

# The Characteristics of the Family Constellation

*Floy C. Pepper*

A different approach in understanding a child's behavior in the classroom is through a study of the characteristics of the family constellation. Viewing the child's movement, we see the formation of alliances and opposing groups within the family. Each person is unique in his method of approaching the social situation and of seeking a place for himself. Viewed from this perspective, all disturbing behavior indicates a mistaken concept of the child about himself within the group and thereby his mistaken approach to others.

The relationship between the child's experiences within the family, especially the impact of the family upon the personality of the child, and his experiences in the world outside the family is our concern. The experiences in the family are the most important determinants for the frame of reference through which a child perceives, interprets and evaluates the world outside. The knowledge, habits and skills which he acquires in the home help to determine his capacity for dealing successfully with situations outside. In this inquiry, then, we shall be concerned with what happens to the child in the family, the opportunities and the barriers, the challenges and expectations which are influenced by his position of birth in the family, and how this insight can aid the parent or adult in a more effective course of action.

Personality and character traits are expressions of movement within the family group in contrast to other assumptions which attribute the main significance either to heredity, psychosexual development, general individual developmental principles, or strictly to environmental stimulations. The concept of the family constellation as a dynamic explanation, sees the development not so much as the result of factors which converge on the child, but of his own interaction. He influences the group and the other members of the family as much as he is influenced by them and in many regards even more, because his own concept forces them to treat him the way he expects to be treated. Each child, in his early relationships to other members of the family, establishes his own approaches to others in his effort to gain a place in the group. All his strivings are directed towards a feeling of security—a feeling of belonging—that the difficulties of life will be overcome and that he will emerge safely and victoriously. The child trains those qualities by which he hopes to achieve significance or even a degree of power and superiority in the family constellation.

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Human beings react differently to the same situation. No two children born into the same family grow up in the same situation. The family environment that surrounds each individual child is altered. The environments of the children within the same family may be different for several reasons.

1. With the birth of each child, the situation changes.
2. Parents are older and more experienced.
3. Parents may be more prosperous and own home.
4. Parents may have moved to another neighborhood.
5. Possibility of step-parent—due to divorce or death.

Other possibilities or factors which may affect the child's place within the family group are: a sickly or crippled child, a child born just before or after the death of another, an only boy among all girls, an only girl among all boys, some obvious physical characteristic, an older person living in the home, or the favoritism of parents toward a child. Adler taught that the dangers of favoritism can hardly be too dramatically put. Almost every discouragement in childhood springs from the feeling that someone else is preferred. Where boys are preferred to girls, inferiority complexes amongst girls are inevitable. Children are very sensitive and even a good child can take an entirely wrong direction in life through the suspicion that others are preferred.

Adler taught that in the life-pattern of every child there is the imprint of his position in the family with its definite characteristics. He pointed out that it is just upon this one fact, the child's place in the family constellation, that much of his future attitude towards life depends.

### **The Only Child**

The only child has a decidedly difficult start in life as he spends his entire childhood among persons who are more proficient. He may try to develop skills and areas that will gain approval of the adult world or he may solicit their sympathy by being shy, timid, or helpless.

1. Usually is a pampered child, and if a boy, has a mother complex.
2. If boy, sometimes feels that his father is his rival.
3. Enjoys his position as the center of interest.
4. Usually is interested only in himself.

5. Sometimes has a feeling of insecurity due to the anxiety of his parents.

6. Usually are not taught to gain things by own effort; merely to want something is to have it.

7. If his requests are not granted, he may feel unfairly treated and refuse to cooperate.

### **The First Child**

The first child has a precarious position in life—being the oldest should entitle him the favored spot, and frequently does. However, he may become discouraged upon the birth of the second child, and refuse to accept responsibility.

1. Is an only child for a period of time and has therefore been the center of interest.

2. Has to be first—in the sense of gaining and holding superiority over the next children.

3. Becomes a “de-throned” child with the birth of the second child. (Sometimes feels unloved and neglected. He usually strives to keep or to regain his mother’s attention by positive deeds; when this fails, he quite often switches to the useless side and may become obnoxious. If his mother fights back, the child may become a problem child.)

4. Could develop a good, competent behavior pattern or become extremely discouraged.

5. Sometimes strives to protect and help others in his struggle to keep the upper hand.

6. Sometimes death wishes or expressions of hate are directed toward the second child.

7. If the first child is a boy followed by a sister—within a short time:

a. Personal conflict may become a pattern of sexual discord.

b. Girls develop faster than boys during one to seventeen, and the girl presses closely on the heels of the first child.

c. The boy usually tries to assert himself because of social preference for boys and may take advantage of his masculine role.

d. The girl may develop a feeling of inferiority and pushes on.

## **The Second Child**

The second child has somewhat of an uncomfortable position in life and usually takes a steam-engine attitude, trying to catch up with the child in front and feels as though he is under constant pressure.

1. Never has his parents' undivided attention.
2. Always has in front of him another child who is more advanced.
3. Feels that the first child cannot be beaten which disputes his claim of equality.
4. Often acts as though he were in a race. Hyperactive and pushy.
5. If the first child is successful, the second is more likely to feel uncertain of self and his abilities.
6. Usually is the opposite of the first child (If the first child is dependable and "good," the second may become undependable and "bad.")
7. Becomes a "squeezed" child whenever a third child is born.

## **The Youngest Child**

The youngest child has quite a peculiar place in the family constellation, and may become a speeder because he is outdistanced and may become the most successful; or he may become discouraged and have inferior feelings.

1. Is often like an only child.
2. Usually has things done for him—decisions made, and responsibility taken.
3. Usually is spoiled by the family.
4. Finds himself in an embarrassing position—is usually the smallest, the weakest and above all, not taken seriously.
5. May become the "boss" in the family.
6. Either attempts to excel his brothers and sisters or evades the direct struggle for superiority.
7. May retain the baby role, and place others in his service.
8. Often allies with the first child as being different from the rest.

## **The Middle Child of Three**

The middle child of three has an uncertain place in the family group, and may feel neglected. He discovers that he has not the privileges of the youngest nor the rights of an older child.

1. May feel unloved and abused.
2. Becomes a "squeezed child" whenever a third child is born.
3. May hold the conviction that people are unfair to him.
4. May be unable to find his place in the group.
5. May become extremely discouraged and more prone to become a "problem child."

## **Middle Children—Large Family**

Children who come in the middle of a family usually develop a more stable character and the conflict between the children tends to be less fierce. In other words, the larger the family, usually the less conflict and strife among the children.

## **Generalizations**

Every brother and sister has some pleasant feelings and some unpleasant feelings about each other. They are likely to have pleasant relations when they satisfy one another's needs. Since each child feels differently toward each brother and sister, the relationship of any two of them is very special. As each member strives for his own place within the group, the competing opponents watch each other carefully to see the ways and means by which the opponent succeeds or fails. Where one succeeds, the other gives up; where one shows weakness or deficiencies, the other steps in. In this way competition between two members of the family is always expressed through differences in character, temperament, interests and abilities. Conversely, the similarity of characteristics always indicates alliances. Sometimes, the two strongest competitors show no sign of open rivalry, but rather present a close-knit pair; nevertheless, their competitive striving is expressed in personality differences. One may be the leader, the active and powerful protector, while the other may lean and get support by weakness and frailty. There are cases where strong competition did not prevent a mutual agreement, but rather permitted each to feel secure in his personal method of compensatory striving.

If there is quite a number of years between the birth of children, each child will have some of the characteristics of an only child. Perhaps there will be two

families; one set of children, then a space of years, then another set. Whatever combination may first exist, with the space of years the situation changes and shifts, but basically the above characteristics remain the same.

The development of an only girl among boys or of an only boy among girls presents a ticklish problem. Both usually tend to go to extremes, either in a feminine direction or masculine role. In most cases, both would be somewhat isolated and have mixed feelings and emotions. Whichever role seems to be the most advantageous will be the one adopted.

Every difficulty of development is caused by rivalry and lack of cooperation in the family. If we look around at our social life and ask why rivalry and competition is its most obvious aspect, indeed, not only at our social life but at our whole world then we must recognize that people everywhere are pursuing the goal of being conqueror, of overcoming and surpassing others. This goal is the result of training in early childhood, of the rivalries and competitive striving of children who have not felt themselves as equal part of their whole family.

From the moment of birth the child acts, thinks, and feels in response to his world in accordance with how he experiences or perceives it; and the way in which he experiences or perceives his world is to him—reality. What actually happens to the individual is not as important as how he interprets the situation; with this in mind, we must remember that it is not the position in the family sequence that is the decisive factor, but rather the situation as the child interprets it.

The child's position in the family sequence shows how a child uses his situation and the resulting impressions to create his style of life, his pattern of movement and his characteristic traits.

### **Personality Characteristics of Oldest, Middle and Youngest Children**

<b>Oldest</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Youngest</b>
Scholarly	Optimistic	Uncomplicated
Apprehensive	Rebellious	Narcissistic
Conforming	Sociable	Personable
Conservative	Aggressive	Precocious
Conscientious	Self-confident	Affectionate
Sensitive	Manipulative	Outgoing
Serious	Competitive	Demanding
Achieving	Self-reliant	Forward-
Dependent		thinking