

# The Link Between Birth Order and Self-Esteem and Resiliency



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**mental health counselor in Utah and a past president of AMHCA—gave a joint presentation on the impact of birth order on self-esteem and resiliency at AMHCA's 2016 Annual Conference, and Dr. Otis contributed significantly to this article.**

When working with clients who have experienced trauma, I have found it helpful to ask: "How safe, secure, and valued did you feel as a child?" Quite frequently, the client's almost instantaneous facial reaction not only conveys the answer to my question, but also the degree of emotional attachment the client experienced as a child. This attachment is the genesis of resilience, and the particular relationship most important to a child's attachment is often related to birth order.

In the 1950s, Alfred Adler was one of the first theorists to use birth order to investigate the role people adopt in their interactions with others. Although extensively researched, many birth-order studies are confounding and poorly executed. After reviewing 200 birth-order studies, Daniel Eckstein, PhD, and his colleagues described in the 2010 *Journal of Individual Psychology* a clearer picture of the impact of birth order on behavioral characteristics and the implications for counselors.

Like many people, I was initially skeptical about the impact of birth order on personality development. However, after learning about the research on the role of birth order in the development of both self-esteem and resiliency by Alan Anderson, PhD, I was won over. Since then I have amalgamated years of my own clinical observations with Dr. Anderson's research and have taught my students about the link between birth order and self-esteem/resiliency. A number of them who now have clinical practices have told me that their clients' stories would be incomplete without understanding the order of their births. (For examples, see the case studies on pages 21–22.)

## HOW BIRTH ORDER AFFECTS CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR PARENTS

I believe that the very beginnings of the development of self-esteem and resiliency are related to the quality of the relationship between the parents or significant adults in a child's birth environment. Even infants observe their environment, and a key part of that observation involves how their mothers are treated. If their mother is treated as a person of worth and value, children automatically assume that they are a person of worth and value as well. I constantly tell fathers that one of the greatest gifts they can give to their children is to treat their mother with great respect and to speak and act in a way that clearly indicates that she is a person of great worth and value, and an equal in power in the family's affairs.



- **First Children.** Typically, the first child in a family enjoys the attention of both parents until the appearance of the second child. At this point the first child's attention turns to the father, because the mother is primarily occupied with caring for the new baby. If the connection is made between the first child and the father, the child's development of resilient self-esteem continues to move in a positive direction. If a secure emotional bond and connection does not take place, however, development of self-esteem is hindered, and the effects are likely to be felt by the child not only during childhood but into adult life. Therefore, the self-esteem of the oldest child in the family strongly depends on the quality of the emotional bond and relationship between that child and his or her father.

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• **Second Children.** The second child focuses on having a secure and comfortable relationship with the mother. Thus, the self-esteem of the second child in the family strongly depends on the quality of the emotional bond between that child and his or her mother.



• **Third Children.** The third child enters a balanced system and as a result becomes what Dr. Anderson calls “the watcher.” This child seems to focus on observing the quality of the relationship between the parents and actually takes some responsibility for preserving that relationship. The third child’s self-esteem strongly depends on the quality of the relationship between the parents.



• **Fourth Children.** Fourth children seem to take whatever relationship opportunity remains and are particularly influenced by the quality of the family system and relationships as a whole. Thus the fourth child’s self-esteem strongly depends on the quality of all of the relationships within the family, as well as the structure and stability of the family.



• **Fifth Children.** With the fifth child, the process appears to start over again, with a slight addition. The self-esteem of the fifth child strongly depends on the quality of the emotional bond and relationship between that child and his or her father and the oldest child in the family.



• This pattern seems to continue with previous children, so that for example, **the sixth child’s** bond with the mother is especially important, as is that child’s relationship with the second child.

If my client is an oldest child and suffers from self-esteem issues, it makes sense at least to inquire about the relationship between the client and the client’s father. If this is productive, the clinician has saved some ... time in more completely understanding the client. If not, nothing has been lost.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Understanding the impact birth order can have on self-esteem and resilience can be very helpful to clinicians. If my client is an oldest child and suffers from self-esteem issues, it makes sense at least to inquire about the relationship between the client and the client’s father. If this is productive, the clinician has saved some exploration time in more completely understanding the client. If not, nothing has been lost.

In my experience, it’s evident that the essential internal messages we tell ourselves about ourselves are often influenced by birth order, which seems often to greatly influence self-esteem. Evidence suggests that children with high self-esteem will be successful. Furthermore, their level of self-esteem largely determines the degree of their resilience. Self-esteem and resilience need to be supported by continued experiences of success. A child’s judgment of self will significantly influence the kinds of friends they choose, how they interact with others, the kind of person they marry, and how productive they will be. It affects their creativity, integrity, and stability and whether they will be a leader or a follower.

Self-esteem is maintained by the quality of the relationships that exist between children and those who play a significant role in their life. There can be a big difference between being loved and feeling loved. My

clinical experience indicates that parents’ love has a ripple effect when they enable their children to be quietly glad that they are who they are.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to ask clients: “How safe, secure, and valued did you feel as a child?” If there is an immediate, positive reply, then I know that my work with them will not be as difficult as it might be. If the response is negative, it may be that I will not be able to significantly help them with the most current trauma until the impact of the earlier disturbing experiences of their life has been resolved. This simple question is a brief assessment of the degree of emotional attachment experienced by the individual as a child.

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Unresolved childhood trauma and a lack of feeling safe, secure, and valued inhibit the development of both self-esteem and resiliency. This impact needs to be addressed and resolved.



I hope that the case descriptions that follow will illustrate some of the principles of the impact of birth order on the emotional health of individuals as well as what might be done to help them with this understanding.

### THREE CASE DESCRIPTIONS



#### **CASE # 1 (FIRST CHILD):**

##### ***Overcoming the Effects of Inadequate Parents***

A 28-year-old male veteran told me of his major problems recovering from several traumatic events when he had been deployed to a combat zone. After focusing on the emotional impact of the most disturbing event on him then and now, I asked him if this was the most traumatic event in his life. His response was: "No not really. The worst one was when I was 5. And there were others."

It is significant that he is an oldest child. After his parents separated when he was 2, he had only limited and strained interactions with his father, and his mother was clearly troubled; he later realized she traded sex for cash and drugs. At age 12, he moved in with his father and his new wife, though he felt guilty that his father, despite pressure from him and his stepmother, wouldn't also take in his two younger siblings.

This stepmother was an amazing influence in his life, and he flourished both academically and athletically until she died in a car accident when he was a high school junior. The boy was devastated, and his grades and his relationship with his father deteriorated. During his senior year, when he lived with a kind neighbor, the principal called him and his father to a meeting, where the principal explained that the boy was in danger of not being eligible to graduate. The father turned to the boy and said, "This just goes to show that you are the same worthless pile of s--- that your mother is," a statement that proved traumatic

to the boy. Though he did manage to graduate and join the military, two of his closest friends in the Marines were killed in the explosive event that brought him to counseling.

In addition to working through an understanding of his strengths and

abilities, we also explored why his father held such a powerful position in his life. After some months of work, he said: "I am not a bad person, am I? I have been and can be successful. I have had people in my life who supported me and helped me to do well. There is no reason why I need to allow my life to be determined and undermined by the inadequacies of my father or my parents. I think I can handle the military stuff better now." There was more work done to build and strengthen his resiliency, but he had reached a turning point.



#### **CASE # 2 (SECOND CHILD):**

##### ***Freeing Oneself From the Impact of a Toxic Mother***

A 30-year-old married man who was the second child in his family of origin sought therapy because he was depressed, anxious, had trouble sleeping, and had many of the symptoms of PTSD. When I asked how safe, secure, and valued he felt as a child, he graphically described a childhood that featured abuse and neglect from his mother.

After some initial work, I asked him to write an essay with the title: "Things I Learned from My Mother." I encouraged him to take all of the memories and emotional turmoil concerning his mother and transfer them from his mind and heart onto paper.

After he came to a session and announced that he had written a 13-page essay, I asked him two questions: "What was the most significant thing you learned from writing this essay?" and "What do you want to do with it?"

His answer: "I learned that it would have been so much better for me if my mother had died in childbirth. She is different now, but at the time she was extremely toxic. I have already done something with the essay. I wrapped it up in a little box in the shape of a coffin and snuck into her backyard in the middle of the night to bury it there. I am free of it all now. She has it even though she does not know it. I believe that she would not be

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really able to handle it, but I can now move on without it hanging around my neck." There was more work to do to increase resilience, but his heavy emotional burden was gone.



**CASE # 3 (THIRD CHILD):**

***Recognizing That a Spouse Is Not a Stand-In for a Critical Parent***

A 32-year-old married woman with three children who was the third child in her family of origin came with her husband for couples counseling. He felt that nothing he did pleased her and that she was almost always on the defensive and somewhat hostile. She described her own parents as always critical of her and having constant conflict that she frequently felt in the middle of.

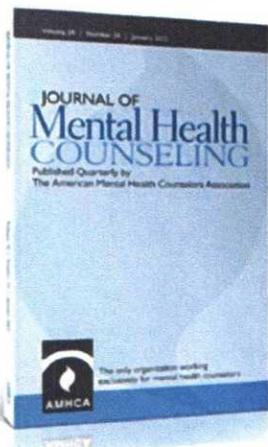
She reported that her husband always told her how she could improve herself. Any time he gave her advice, it triggered anger and hurt. Over time, she realized she had felt responsible for the quality of her parents' relationship, which had depleted her

emotional resiliency. In addition, she realized she could let go of her belief that bad things would not happen to her parents if she were a "better" child. Her husband needed to learn how to interact with his wife more positively, but it was helpful for her not to see him as a representative of her parents.

**USE THE ANSWER TO ONE,  
SIMPLE QUESTION TO HELP CLIENTS**

I have found that understanding the impact of birth order on the self-esteem and resiliency of my clients is essential to me as a mental health professional in helping them address and build their emotional stability and their confidence in their feelings of worth and value. Understanding the impact of birth order has also helped my clients gain a deeper understanding of their internal processes and resolve many inner conflicts.

I now use the standard Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire (ACE 10) with new clients, in addition to asking this simple question: "How safe, secure, and valued did you feel as a child?" The information gleaned makes it possible for therapists to give the utmost assistance to our clients. ●



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