

Firstborns -- under the right circumstances -- more likely to be creative

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Credit: WUSTL

Expectant parents eagerly await the arrival of their bundle of joy, hoping that they will have the most beautiful and intelligent baby in the world. While parents might not have direct control over brains and looks, new research from a business professor at Washington University in St. Louis finds that parents can influence their firstborn's creativity.

There are three factors that seem to impact creativity for firstborn children: the number of siblings he or she has; having siblings of the opposite sex; and having siblings close in age (less than three years apart), said Markus Baer, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the Olin School of Business.

"The argument is that if there is a huge age difference between the firstborn and the other children, then people get pushed into the role of being a parental surrogate," Baer said. "From early on they are expected to help discipline their younger siblings and that usually leads to the adoption of adult-like behavior. When the children are born closer together, then the firstborn has a play-buddy and this enhances creativity."

Having younger siblings of the opposite sex helps develop a higher level of creativity because the oldest child tends to adopt roles that may not be stereotypically male or female. The influence of a younger sister on an older brother, for example, often means that the big brother isn't being socialized as strongly in male roles.

Instead, the firstborn is exposed to a broader spectrum of behavior and perspectives — factors that might enrich a child's experience growing up.

Baer defined creativity as the extent to which people develop ideas that others consider both novel and useful.

"In other words, just because an idea is original doesn't mean it's creative," Baer said. "The idea has to have some practical value for it to be considered creative."

In conducting his research, Baer had more than 400 individuals work in teams to develop ideas for solving a given set of problems. After the exercise, each individual in the team rated every other person in the team on how creative his or her contributions were.

Each individual was also asked to describe his or her family constellation. Baer said he controlled for factors such as age and gender and the education level of the parents.

"What stood out was that firstborns who had many siblings, close in age, and of the opposite sex tended to have more creative ideas," Baer said. "Now that we know how firstborns handle hypothetical problems, it would be interesting to follow them and learn what kinds of careers they chose."

Source: Washington University in St. Louis

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