# **Alfred Adler Birth Order Theory Explained** Dec 27, 2017

Alfred Adler believed that the birth order of a group of siblings would help to determine individual personalities. Although family situations are unique and individualize, Adler believed that generic principles to family situations could dramatically impact how a child develops over time. The structure of the family also matters in Adler’s theory. Families with all boys or all girls may see changes to the personality structures that he developed, for example, compared to families that had an even mix of boys and girls or had an only child.

***An Overview of the Alfred Adler Birth Order Theory***

In Adler’s birth order theory, there are three key observations which must be made. One must look at the position of the child in the family, what the family situation happens to be, and what characteristics develop because of that combination. Here are some of the general expectations to expect from a child’s personality when using Adler’s birth order theory to evaluate children.

**Only Child:** An only child tends to receive the full attention of both parents. They can be over-protected, but they can also be spoiled. This causes the child to like being the center of attention, prefer adult company, and have difficulty sharing with others.

**Oldest Child:** The eldest child in a family goes from being an only child to the oldest child. That requires the child to learn how to share. Expectations are usually very high, which includes the need for the child to set an example for other siblings. This causes the child to trend toward authoritarian and strict approaches. They feel powerful and often require encouragement to be helpful.

**Youngest Child:** The youngest child in a family often sees every sibling as a potential “mother” and “father.” Just about everyone tells them what to do and when to do it. Their role is never removed. This causes the child to want to grow up more quickly and make big plans that may never come true.

**Middle Child:** Because the oldest receives responsibility and the youngest can be spoiled, children in the middle can feel like they don’t receive any attention at all. They fight for significance and privilege. This causes the child to develop an attitude that is very black-and-white. They tend to be even-tempered and fight to protect the social justice of others, but can also feel very lonely.

**Twins:** One twin is usually stronger than the other twin. One may be more active. Some families may see the older twin as being the oldest child. Because they are born together, there isn’t the same transition issues from an only child, but there can also be some identity problems. One twin tends to become the “leader” and the other is the “follower.”

**Ghost Child:** Some children are born into families where a first child may have died before they were born. This causes parents, especially mothers, to become over-protective of all their children, but especially their oldest. Children in this position often become rebellious or may attempt to exploit their parent’s feelings for personal gain.

**Adopted Child:** Many adopted children receive the same levels of attention that an only child receives. Parents who adopt tend to try to compensate the child for the loss of their biological parents. This causes the child to become demanding, lack in self-confidence, and even resent their family over time.

***What About Single Girls or Single Boys in a Sibling Group?***

The most unique aspects of the Adler birth order theory involve families where there is a sibling group, but only one boy or one girl in that group. When there is only one boy with a group of sisters, they tend to prefer spending time with women over men. Boys in this position can be very distant from their fathers. Many try to “prove” they are a man in the family.

For girls, the brothers tend to act as a protector. This can lead girls in this position to become extremely feminine, taking on the “princess personality,” or become a tomboy and attempt to “conquer” her brothers. Fathers tend to play a dominant role in the personality development of girls in this position.

In families that are all boys or all girls, the assigned roles can blur. If the parents wanted a child of the other gender, then that role may be assigned to one of the children. This can cause the child to rebel, to accept their role, or have resentment fester over time. Adler believed that the differences he saw in birth order could fade, in time, if families became less competitive. In a democratic, cooperative environment, he felt like all these differences could disappear.