

APPENDIX C
Birth Order: Different Windows on the World*
by Roslyn Ann Duffy

Situation: Different Windows on the World

Parents say:

“Marnie is our baby.”

“Lakshmi is our middle girl.”

“Donny is our oldest.”

“Philip is our only child.”

Children say:

“I’m the oldest — so I go first.”

“That isn’t fair! You always get to go first!”

“You have to let me play or I’ll tell mom!”

Solution: Different Views

It is hard to introduce our children without mentioning birth order and often even the order of the introductions is tied to birth order.

“Jimmy is our first, then there’s Meg . . .”

It seems like a simple thing — this first, middle, only, or youngest role call — but as those children above make clear, the effects of birth order are far from simple.

Young children are making decisions about themselves that have life-long effects. Birth order is not simply numbers but the people, relationships, and way we experience the world. Even parents change from child to child. The first-time mom changing her firstborn, Bobby’s, diaper with trembling hands is not the same mom getting the task done for baby sister, Annie, in the car’s back seat at the local shopping mall.

To better understand birth order, a metaphor using windows may help.

Windows on the World

Imagine a house with several different stories. Each floor has one or more windows commanding different views, and looking out from each window is a child. This view will influence each child’s understanding of her world.

One little girl looks out a top window and sees a robin’s nest balanced in the branches of an apple tree. Season-by-season, she watches as tiny eggs appear and marvels at the number of worms the newly hatched babies gobble up each day. This unfolding cycle of life shapes her worldview.

Another child, looking out a side window, doesn’t see trees. She watches a procession of cars, trucks, and buses rumble past on the road below. She learns about traffic’s flow, and recognizes the hollow clang of metal bouncing off metal when a vehicle fails to stop on time.

Meanwhile, the little boy peeping out from the basement is absorbed by the rhythm of feet squishing, stomping, and shuffling past his window.

And across the street, from a large bay window, another little boy watches the children in the windows across the street, superimposing their faces onto those of the soldiers, princesses, and dragons from his bedtime stories.

Birth Order Windows

The way we each see the world is as varied as these children’s views, except our windows are birth order. We will come to expect and interpret things differently, with actions in line with our expectations, depending upon our birth order perspective.

Just as the child watching baby birds may be more predisposed to studying nature than the budding engineer monitoring street traffic below, when we switch from these imaginary windows to birth order, we will find that the view a particular birth order provides can invite some predictable responses, too. The effects of birth order are most powerful in the early years and the longer we hold a position, the stronger its influence is going to be. That means that a youngest child whose sister is born when he is 1½ will more easily move into the birth order

traits of a middle child, whereas the one whose sister is born when he is six may maintain the traits of a youngest child, in spite of his numerical position.

De-throning

One of the most consistent birth order experiences is that of being ‘dethroned’. Although any child can feel dethroned (even an adult can feel dethroned by the birth of his own child!) the shift to being the first born among others predisposes first-born children to ‘I’m first’ thinking.

Following the Trail

Middle and second born children share the common experience — of coming behind another. If you have ever gone cross-country skiing, you know the difference between forging a trail through deep snow or gliding with ease along the packed grooves of an established trail. But following that bigger or more skilled sibling also invites comparisons: “Am I as good as her?; better?; not good enough?”

Not Alone

Youngest children have plenty of others available to do things for them. Either this child will be happy to let others run the show or decide to rebel and cut a new path. They also have built-in audiences who find them funny, cute, or charming — all characteristics that youngest children may use to advantage, but which can also lead to frustration when they don’t want to be seen as cute.

Lonely Only

Only children spend time alone, but they also spend a lot of time around adults. They may not have to defend their television choices, but can long for the companionship of ready-made playmates while chafing under overly intense adult expectations.

‘Ad’vantages and ‘Dis’advantages

Each of the examples above describes some common and even stereotypical effects and experiences of birth order. But, as Jane Powers explains, birth order is one’s ‘vantage’ point, which means there will be ‘ad’vantages and ‘dis’advantages which defines the real significance of birth order. Some things will be easier (‘ad’vantages) while others will be difficult (‘dis’advantages), depending on one’s vantage point. (For a detailed description of many more characteristics as well as a chart listing advantages, disadvantages, and ways to support the development of different birth orders, please refer to the 2007 revised edition of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* by Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and Roslyn Duffy, Three Rivers Press, Random House.)

‘Ad’vantages and ‘Dis’advantages: First borns

The ‘ad’vantage of dethroning, fostered by that ‘I’m first’ attitude, is that of seeing oneself as a leader. Over half of America’s Presidents were first borns, and almost half of international CEOs are. Winston Churchill exemplifies this leadership ‘ad’vantage.

But striving to keep up that first place status can lead to ‘dis’advantages, especially self-criticism and perfectionism, driven by that early experience and persistent fear that someone will come along to take away one’s status. Rule following and pleasing are common strategies first borns embrace.

Best advice: *Learn to laugh, especially at yourself. Mistakes are okay.*

Second and Middle

The ability to literally, ‘see both ways’, is a lifelong ‘ad’vantage for second and middle children. Mediation is a common life skill honed from years caught in the crossfire of sibling dynamics. President Dwight Eisenhower exemplifies the middle child’s ability to bring different factions together.

‘Dis’advantages to that striving to keep up with or surpass one’s older sibling lead to a frequent comparisons or a preoccupation with fairness. Learning to appreciate ‘good enough’, instead of worrying about more or better is a great counterbalance.

Best advice: *Enjoy what is.*

Youngest

Being everyone's delightful little brother or sister has the 'ad'vantage of seeing oneself as lovable, funny, and able to charm others. Mark Twain, Bob Hope, and today's Stephen Colbert are examples of youngest children who turned funny into fantastic as career choices.

The 'dis'advantage comes from feeling that you are not taken seriously. For those who reject being babied, that race to the top may lead to riskier routes, a trait borne out by the large percentage of youngest children in high-risk professions, Joan of Arc and Charles Darwin among them. Learning to become more like the *Little Engine that Could* and adopt the motto: "I can do it" comprises a great lesson for youngest children.

Best advice: *Expect more of yourself — and others will, too.*

Onlies

One 'ad'vantage of all that alone time for onlies is that of being able to work independently and feeling at ease in one's own company. William Randolph Hearst is an only child whose name easily stands alone.

'Dis'advantages may include difficulty in team situations or a particular discomfort with conflict (something siblings provide in plentiful measures). It helps to accept others (and yourself) as the imperfect beings we all are.

Best advice: *You don't have to do it all — or do it all alone.*

A Child's World

Birth order provides us with a window into a child's world, thereby offering insights into what she may be deciding about herself, others, and the world around her. While the actual number of that role call does not predetermine who we are or will be, it does provide each of us with a vantage point as we figure out who we are and how we fit into our families and the world.

**Reprinted from Exchange magazine, March/April, 2008*