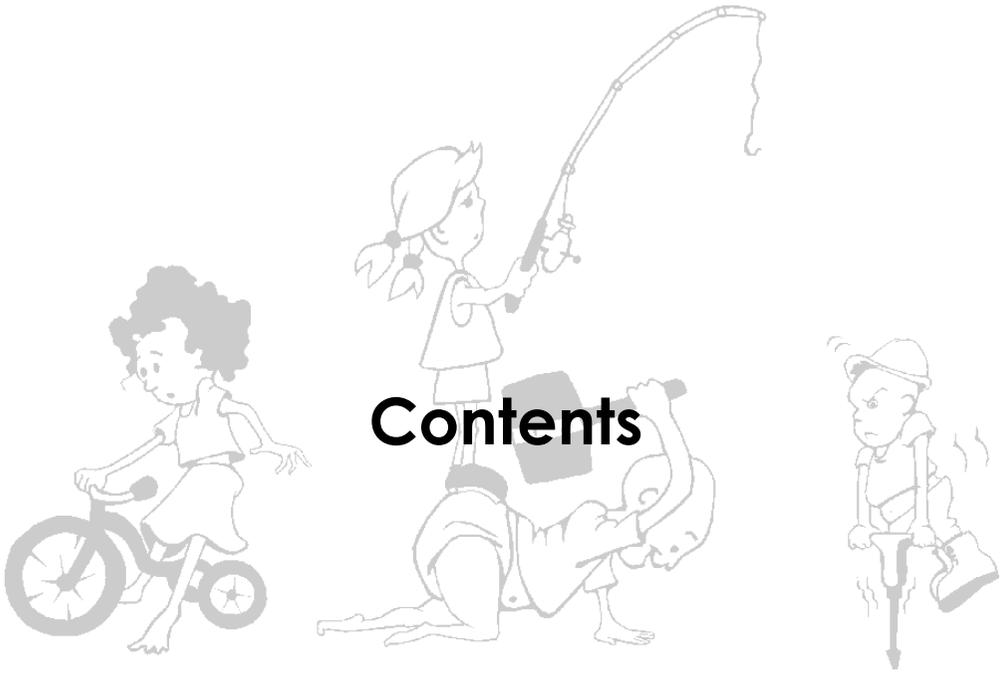


BIRTH ORDER AND YOU

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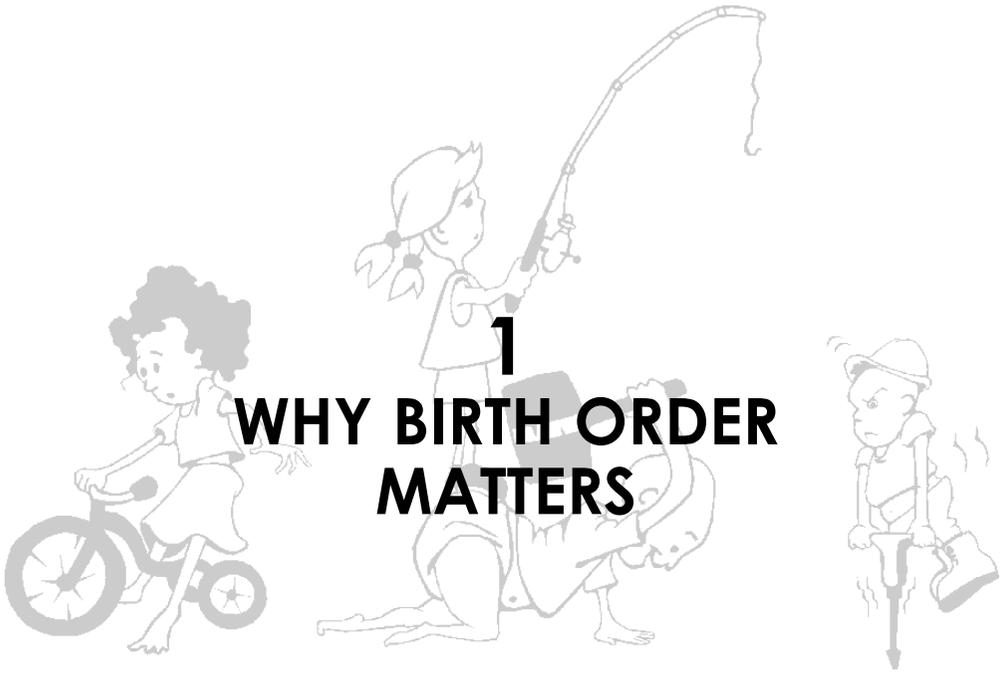
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Give me a child for the first seven years and you may do what you like with him afterwards.

Jesuit saying

Aaron is 55 years old. He is a senior partner in a large, successful law firm in Pittsburgh, where he has worked since graduating from law school. He and his wife, Beatrice, his high school sweetheart, have two children now in university. Aaron is on the board of several non-profit agencies in Pittsburgh and is an elder in his church. He works most weekday evenings, but usually manages to play golf with important clients on Saturday. He gets up early every morning to swim.

Aaron and Beatrice have a cordial, but rather distant, relationship. Aaron is definitely the master of the house and was the disciplinarian when the children were young, punishing them more often and more severely than Beatrice would have wished. He loves his wife and children, but isn't able to express it very often in ways they can understand. He has high standards for them all and doesn't hesitate to let them know when

they have failed to meet those standards. When Beatrice doesn't seem to have the household organized sufficiently well, Aaron feels let down. If the children get less than an A- in any course, he thinks they must be goofing off because he knows they are capable of doing much better.

He also drives himself hard at the office and expects his staff to do the same "for the sake of the firm." When his secretary of 10 years resigned recently, he felt personally betrayed and refused to attend her going-away luncheon. He prides himself on his own loyalty and has kept in touch with previous partners who retired after he started with the firm.

He dutifully visits his mother in a nursing home every week and pays her expenses. He had invited her to move into his home, but she didn't want to bother his family.

Brad is 53 years old, unmarried, and works as a shoe salesman. He owns a \$30,000 sports car, but not his own home. He has more debts than he can handle, partly because of the amount he spends on cigarettes and drink. He is a chain-smoker and an unacknowledged alcoholic. He spends most evenings at the neighborhood pub. He gets along with almost anybody, and people genuinely like him when he's sober, but he often turns mean when he's been drinking. He has only a few friends who still tolerate him consistently.

He was involved for several years with a married woman at one of the shoe stores where he worked. When her husband found out about it, he was forced to quit his job there. He was on employment insurance for six months before he found another selling job.

Evelyn is 49 years old and looks 35. She is a vivacious, pretty, almost-natural blonde. She lives in Denver with her husband Lee. She moved away from her hometown when she was 18 to get away from her strict, domineering parents and has been back to visit only two or three times since.

When she works, Evelyn works as a receptionist; she prefers to stay home so she can ski in the winter and go to the beach in the summer.

She has been married and divorced twice and has recently married again. Her first two husbands just couldn't keep her happy and seemed too much like parents to her. She enjoyed the comfortable life she had with them, though, and didn't like having to work when she was between marriages.

As a young wife, she kept house half-heartedly and spent most of her free time visiting friends and going to parties. Her son by her first marriage spent half of his time with his father, though he worshipped his mother and as an adult enjoyed being her escort before she remarried. Although she often left him with babysitters when he was a child, Evelyn enjoys her son very much as an adult and has never been critical of anything he has done.

What do Aaron, Brad, and Evelyn have in common? Very little it seems. And yet they have the same parents and grew up in the same family just a few years apart. They are siblings — two brothers and a sister (in that order).

Your birth order position (whether born first, second, last, etc.), your sex (male or female), and the sex of your siblings affect the kind of person you become. The kind of people Aaron, Brad, and Evelyn have become is consistent with their birth order positions. They needed that particular mix of siblings to develop the personal characteristics they did. They would not have become the same people if they had not had each other.

People often say they can't understand "how people from the same family can be so different." What they don't realize is that each sibling is born into a different family. Each new child needs to create a unique identity, separate from the others. But this new identity is created within a context of those who are already there.

a. THE FAMILY CONTEXT

The people in a family change in many ways between the birth of each child. Their circumstances are different, their emotional life is different, and the world around them is different. These

differences mean that each child is treated in a different way by parents and siblings, usually unintentionally.

In addition to the changes in the family itself between births, each child is born with a unique genetic inheritance and constitutional makeup. This also affects how family members relate to the child, which in turn affects the child's perception of all that happens in the family.

1. Circumstantial differences

Where the family lives, what other relatives and friends are around, how much money is available, and the career stage of the parents are all factors that may change over time and will affect the early experiences of each child.

The family is, of course, numerically different for each sibling. A child who is born into a household with only two adults in it has a different experience of early childhood than the child born into a household of two adults and three children. Much of the influence of birth order on personality is due to this difference in who is physically present in the household.

A later child may also arrive when an elderly grandparent is either living with the family or placing many demands on the time and money of the parents as well as adding emotional strain to the family.

2. Emotional differences

One of the greatest determinants of a child's personality development is the happiness level of the parents. The personal and marital fulfillment and contentment of the parents may be at a different level at each child's birth, and this will affect how they are as parents as well as the emotional atmosphere in the home.

A newly wed couple may be more loving to each other than a disillusioned couple suffering from the seven-year itch. A younger couple may still be working out their differences and power struggles and adjusting to each other, while an older couple may have made their peace with each other. A struggling

student couple or a couple concerned about getting a career started will be different kinds of parents at that stage than they are when more established and comfortable.

The parents of later-born children have usually settled into their social roles and are more secure in their career directions. For each succeeding birth, the current family members bring a higher level of maturity to the experience of being a parent or being an older sibling.

The parents may develop somewhat different parenting styles between children. The first child is usually born to a youngish couple, with no experience in childrearing. The two of them now have to make space in their lives for a third (very demanding) person. It is normal for these parents to be anxious and uncertain with a tendency to focus much more attention on this child than they do on later children.

When the second child is born, the parents have some experience behind them. They are usually more relaxed about parenting and also less impressed with the child's stages of development (first words, first steps, first whatever). So the child who comes later tends to get less pressure but also less attention and affirmation for similar accomplishments.

When there are many years between the births of siblings, even things like a change in the prevailing theories of childrearing can make a difference in the way the siblings are raised.

3. The external world

Each child born into a family also faces a different external world. A child born in London during World War II had a different kind of early family experience than a younger sibling born in Canada after the war. A child who became a teenager in the political turmoil of the early seventies had a different experience from that of an older sibling who became a teenager in the Camelot years of the early sixties. A child born in the inflationary years of the eighties will have a different family context than a child born in the nineties.

b. FAMILY IDENTITY

The over-riding influence on an individual's development is the family personality. Children develop their social behavior by relating to their own parents and siblings. For instance, even though all oldest children are likely to share many characteristics, they are all also unique in the way those characteristics are expressed.

Even where non-birth order characteristics are the dominant element in someone's personality, some of the birth order traits are usually evident. For example, an exceptionally bright or talented youngest boy might still be more dependent or less responsible than the other children in his family. He may be a genius, but a spoiled, babied genius.

In addition, birth order doesn't determine the basic values of a person or the person's value to society. It affects social interactions more than attitudes and ethical stances. Depending on a number of other family and environmental circumstances, an only child can turn out to be Joseph Stalin or Leonardo da Vinci, Elvis Presley or Franklin Roosevelt. But these four men shared certain characteristics that are common to male only children.

c. SIBLING DISTINCTIVENESS

We each need to develop a distinctive identity or a separate sense of self. This need is driven by a desire for recognition, acknowledgment, support, and affirmation and is one of the major factors in creating differences between siblings. While some children may try to establish their identity by imitating a sibling who is clearly affirmed and recognized by their parents, the more common pathway is to find something that will distinguish self from others.

Identical twins demonstrate the principle most clearly. Those who were separated at birth and raised in different families are more like each other in personality than those who are raised in the same family where they try to be different from each other.

The first child in a family usually identifies with the parents' values and works at becoming what they want. The second child (especially a second child of the same sex as the first) will most likely not be able to compete with the first one. He or she will therefore learn to open up new territory, try out new behaviors, and seek a different route for getting affirmation and recognition.

This can be a problem, however, if what the parents value most is reflected in the first child. The second child (especially of the same sex) may be seen as less "good" than the first — less competent at doing whatever it is that the parents value. Sometimes, when the first child is good at being "good" (i.e., fulfilling parental expectations), the second child gets his or her recognition by being good at being "bad."

Younger siblings tend to define themselves according to whatever territory has already been claimed by the older child. In therapy, two adult sisters began to explore this dynamic and the resentments between them that had resulted. May spoke of how much she envied the academic achievements of her older sister Alice, who clearly pleased her parents with her abilities. Quite early on, May decided she could not and would not compete with Alice in that area. She put more energy into friends, her social life, and team sports. She also became a cheerleader and eventually ended up becoming a television actress. It was news to her to hear how much Alice envied her. While they were growing up, May not only had a lot of dates, but seemed to Alice to be favored by dad since he appreciated and enjoyed her activities more than Alice's quiet work in the chemistry lab. As an adult, Alice wished she had the kind of public recognition May had.

d. SEX

Sex* adds another important dimension to birth order characteristics. Although all children who share the same birth position in their families will have some characteristics in common,

*Generally, in this book, the word sex refers to the biological fact of being male or female. Gender refers to the attributes of masculinity or femininity as defined by our culture.

they will differ according to their sex and the sex of others in their family.

Each succeeding child is treated by, and relates to, parents and siblings differently according to the sex of each of them. A boy born into a family of boys will see himself and, ultimately, the world in a different way from a boy born into a family of girls. This continues to be the case even in these days of increased equality for women and despite the professed belief of many parents in non-sexist childrearing.

Just about the first question the parents and everyone else asks about a newborn is “What is it?” They aren’t asking if it’s a puppy or a pony; they’re asking what sex it is, in part so they know how to think of it and how to treat it. Research has shown that, from the moment of birth, girl infants are treated differently from boy infants. For instance, they are handled more gently and talked to more often. In one study, volunteers were asked to play with different infants. Each baby was first dressed as a boy and then as a girl. The volunteers thought there were two different babies each time, and they played with and talked to them in very different ways, according to the sex the babies were dressed as.

Sex is also a factor when the parents want a child of one sex and end up with the opposite. For example, in a family where a third girl is born to parents ardently wanting a boy, the impact on that girl’s experience in the family and her sense of self can be very strong. The impact usually shows in one of two ways: she is either treated as a disappointment and ignored to some extent or is groomed to become the “boy” of the family.

And, of course, genetic research is increasing our understanding of biological differences between the sexes.

e. HOW SIBLINGS REACT TO EACH OTHER

Parents usually get the blame or credit for the way their children turn out. However, brothers and sisters in the family have a profound effect as well. Children — except for only children or oldest

children for the first few years of life — develop in great measure by relating to their siblings and struggling to establish a separate identity within the family. By age five or six, this identity and the accompanying personality traits are more or less set. These early experiences in the family far outweigh the later influences of school, church, clubs, and friendships.

Birth order and sex are commonly used to identify a child. Parents will often introduce their children to outsiders by saying “This is my oldest,” “This is my youngest son,” “This is my only daughter.” The child soon accepts these factors as part of his or her identity. What seems a superficial matter is important at a deep level of consciousness. In addition to whatever the parents believe about oldests, middles, and youngests, and about males and females, society’s attitudes about these factors will also become part of the child’s consciousness.

Almost all children learn to identify with their position and construct a story or form their own private beliefs about what it means to be a “first,” a “middle,” or a “last” child, or a “boy” or a “girl.” Their stories, repeated to themselves daily in their heads, may have an essentially positive or negative tone, and as each day’s events happen, only those elements that fit with the story will be noticed and remembered. It is not only the reality that makes the difference but the child’s perception of reality that affects this identity.

Jeremy and his wife came into therapy partly because Jeremy didn’t feel appreciated and loved by her. His negative feelings had increased substantially since their first child was born and the baby commanded so much of his wife’s attention. Jeremy was asked if he had ever felt like that before. It came out that he had often felt his parents cared more for his younger brother, Wylie, than for him. He had never said anything about it to his parents, but had often been quiet and sulky at home, just as he was with his wife. Asked for a specific example of how his parents had favored Wylie, Jeremy told a story about being sent off to boarding school at a young age. He hated the school, was homesick, scared, and unhappy. A year later, Wylie came to the same school and had the same feelings about it. However,

Wylie immediately called his parents to say he wanted to come home. His parents came to the school to see him and encourage him. This happened several times during the year, and each time, Jeremy felt hurt that his parents were so concerned about Wylie. He interpreted this as their loving Wylie more.

Not long after Jeremy told this story, his parents came to visit from England. Jeremy was asked to bring them to a therapy session. In the session, the therapist asked them about their experience with their two sons. They both spoke about how much more responsible and competent Jeremy was than his younger brother Wylie. They said Wylie had always been a problem for them, but that Jeremy could be counted on. Asked for an example, they spontaneously told about sending both boys to boarding school. They never had a problem with Jeremy, who handled it just fine, they said, but Wylie complained constantly and kept dragging them down to the school to deal with his problems. They tried to be understanding, but inside they wished Wylie could handle it like Jeremy. To this day, Wylie came to them with his complaints and pleas for help.

Tears filled Jeremy's eyes as he listened to this version of the story. He had never seen it from this perspective. When he told his father that he had been just as upset by his first year at school as Wylie, his father said he'd never known that. It began to emerge that Jeremy thought people who loved him (including his wife) should just know what he felt and needed. He had never asked for what he wanted directly, but just sulked quietly instead. As a result, his perception of situations became the reality for him and that "reality" shaped his responses.

Children often learn to use their birth order position to advantage to get what they want. In reaction to each other, they reinforce each other's characteristics. A youngest child like Wylie may decide to excel in using relative weakness to get attention from the parents; an oldest child like Jeremy may be pushed to even greater efforts to excel at some accomplishment in order to get affirmation from the parents.

At one level, Jeremy understood that his parents valued his quieter, less demanding style, but that created a bind for him

because it prevented him from getting the attention he wanted. He achieved some recognition by being more adult, but some of his emotional needs were not met.

Because all members of a family define themselves in relation to other family members, a change in any one family member always has an impact on every other family member.

This process is especially true for siblings. Any one child's behavior and way of expressing self in the world has to be seen in the context of the other children. They don't make each other the way they are; but they all define themselves in the context of their relationship with each other.

Arthur frequently had physical fights with his older brother, which he usually lost. He craved his older brother's attention, respect, and acceptance. But the older brother preferred to be with the third, youngest boy who was a more compliant companion. Arthur's father seemed to dote on the oldest son, and his mother spent her time with his sisters. He felt like an outsider. Early in adolescence, after years of trying to be like his older brother and failing miserably, Arthur began to avoid the family. He became a loner, saying he didn't need them or anybody.

After getting married, Arthur became intensely attached to his wife. He was sensitive to her every emotional move toward or away from him. Their relationship worked pretty well until they had children. With each child he became more jealous and more demanding of his wife's attention. His wife complained that he was just too demanding and wanted to control her. They were on the verge of separating when they tried therapy. Once his experience in his family was explored, both Arthur and his wife were relieved to see how this was a major factor in his life and the way he experienced his marriage. He was trying to make up for his loneliness in the family through his marriage.

Arthur began to sort through his family issues, inviting his brothers, sisters, and parents into his therapy at different times. His major task, however, was to begin to define himself in ways that did not depend on his perception of how others responded

to him. He needed to focus more on what made sense to him about how to be, rather than on how he thought he had to be in order to be connected with others. As he did this, he found he got into fewer upsetting situations. His life calmed down and became more satisfying, and he established a better relationship with all his family members. "I have my family back," he said.

f. ONGOING EFFECTS OF BIRTH ORDER

Sigmund Freud was the first of the psychotherapists to note that "a child's position in the sequence of brothers and sisters is of very great significance for the course of his later life."

Your birth order and sex determine in large part how other people in your family react to you and treat you. That, in turn, influences what you think about yourself and how you react to and treat others inside and outside the family.

Your family is your classroom for learning how to behave in the world. In the family, you learn how males and females act; how youngest or oldest children act; how different sexes and ages relate to each other. Whether or not it was an enjoyable lesson a happy home for you, you usually learn your role so well (and so unconsciously) that you live it out the rest of your life without even knowing you've been in "school."

Pioneer psychologist Alfred Adler said, "It should not surprise us to learn that people do not change their attitude toward life after their infancy, though its expressions in later life are quite different from those of their earliest days."

The family experience is so powerful in your early life that you may grow up with the firm conviction (which again may be unconscious) that the way things are in your family is as natural as water to a fish and that anything else is deviant. It is, for example, why you may think the normal way to squeeze the toothpaste tube is from the middle and your spouse is equally convinced it is from the bottom, and neither of you can understand how the other could possibly do it differently.

“The little world of childhood with its familiar surroundings is a model of the greater world,” said Carl Jung. “The more intensively the family has stamped its character upon the child, the more it will tend to feel and see its earlier miniature world again in the bigger world of adult life. Naturally this is not a conscious, intellectual process.”

This conviction that your way is the right way exists even if you consciously dislike your family of origin (the family one is born and raised in) and the way you were brought up. You may not like it, but it is what you are used to. One result of this may be that you will try to duplicate early family experiences, even painful ones, in other areas of your life.

Take, for example, the woman who comes from a family where either she or her mother was abused by her father and who ends up being abused in her marriage. She didn’t “look for” this kind of man (and certainly didn’t want to be abused), but since that was the kind of man she was accustomed to, he was the kind of man she felt “at home” with when she first met him.

Your experiences at home will also affect your expectations and judgments of situations and relationships. You will react to many of the events in the rest of your life the same way you reacted to them in your family. This can sometimes be dangerous.

For instance, you may assume people or events are duplicating the ones you knew as a child when they’re not like that at all. The younger son whose mother and big sister were overprotective and possessive may react resentfully when his wife asks him how his day was. He is so accustomed to women being “domineering” and “snoopy” (according to his perception of his family) that he is automatically angered by an innocent remark. The middle manager who thinks an ambitious young co-worker is trying to undermine her work to win the top boss’s favor may react the same way she did to her younger sister trying to win favor with father. In both cases, the reaction, which is to old hurts, may be inappropriate in the current context and destructive to everyone involved.

It is important, then, to be aware of how your position in your family and your early experiences have shaped you and your relationships with others. Murray Bowen, one of the originators of family systems therapy, often tells therapists that “no single piece of data is more important than knowing the sibling positions of people in the present and past generations.”

g. PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book will help you answer, in part, the question “Why am I like this?” The summary of research findings about birth order positions in a family should help you recognize aspects of your own personality and understand their origin.

While it may be comforting to find out that some of your less desirable characteristics were almost inevitable given your sex and birth order, it isn’t helpful to blame your faults on that and give up trying to change. The point of knowing how those characteristics developed is to learn strategies for changing the ones you don’t like. Just because you were born as a youngest or an oldest or an only, you do not have to keep on behaving like one; the traits are not written in stone.

Many of the descriptions in this book are not very flattering. It almost seems that there is no “good” birth order. Each of the birth order positions has characteristics that are helpful and make life easier for the person, and each presents challenges to face.

These descriptions of the birth order positions for each sex report what most people in these positions are usually like according to research studies; they do not say what anyone should be like. They are descriptive, not prescriptive. They simply provide one more framework for looking at yourself and your relationships. (See the appendix for more details on the research.) The most valuable and extensive research has been done by Austrian psychologist Walter Toman, whose book *Family Constellation: Its Effect on Personality and Social Behavior* (Springer, 1976) is a classic in the field and is highly recommended for your further reading.

For many reasons, some of which are discussed in chapter 15, the description of your birth order may not fit you at all. It may seem about as meaningful as a horoscope reading or a fortune cookie. If this is your experience, first ask someone who knows you well to read the description of your birth order position and see if it fits. We are not always the best judges of our own character. If your outside reader agrees that the description does not fit, you may be interested in finding out why this is so. What aspects of your family situation have affected the development of the usual birth order characteristics?

h. USING THE INFORMATION

The best way to use the information in this book is to see how your birth order may have led you to think and behave in certain ways. If those ways are working well for you, this can be just an interesting intellectual exercise. If some of the ways you think and act are causing problems for you or others in your life, you may want to use this information as a springboard for making some changes. Since people are most often motivated to make changes when they are dissatisfied, the birth order descriptions here focus on the more troublesome aspects of each birth order position rather than the more positive ones. It's the troublesome aspects that you will want to deal with in some way; the good times can just keep rolling.

The information about birth order characteristics can also help you understand why others in your life think and behave as they do. It can be very constructive for you to understand that a person's way of being with you may be related to these standard birth order characteristics and is not just deliberate perverseness on their part. You may be able to accept someone's behavior more easily when you can say to yourself, "Well, that's just how oldest brothers of brothers are. He's like that with everybody; it's not that he dislikes me." The next chapter describes some of the ways birth order can affect different kinds of relationships.

Be sure you read only with the intent of using the information to discover how you might want to change in relating to

others. It would be a misuse of this information to start labeling those around you as a “such and such” as a way of putting them down or trying to get them to change. As always, in attempts at self-improvement, remember that it’s not self-improvement if you’re trying to improve someone else. It’s difficult enough to change your own behavior; it’s impossible to impose change on someone else. However, if you change the way you act with someone, eventually that person may change in response to your change.

Many therapists prefer to work with the “healthiest” person in a relationship, the one who would appear to need changing the least, because that person has the best chance of successfully making changes. Changes on the part of one person usually alter the way a relationship functions. But don’t make that the goal of your change. Your only goal for change can be for yourself and how you treat others.

Understanding birth order characteristics precedes change, but doesn’t decree change. Knowing that some of your traits are common among people in your birth order position may simply help you see why you feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. You can then decide whether you want to work on being rounder or whether you want to find a squarer hole to fit into.

Elsie, an oldest sister of sisters, had become a secretary because that was the only kind of work open to her as a young woman 30 years ago. She had good skills and good work habits, yet she had been dissatisfied in most of her jobs. She had little respect for the men and women she worked for (especially the women), was unable to be supportive of her bosses, and lost several jobs because of her “attitude.” When she learned about birth order characteristics, it began to make sense that she wouldn’t adapt well to the traditional subordinate role of a secretary. Learning that the fit wasn’t right for her motivated her to look seriously at other kinds of work where her birth order characteristics would be an asset rather than a hindrance.

Elsie might also have made the decision to pay particular attention to those aspects of her birth order characteristics that

caused her problems at work and to be aware of when she was acting like an oldest sister rather than a professional secretary. She could then have consciously made the effort not to think of her boss as a younger sister who needed straightening out.

We hope that by learning a little bit about the usual characteristics for your sex and birth order, you will better understand and accept yourself and others in your life. Chapter 17 provides a worksheet for using this information in a constructive way to change those aspects of your functioning that are hindering you in some way.

