

## Relationship Between Birth Order and Personality Traits: A Review Study

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper systematically reviews the effect of birth order on personality traits focusing mainly upon the traits of introversion and extroversion. Early work by Alfred Adler and Frank Sulloway's Born to Rebel theory, along with the Resource Dilution Model, offer different insights into how being a firstborn, middle child, youngest, or only child could shape a person's traits. Firstborns, for example, are often seen as responsible and mature, which might make them lean toward introversion or extroversion depending on how much attention and responsibility they receive from parents. Middle children, on the other hand, tend to develop strong social skills and flexibility, which could encourage extroversion. Youngest children are frequently described as more outgoing and adventurous, perhaps due to lessened parental pressure. Only children show a range of traits, shaped largely by their relationship with their parents and peers. However, research on this topic is not without its challenges. Many studies rely on self-reported data, which can be biased, and external factors may complicate the results. While the existing research suggests that birth order might have some influence on personality, the connection is far from straightforward. It appears that factors like heredity, parental behavior, social environment and individual experiences play a larger role. The review concludes that more longitudinal studies are needed to fully understand how birth order affects personality development as the current findings are contradictory, complex and indicate towards thorough and innovative researches in future.

**Keywords:** Birth order, Extraversion, Introversion, Personality development, Personality traits

Personality traits like introversion and extroversion are key to understanding how people behave and interact with others. These traits, introduced by Carl Jung in 1921, describe a spectrum where introverts are generally more reserved and solitary, while extroverts tend to be outgoing and socially engaged. Over time, psychologists have been particularly interested in understanding what shapes these traits. One factor that has sparked much debate is birth order—the position a person holds within their family (e.g., firstborn, middle child, youngest, or only child). The idea that birth order might influence personality dates back to Alfred Adler's early 20th-century theories, where he argued that a child's position within the family impacts their personality due to differences in sibling

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relationships and parental attention. Since then, researchers have worked to validate and expand upon Adler's ideas, exploring how these family dynamics contribute to traits like introversion and extroversion.

There are several key theories that try to explain how birth order could influence traits like introversion and extroversion:

- 1. Adler's Theory (1927):** Alfred Adler was one of the first to propose that birth order impacts personality. He believed each position in the family comes with unique challenges and opportunities that shape personality. For example, firstborns may become more responsible and achievement-oriented, while later-borns might develop social strategies to stand out from their siblings.
- 2. Resource Dilution Model (1981):** This model argues that as families grow, parental resources—such as time, attention, and financial support—become more spread out. Firstborn children may receive more one-on-one attention and resources early in life, which could shape their personality and lead to behaviors that are more extroverted.
- 3. Sulloway's Born to Rebel Hypothesis (1996):** Frank Sulloway expanded on Adler's ideas, suggesting that younger siblings are more likely to rebel and explore new experiences in an effort to carve out their own identity. This could influence their levels of extroversion, while firstborns, in contrast, might be more likely to exhibit traits associated with introversion, such as conscientiousness.

Adler's foundational work laid the groundwork for understanding how birth order affects personality. According to his theory, each child's role in the family constellation presents unique challenges. For instance, firstborns often feel displaced when a new sibling arrives and may develop a need for responsibility and achievement, which could lead to more introverted behaviors. On the other hand, later-born children, seeking attention and recognition in a crowded family, may develop extroverted tendencies.

The Resource Dilution Model (1981) presents another angle. This theory suggests that as a family expands, resources become spread thinner, which can affect how children develop. Firstborns, who receive undivided parental attention early on, may develop different personality traits than their younger siblings, who must share attention and resources. This could influence their social behaviors and even their tendencies toward introversion or extroversion.

Building on Adler's ideas, Sulloway's Born to Rebel hypothesis (1996) offers a deeper explanation. He suggests that firstborns tend to be more conscientious and conformist—traits associated with introversion—while younger siblings are often more open to new experiences and rebellious, which aligns with extroversion. Sulloway's research implies these differences are due to the strategies siblings use to compete for parental attention and resources.

Empirical studies on the link between birth order and personality traits have produced mixed findings. Some research suggests that firstborns are more introverted, possibly because they feel more responsibility and pressure to meet high parental expectations. However, other studies show that firstborns can also display extroverted traits, especially in leadership roles or when they assume a dominant position in social settings. Middle children, often finding themselves in a more neutral role, may develop strong social skills, which aligns with extroversion. Youngest children, often seen as more carefree and social, might exhibit

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higher levels of extroversion. Only children, on the other hand, display a wide range of personality traits that are influenced by their unique family dynamics.

This review will bring together the key theories and findings on how birth order might relate to introversion and extroversion. By examining the strengths and limitations of these approaches, we hope to gain a more nuanced understanding of how family roles and individual development are interconnected.

### *Rationale*

Understanding personality traits, especially introversion and extroversion, is essential to grasping human behavior. These characteristics influence various aspects of life, from social relationships to professional achievements and mental well-being. Given their significance, it is important to explore the factors that shape these traits. One such factor is birth order—the position an individual holds within their family. For over a century, psychologists have examined the connection between birth order and personality development. However, research findings in this area remain inconsistent and, at times, contradictory. While some studies suggest that birth order influences whether a person leans toward introversion or extroversion, others find little to no correlation. The lack of consensus highlights the complexity of this relationship and the need for further exploration. This literature review aims to bring clarity by synthesizing existing research on birth order's role in shaping introversion and extroversion. By evaluating different psychological theories, analyzing empirical studies, and considering methodological challenges, this review seeks to provide a balanced perspective on the topic. Additionally, it will explore the practical implications of these findings, offering insights into personality development.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This review aims to take a closer look at the relationship between birth order and personality traits by evaluating the research to date. It will also discuss the challenges researchers face in this area and suggest directions for future studies to better understand these connections. By doing so, we hope to provide a clearer picture of how family dynamics shape an individual's personality over time.

The study of birth order and its influence on personality traits, particularly introversion and extroversion, has long intrigued psychologists. While some researchers argue that birth order significantly shapes personality, others contend that its impact is minimal or inconsistent. A number of key studies have explored this complex relationship, shedding light on various aspects of personality development and how family dynamics contribute to shaping an individual's traits. The experiences of middleborn children have also been a subject of interest in birth order research. A comprehensive review conducted by Falbo and Polit (1986) sought to challenge stereotypes about only children, who are often perceived as lonely, spoiled, or lacking social skills. Their quantitative analysis synthesized findings from multiple studies to provide a more balanced perspective on the personality traits and social behaviors of only children. The review revealed that, contrary to common misconceptions, only children tend to excel in intelligence, achievement, self-esteem, leadership, and autonomy. These positive traits are largely attributed to the undivided attention they receive from their parents, which fosters cognitive development and self-confidence. The study's findings contradict the negative stereotypes surrounding only children and emphasize the advantages of growing up without siblings. However, the review also acknowledges that individual differences and parenting styles play crucial roles in shaping an only child's personality. Salmon and Daly (1988) specifically examined how birth order affects familial

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relationships and personality development, with a focus on middleborn children. Their study found that middleborns often navigate unique social and emotional challenges within the family. Unlike firstborns, who typically enjoy parental attention and authority, and last borns, who are often seen as the family's "baby," middleborns may struggle to define their place within the family hierarchy. However, this position also fosters resilience and adaptability. The study found that middleborn children tend to develop strong social skills and a cooperative nature, helping them maintain positive relationships with peers. Their ability to balance social harmony and establish their own identity underscores the importance of considering birth order when analyzing personality development. Another foundational contribution to this field is Frank J. Sulloway's work, *Born to Rebel* (1996), which explores how birth order influences personality and behavior, particularly in the context of rebellion, conformity, and openness to new experiences. Sulloway's research integrates evolutionary theory with empirical data, suggesting that birth order plays a key role in shaping personality differences among siblings. He argues that firstborns, benefiting from their initial status as the sole recipient of parental attention, often develop traits associated with authority, reliability, and conscientiousness. Meanwhile, later-born children, needing to distinguish themselves, are more likely to be open to new experiences and challenge the status quo. Sulloway's work provides a compelling framework for understanding sibling competition and personality differentiation. However, like many studies in this field, his conclusions have faced criticism, particularly regarding the replicability of findings across diverse populations. Despite these debates, his work remains a cornerstone of birth order research, offering valuable insights into how family dynamics shape personality traits. Another important aspect of birth order research involves the study of only children. Another influential study, conducted by Paulhus et al. (1999), took a different approach by examining birth order's effects on personality traits and achievement within families. Unlike broader population studies, this research used a within-family design, meaning that it compared siblings directly rather than analyzing unrelated individuals from different families. This methodology helped control for variables that might otherwise skew results, such as differences in socioeconomic background or parenting styles across households. The study's findings suggested that firstborns tend to exhibit higher levels of conscientiousness and dominance—traits often linked to leadership and a sense of responsibility. This pattern likely emerges due to the expectations placed on firstborn children, who typically serve as role models for younger siblings and receive undivided parental attention in their early years. In contrast, later-born children were found to display greater openness to experience and agreeableness. Growing up in an environment where they must negotiate family dynamics and carve out their own identity, younger siblings often develop adaptability and strong social skills. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of birth order's influence on personality, although they also highlight the need for further research to explore the extent and consistency of these effects across different cultures and family structures. One notable study by Saher et al. (2022) examined the link between birth order and personality in Pakistan, specifically focusing on introversion and extroversion. The study sought to explore this relationship while deliberately excluding broader cultural influences, allowing researchers to focus on birth order alone. While the findings provided valuable insights, the study faced several limitations. One major drawback was the relatively small sample size of 160 participants, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to a larger population. Additionally, the study was conducted within a limited number of educational institutions, primarily catering to specific socioeconomic groups. This narrow scope restricted the diversity of participants and, consequently, the applicability of the findings to a broader audience. Another important limitation was the study's exclusive focus on an educated population, with participants

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ranging from 16 to 22 years old. This age range does not fully capture the complexities of personality development across different life stages. Personality traits continue to evolve over time, influenced by life experiences, career choices, and social interactions, making it necessary to examine a wider demographic to obtain a more holistic understanding. Furthermore, the study used English-language instructions due to the unavailability of a translated measurement tool, which may have affected participants' comprehension and response accuracy. Future research in this area would benefit from translating and adapting assessment materials into Urdu to ensure inclusivity and precision in data collection.

Taken together, these studies contribute to the ongoing discussion about birth order's role in personality development. While some research supports the idea that birth order significantly influences traits such as introversion, extroversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness, other studies highlight the complexity of these relationships. Many factors—including cultural background, socioeconomic status, family size, and parenting style—interact to shape an individual's personality, making it difficult to draw universal conclusions. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics with a broader scope, incorporating cross-cultural studies and more diverse methodologies. Expanding sample sizes, studying different age groups, and considering environmental influences beyond the family setting would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how birth order affects personality. Additionally, researchers should aim to develop more culturally inclusive measurement tools to ensure accurate and representative data collection. Understanding birth order's impact on personality has important implications for parenting, education, and psychological interventions. Parents can use these insights to tailor their parenting strategies to better support each child's unique needs. Educators can create more inclusive learning environments that accommodate different personality traits. Psychologists and counselors can apply these findings to help individuals understand their own behaviors and social interactions more effectively. Ultimately, while birth order is just one of many factors influencing personality development, it remains a valuable area of study. By continuing to investigate the intricate relationships between family dynamics and individual traits, researchers can deepen our understanding of human behavior and contribute to more effective social, educational, and psychological practices.

### CONCLUSION

The connection between birth order and personality traits like introversion and extroversion is a complex and widely studied area in psychology. Research suggests that birth order may play a role in shaping these traits, as family dynamics, sibling relationships, and parental attention influence an individual's development. Studies indicate that firstborns often take on leadership roles and exhibit more traditional personality traits due to the responsibilities and expectations placed upon them. In contrast, middle and later-born children may develop different social strategies to carve out their own identities within the family. These differences can manifest in varying degrees of introversion or extroversion, depending on the child's environment and interactions with parents and siblings. However, the relationship between birth order and personality is not straightforward. Various factors, including cultural background, family size, socioeconomic status, and parenting styles, contribute to personality development. Some researchers argue that birth order has a significant impact, while others find little evidence to support a strong correlation. The inconsistencies in findings highlight the need for further exploration using diverse research methods and cross-cultural perspectives. Understanding how birth order influences personality can have valuable applications. Insights from this research can help parents tailor their parenting approaches to meet the unique needs of their children. Educators can also use this

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knowledge to create learning environments that support different personality types. Additionally, psychologists and counselors can apply these findings to better understand their clients' social behaviors and personality traits.

### ***Future Implications***

The contradictions in the findings of previous studies on birth order and personality highlights the complexity of this relationship and points towards the need for further researches in the area. Future research should continue examining this topic with a broader lens, incorporating different cultural settings and methodological approaches. By doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of how family structure and early experiences contribute to the development of introversion and extroversion, ultimately enriching our knowledge of human behavior and social interactions. The findings of the future researches may help the care givers including the parents , teachers and policy makers in identifying the individual needs of different stake holders and bringing out the best in them.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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