

The Second Child Syndrome

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THE GIFTED CHILD has typically been portrayed as an only child or the first-born of two siblings in a middle-class family. Studies of identified gifted children and eminent individuals provide little contradictory evidence to this picture. The number of first-borns and only children among the gifted is striking, comprising half or more of the populations in most major studies of gifted children and eminent adults. In Cornell's (1984) study of gifted and non-gifted siblings (as selected by their schools), in *all* cases the gifted sibling was the eldest child!

There was a striking birth order difference between those children in a gifted program and their ... siblings who were not in a gifted program. All 22 of the first-born children were in a gifted program, whereas only 10 of 22 second-born children were in a gifted program. That is, in 12 families where only one child attended a gifted program, it was always the first-born who attended the program and the second-born who was in the regular program. This birth order difference was highly significant, $p < 0.0001$, by Fisher Exact test. [p. 28]

Cornell viewed the birth order configuration in his sample as an indication that giftedness might be more a function of "social values of parents and educators rather than some intrinsic quality common to the children" (p. 8). From a family systems perspective, the child's giftedness could be the outcome of complex family processes in which the child serves a particular role in the family system (e.g., such as fulfilling the "narcissistic" needs of parents). First-born gifted children in his study appeared to internalize their parents' expectations, becoming perfectionistic, compulsive and conscientious.

The most frequently offered explanations for the relationship between birth order and giftedness have emerged from research on the environmental factors related to the development of intelligence. Manifestations of intelligence appear to depend in part upon the quality and de-

gree of attention the child receives from adults early in life (Zajonc, 1976). Since first-borns and only children interact more frequently with adults than do most other children, they receive a greater amount of attention and tend to imitate adult role models in their language and thought.

In 1981, all of this research thoroughly convinced us that giftedness visited first-borns to a greater extent than anyone else in the family. Then something interesting happened to challenge this belief. Some parents brought in their "non-gifted" second children to be tested. These parents were quite convinced that the younger siblings were not gifted, but they wanted to gain information about the children's learning styles which they had found valuable in the assessment of their eldest. To everyone's astonishment, the

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second children came out within a few IQ points of their older siblings.

The parents were surprised because these second-born children didn't act gifted; that is, they didn't behave or achieve like the first-borns, who walked right out of the textbooks. After a few cases like this, we were puzzled. Could a child be gifted on the inside and non-gifted on the outside because of placement in the family? We noticed that very few of the parents had brought in their second children for testing. Many of them said things like "I know our second one isn't gifted; he's just a happy-go-lucky, well-adjusted kid ... but wait until you see the baby ... she's the brightest of the bunch!"

At this point, we decided to give a discount to any families who would bring

in their second children for testing. (We had to bribe them!) Over the next few years, we collected data on 50 sets of siblings. Out of this sample, 42 sets contained two gifted siblings (Silverman, 1986). Two circumstances accounted for the differences in most of the other sets: Either the siblings were too far apart in age to make test results comparable, or one of the siblings had a learning disability which depressed the IQ score.

We found the siblings to be remarkably close in IQ. More than one-third (19) were within five IQ points, and about two-thirds (30) were within 10 IQ points. When they were the same age at the time of the testing, tested on the same instrument, and free from learning disabilities or chronic ear infections, the siblings were usually within five or 10 points of each other.

We recently expanded our sample to 148 sets of siblings that had been assessed at our center. Our preliminary results held. Fifty-five sets of siblings were within five points of each other's IQs (35.81 percent) and 91 were within 10 points (61.49 percent). Only an eighth of the sample had differences greater than 13 IQ points.

When we analyzed the cases in which there was greater than a 13 point difference in the IQ scores, we again saw that two factors accounted for most of these discrepancies: learning disabilities in one of the siblings — most commonly, auditory processing dysfunction — or an age difference at the time of testing in which one sibling was younger than nine and the other was older than nine. Nine seems to be the magic age at which gifted children's IQ scores take a dramatic plunge, probably due to the shift in the construction of the test items from the assessment of fluid abilities in young children to crystallized abilities (i.e., more verbal and environmental emphases) in older children.

Of the 148 families, only 25 contained gifted and "non-gifted" children (IQ scores above 120 and below 120 on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, 1972 norms). This represents less than 17 percent of the sample. And, once again, auditory sequencing difficulties were found in the majority of cases of siblings who scored below the gifted range. In only four cases in which there was a discrepancy greater than 13 points between siblings were age differences and learning disabilities not factors.

In most cases in which we have assessed three or more children in a family,

all the children tested in the gifted range. We are not alone. Terman discovered 20 families with three gifted children, 10 families with four gifted children, and two families with five gifted children (Terman & Oden, 1959). The number of families in his study with two gifted children was more than 1,200 times chance expectancy (Stein & Heinze, 1983).

It often comes as a shock to people when we mention that when one child in a family is gifted, all the children tend to be gifted. Because siblings share both hereditary and environmental similarities, this should not be so surprising. Yet, from the typical reactions we receive to this information, one wonders if people imagine that gifted children are randomly assigned by the stork.

Another observation we have found fascinating is that parents' IQ scores, when known, are usually within 10 points of their grandchildren's. Our findings that family members are close in ability is not quite so startling when one examines the research on genetics.

If we took a large random sample of pairs of strangers, the mean IQ differences of the group would be about 17 points. Unrelated family members, as in cases of adoption, differ by about 15 IQ points on the average. Natural family members differ by about 13 IQ points on the average, and identical twins reared together differ by about six points (Plomin & DeFries, 1980). Differences in identical twins can only be explained by environment or errors in measurement, as they share the same heredity.

The newer research in behavioral genetics suggests that heredity accounts for approximately 50 percent of the individual differences found in IQ (*ibid.*). Older data indicated that 70 percent or more of intelligence was traceable to heredity. Although the newer estimates are lower than the older ones, the research still supports "genes as the major systematic force influencing the development of individual differences in IQ" (*ibid.*, p. 21) with no single factor in second place. The investigators found no specific environmental influences nor combinations of them that account for as much as 10 percent of the variance in IQ. Birth order and family size account for less than two percent of the variance of IQ in a population (Grotevant, Scarr & Weinberg, 1977).

It has become clear that birth order does not account as much for the actual *ability* of the child as it does for his or her

achievement—and, therefore, *recognition* as being gifted. Descriptions of first-born children in the literature seem to parallel closely the typical descriptions of eminent adults in childhood: perfectionistic, achieving, adult-like, leaders, reliable, well-organized, critical, conforming to adult expectations, serious ... (Leman, 1984; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). These are the personality characteristics of high achievers rather than the developmental or learning characteristics most clearly associated with giftedness. Our lack of clarity on the differences between giftedness and accomplishment have led to this confusing array of results.

If brothers and sisters are close in

The first and second children often seem to be polar opposites.

measured abilities, why are more first-borns identified as gifted than second-borns? Over the past several years, I've spun a mini-theory about this phenomenon. When a first-born child enters the world, it looks up from the crib and sees two adoring giants smiling down benevolently upon its every gurgle. It has free reign to develop its abilities in any direction it wishes, with the support of nurturing parents. But when the second child comes along, it looks up from the crib and sees two benevolent giants and one not-so-benevolent, not-quite-so-giant face. And somehow that face gets the message across, "Remember that I'm the boss around here, so don't mess with my turf or you're in big trouble."

The younger siblings learn the rules of the game very quickly, and before they are out of diapers, they develop personalities that are very different from their older brothers and sisters. Second children seem to live by one rule alone: "If my big sister (brother) does it, I don't; if she (he) doesn't do it, I do it." So we commonly see patterns in which the two siblings appear to be polar opposites. If the first child is difficult to live with, the second one is an angel. If the first-born is a straight-A student, the younger sibling can't find his homework. If the older has no friends, the second is everybody's buddy. If the first one has two left feet, the second one is a

top-notch athlete. If the elder is neat and precise, the younger sibling is disorganized and sloppy. If the first child is introverted, the second is extroverted. And so it goes.

It is no wonder that parents who are looking for the textbook symptoms of giftedness fail to see them in their second-born. These children are desperately trying to carve their own way in the world, a way that is different from their elder siblings.

The behaviors established in the family carry over into school, so that second children rarely demonstrate the full strength of their abilities in the classroom, either. Their self-concepts are often affected by the belief that they are the "non-gifted" ones in their families, and this in turn affects their motivation, grades and achievement test scores. When children are selected for gifted programs, the high-performing first-borns have the edge there as well, and their siblings gain confirmation of their belief that there can be only one gifted child in a family.

We have seen some interesting exceptions to this picture. Typically, if the first child has a learning disability, the second child becomes the star, and the third child often exhibits the second child syndrome. If the eldest has emotional problems that prevent achievement, a younger sibling could also appear as "the gifted one" in the family.

If the first two siblings are quite close in age, and the second one surpasses the first one in strength in the first few years, there may be intense competition between them. When the second child is successful in dethroning the eldest from his or her natural position in the pecking order, this makes for a pretty unhappy first child, who may appear less gifted than the younger sibling.

One important variable to take into consideration is the spacing of children in the family. In cases in which the children are very far apart in age, there may be several fitting the "first-borns" profile. Large families often have several first-born/second-born sets. It's as if only the odd-numbered children in the family are allowed to be gifted! I have found it quite amusing that even twins we have tested sometimes follow this pattern. The twin who was born a few minutes earlier is the achieving, analytical organizer, and the other is the creative socialite. We have seen identical twins get identical IQ scores, answering correctly completely

different items. When twins have been separated by the school system, with one designated gifted and the other not (a truly inhumane practice), it is amazing how often it is the first-born twin who is recognized as gifted.

Other factors that can cause exceptions to the pattern are the distribution of the sexes (e.g., an only girl in a family of boys, an only boy in a family of girls, a first male born after several girls); disrupted families (e.g., death of a sibling, separation of siblings, divorce, blending of step-families); chronic underachievement, disturbance or illness in one of the siblings; and certain family dynamics (e.g., a grandfather taking special interest in the second child). Many variables in a family can override the influence of birth order, but it is fascinating how many families fit this description.

Several writers have indicated that there is an increase in friction in families in which there are gifted and "non-gifted" siblings (Ballering & Koch, 1984; Cornell, 1984; Hackney, 1981; Pfouts, 1980; Sunderlin, 1981). Jealousy and competitiveness among siblings is quite common in this situation, and differentiating labels are usually blamed for the conflict. *Yet one variable that has not been studied properly is the effect on children of being perceived as non-gifted when in fact they are just as bright as the family "star."* When second children are identified as gifted, they often

outshine their older siblings.

In his study, Cornell (1984) found the second-born children who had been recognized as gifted much better adjusted than second-born non-gifted children. He described them as more emotionally stable, more controlled and socially precise, less tense or frustrated, less anxious and less neurotic. Parents described them as better-adjusted and content than their first-born gifted children. They seemed temperamentally more easygoing, less perfectionistic, and more sociable and affectionate than their siblings.

Some of the parents in Cornell's study were surprised to learn that their second-born was gifted, because these younger siblings did not do things with the same intensity and drive as their first-borns had displayed at the same age. In an interview, one mother described her second child as follows:

Oh, Roger is a delight ... as a matter of fact, Roger is so outgoing and friendly and confident and happy and athletic and persevering and all of those kinds of qualities, that I think we were a little bit surprised how bright he is, you know? Because you see, he always has been uh, easygoing about everything. He's always so confident and happy-go-lucky that I, and who knows why, again perceive that as being less brilliant than something else. And he's not. He's clearly the smartest of us all. [p. 56]

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Cornell's study highlights the critical role of the family environment in the recognition and development of abilities.

The implications of our research have been very exciting. Hidden middle children often blossom when their giftedness is recognized and acknowledged. We have seen cases of this in adults as well as in children. After several lectures in which I shared our findings that siblings are close in IQ despite different achievement patterns, I have received letters from individuals who said this information changed their self-image. Finding out that they were as bright as their brothers and sisters encouraged them to make major life changes, such as going back to school, entering new professions or taking on new challenges.

When parents have learned that their easygoing second children are gifted, there have been marked changes in their attitudes toward these children. As the younger siblings received more special attention for their abilities, family harmony increased. Their new self-perceptions had an ameliorative effect on family dynamics.

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The 2% Solution, continued from page 17...

Tisdale's Delphi Solution Network. Details next month.

Question #41: Glasnost is big news here and in the Soviet Union. Does it portend a real change in the Soviet system, or is it simply a ploy to buy time while strengthening military might? Regardless of your opinion about the motivation, it's obvious the Soviet Union is undergoing tremendous turmoil. If we grimly suspect the worst of motivations, we may miss a historic opportunity to foster greater freedom in the Soviet bloc. So, what should our national leaders do to encourage genuine reforms within the Soviet Union? Your suggestions must consider realistic ways of building trust.

Send your replies and any other comments about "The 2% Solution" to:

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