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Science magazine - "Eldest children are less cooperative, trusting, and reciprocating than their siblings."

By Tiffany McMan | December 6th 2009 11:55 AM | [Print](#) | [E-mail](#) | [Track Comments](#)

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Tiffany McMan

Gee, I'm the eldest! [full article](#) I did read somewhere that birth order determines decreasing intelligence, something about younger eggs in the mother I think.

Tiff :-)

"Psychologists have been debating the importance of birth order since the days of Sigmund Freud. Those that argue that it plays a strong role in personality say, for instance, that middleborn children are more social than their youngest or oldest siblings because they get the least amount of attention from their parents and thus must make friends outside of their family. Psychologists base their findings on self-questionnaires and interviews with friends and family.

Evolutionary biologist Alexandre Courtiol of the University of Montpellier 2 in France and colleagues wanted a more objective test. So they asked 510 unrelated college students to play a two-person investment game.

When the researchers grouped the game data by birth order, they found that firstborn player A's trusted less than laterborns, sending 25% less money to player B. Firstborn player B's also reciprocated less, returning between 22% and 29% fewer euros, the scientists [report](#) in the December issue of Animal Behavior. Birth order was a stronger factor than age, gender, income level, or religious belief--other possible variables that could influence cooperative behaviors.

A Mom's Perspective

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ABOUT TIFFANY

A very busy mom with a young family but interested in whatever we can do to make our planet better. I am home quite a bit with the kids but do look...

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

- ◆ "How very cute. ..."
- ◆ "first u should eat second i no how u feel third trust me..."
- ◆ "i know i am a few months late in saying this but Gerhard (or whoever u r) and that Hank guy, seriously..."
- ◆ "Can you get a life please dick head!? obviously you are not contributing to this conversation positively..."
- ◆ "PROOF! PROOF! PROOF! okay, at first i wasnt sure if this was a dream or a memory but my sister..."



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On possibility, the researchers say, is family dynamics. When new siblings arrive, they siphon off parental attention, and in response firstborns feel the need to compete more and cooperate less. The behavior of children without siblings fits that explanation: They behaved like middle and lastborns. "That suggests that what influences cooperative behavior isn't being born first ... but instead a child changes his behavior when another sibling arrives," Courtiol says. He cautions, however, that although birth order is a stronger influence than other factors studied, it explains less than 10% of the variation in subjects' game behavior.

Personality researcher Del Paulhus of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, in Canada says that the findings make sense, but he offers an alternative interpretation. "All the strength and maturity is in [firstborns'] hands for a number of years," Paulhus says. "So they don't have to go out of their way to bargain or tradeoff with other siblings." And the finding that laterborns cooperate more jives with the theory that they are the bigger risk-takers, says evolutionary psychologist Frank Sulloway of the University of California, Berkeley. "Cooperation [as a strategy] often entails risks, because cooperation isn't always reciprocated."

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