

Being a Middle Child

Healthline

If you are a middle child, or have a sibling who is a middle child, you may be wondering if “middle child syndrome” is a real thing.

Middle child syndrome is the belief that middle children are excluded, ignored, or even outright neglected because of their birth order. According to the lore, some children may have certain personality and relationship characteristics as a result of being the middle child.

In this article, we will explore whether middle child syndrome is a real, the common characteristics of middle children, and what the science says about birth order and middle child syndrome.

Is it a real thing? In 1964, Alfred Adler developed a theory on the importance of birth order on personality development. In his theory, he claims that although children may be born into the same household, their birth order greatly influences their psychological development.

Characteristics of Middle Children

How might being a middle child influence someone’s personality and relationships? Below are some common ideas about the characteristics of middle children.

Personality: Middle children have personalities that are often overshadowed by their other siblings. The older sibling is strong-willed, and the younger sibling is the baby, which leaves the middle child

somewhere in-between. Their personality may be dulled down by their siblings, making them quiet and even-tempered.

Relationships: Middle children may have trouble feeling equal to their siblings in parental relationships. The older sibling often holds more responsibilities, and the younger sibling is well taken care of by the parents. The middle child isn't given as much attention as either.

Rivalry: The middle child often feels the need to compete with both the younger and older sibling for parental attention. They might compete for attention between siblings, as they risk being ignored by one or the other. As they find themselves in the middle of everything, they may also become the peacemaker.

Favoritism: Middle children generally don't feel that they are the favorite child of the family. Favoritism may exist for the oldest child who is viewed as special, or for the youngest child who is viewed as the baby. The middle child falls somewhere in-between and is unable to be the favorite of either parent.

How does it affect adults? It is believed by some that middle child syndrome can have a lasting impact on children as they grow into adults. If the characteristics listed above are true, being a middle child could cause a cascade of negative effects well into adulthood. The personality and relationship traits that defined them as a child may develop into similar traits in their adult relationships.

For example, middle children who feel that they were neglected may struggle with co-dependency in adult relationships. They could find themselves continuing to be the peacemaker in adult life, perhaps at work or at home.

Their personality might be dulled in comparison to the personality of other adults around them. They might even have trouble feeling that they can be a best friend's or partner's "favorite" person.

One of the most common beliefs about middle-born children is that they have distant relationships with their parents. One 2019 study found that middle-born children were least likely (when compared to first-born or last-born children) to feel comfortable talking to their parents about sex education.

Earlier 1998 research found that middle-born children are least likely to say they are closest to their mothers. The review of studies noted that middle-borns are also least likely to say they would turn to their parents when under duress.

The authors of another study bring to light opposing results on the relationship between birth order and depression. They explain that one study in 2003 found that middle children were more likely to develop depression.

It is important to note that the terminology "middle children" can mean any children that are not the oldest or youngest in the family. This may be quite different from a singular middle child and is could possibly impact development and personality.

Addendum

Susan Peabody

I am a middle child and I believe I was traumatized by this. On my mother's deathbed her "favorite child," said to me: "Why are you here? Mom didn't even like you."

A month later, I was at a bus stop. I noticed a woman standing there. She had three children. The infant was in her arms and very content. Her six year old was reading a child's book and was able to take care of himself. The toddler stood their screaming, "Mommy, please pick me up." I suddenly realized what I had gone through as a middle child.