other persons with reduction of anxiety. Accordingly, firstborns had a greater "need for affiliation" and sought company as they awaited their fate. In contrast, later borns are raised by mothers who can no longer attend to every bruise—whether real or imaginary—and who are too busy always to come when called. These children learn to allay their anxiety at least in part through their own efforts. And so they were content to remain alone.

**A Composite Portrait.** Schachter's intriguing results have stimulated considerable research on the multifaceted effects of birth-order position. Drawing on the findings of numerous studies of siblings (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1970; Zajonc and Markus, 1975), we can now sketch a composite portrait of the child representing each sibling position. Naturally, there are many exceptions, but the patterns are fairly typical, at least within our society.

Firstborn children are characterized by two somewhat inconsistent features. On the one hand, having parents who expect much of them, they tend to be highly motivated, ambitious, and successful, to adhere to rules, and to have highly developed standards and considerable organizational ability. From early infancy, they receive and emit more behaviors than other children (Booth, 1981; Kilbride, Johnson, and Streissguth, 1977; Lewis and Kreitzberg, 1979; Snow, 1981). They are especially likely to succeed in fields where seriousness, intellectual prowess, and high goals are valued. Yet, on the other hand, firstborns do not have the self-confidence that might be expected of successful persons. They are more likely to need others around them and are more fearful and sensitive to pain. They are less able to cope with anxiety, and they are quite dependent on parents and other people. They tend to be cautious and conservative (Finley and Cheyne, 1976). While successful in school, they are not particularly popular (Lyons, 1979). (See also Figure 8.4.) This paradox may explain why firstborn children are often uncertain of their roles and are more likely than middle children to turn to psychotherapy (Garner and Wenar, 1959).

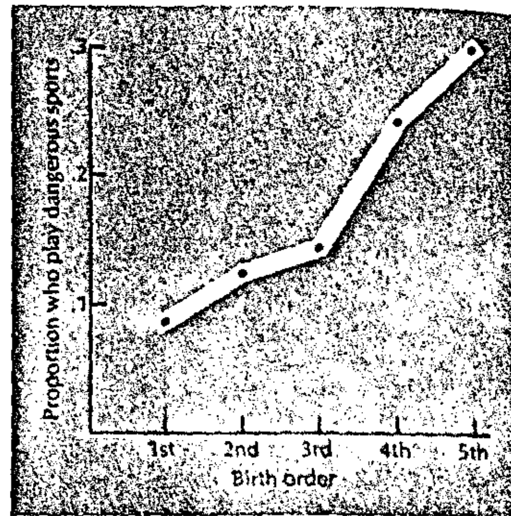


**Figure 8.4.** One reason for the growing fascination with a child's birth-order rank is the often unanticipated effects that seem associated with the accident of birth. One such example comes from the work of Richard Nisbett: a child's birth order turns out to be directly correlated with the likelihood that he will participate in a dangerous sport, like football, rugby, or soccer. In contrast, participation in sports such as baseball or crew appear unrelated to one's birth-order rank. (Nisbett, 1968)

Even more dependent and achievement-oriented than the firstborns, only children have often been viewed as "super firstborns." Their parents often make strong demands on them and the children often satisfy these high demands. Because they remain at the center of attention, they may become quite adroit at pitting one parent against another to get their own way. They are likely to become quite self-centered, viewing themselves as unfairly treated and refusing to cooperate if they do not get their own way. They often have diffi-

Only Children

culties in relating to peers. And they often seek out the company of adults. Interestingly, they are more likely than firstborns to display traits normally associated with the opposite sex (Segal and Yahraes, 1979).

At the polar extreme of the sibling hierarchy are the children born last in a family. In some ways, last borns resemble firstborns, for they too are likely to be the center of attention for a long time and to be somewhat spoiled. However, rather than maturing quickly, as first borns usually do, last borns may remain quite babyish. Moreover, because they are not given responsibility, they are unlikely to develop feelings of independence: as the littlest in the family, they may feel inferior to the other, stronger family members, sometimes even becoming discouraged with their relatively paltry achievements and giving up in despair. They are as prone as firstborns to have personal problems and to seek psychiatric help. However, unlike firstborns, they are often quite popular, possibly because they develop interpersonal competence through the constant need to negotiate, accommodate, and tolerate (Segal and Yahraes, 1979).

And what of middle children? They may feel unloved and imposed upon because they have never been at the center of attention. They are caught in the middle, unable to recap the benefits incurred by being oldest or youngest. They are quite likely to perceive themselves as less skilled than the firstborn. As a result, they often turn to nonacademic endeavors, such as sports or the arts, preferring physical and action-oriented pursuits. They are also more likely to pick up unconventional ideas or philosophies, possibly as a means of getting back at an oppressive older figure. In fact, over 90 percent of the scientists who first supported Charles Darwin's biological notions in the nineteenth century were younger siblings (Sulloway, 1972). Receiving less attention than their siblings, middle children often become more cooperative with their peers and less dependent on their elders. Even as young children they are more likely to talk to strangers, whereas firstborns restrict their conversation to their mothers. Overall, middle children are usually easygoing, cheerful, and gentle, not anxious, not overconcerned with achievement.

**Evaluating Birth-Order Studies.** Everyone can think of (and some can peer in the mirror at) exceptions to these sketches. It must be remembered that these are only typical portraits; they yield no specific predictions about a specific individual. Each pattern can be modulated by many factors: the size of the family; its social, economic, and personal characteristics; the number of years between the children; and so on (Trotter, 1976). For instance, second-born children are more likely to be treated as firstborns if born much later or if their sex is different from the firstborn's.

Finally, many of these conclusions rest on tenuous findings. Results based on questionnaires and self-reports are usually less reliable than systematic observations or experimental manipulations by impartial researchers. Studies tended to concentrate on middle-class families. Moreover, statistical correlations were usually between birth order and personality trait: that is, they indicate that children who occupy place *x* in the birth order are likely, as a group, to score high on trait *A* and low on trait *B*. Longitudinal studies focusing on the family dynamics that lead to this profile of scores would be more reliable. And greater confidence could also be achieved if studies were conducted on the way children of different birth-order positions solve problems or interact with one another.

Nonetheless, the fact that patterns can be found for each of the major birth-order positions is powerful evidence that a child's place

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within the family will have a significant influence on her development. In the future more precise experimental studies may yield firmer insights about the significance of birth order. For instance, one recent study found that older sisters are more likely than older brothers to help a younger sibling solve a problem by offering explanations, providing feedback, and the like (Cicirelli, 1975). Children from larger families sought and received more help from one another than children from small families did, and mothers were more likely to aid children who had older brothers than children who had older sisters. Siblings prove more likely to interact with one another when only one parent is present than when both are present (Lamb, 1979) and older children can serve as attachment figures for their younger siblings (Stewart, 1981). Younger siblings attend to and often imitate their older siblings, while older siblings are more likely to initiate behaviors—both antisocial like aggression and prosocial actions like teaching—toward their younger sibs (Abramovitch, Corter, and Lando, 1979; Pepler, 1981; Vandell, 1981). These findings indicate that we need to (and can) go beyond a simple list of traits to understand the dynamic relations among children in various birth-order positions.

### THE KENNEDYS REVISITED

One yardstick against which to assess various approaches to the family is the extent to which they successfully illuminate a particular family. Returning to ponder the remarkable saga of the Kennedys, we can call on each of these perspectives in turn and identify its relevant features.

From the evolutionary perspective, the Kennedy sons may be compared to a strongly male-oriented primate group (R. Kennedy, 1974; Whalen, 1965). The family extolled masculine virtues, encouraged the boys to go out in the world, and emphasized combative physical activity. As typically occurs in primate tribes, the males were clearly dominant in the family. And, within the tribe of Kennedy males, there seems also to have been a definite order of dominance, based largely on age: when the dominant male died, the next in line assumed his post.

Rose and Joseph Kennedy, the parents, clearly evolved a particular style of childrearing (R. Kennedy, 1974). They were highly demanding of their youngsters and yet compassionate regarding failure so long as the children tried their best. Authoritarian features such as strict schedules and stringent demands were modulated by a more permissive atmosphere during meals and periods of play. Especially important was that the parents apparently agreed on methods of childrearing and consistently supported each other's decisions. Indeed, as we saw earlier, this consensus and consistency may have been as important as any specific feature of their parenting style.

Events in the lives of the Kennedy children underscore the usefulness of a family-as-system approach. The oldest brother, Joseph, Jr., was slated to go into politics but was killed in an accident during World War II. The next brother, John, stepped into his older brother's shoes, eventually becoming President. When John was killed, Robert was next in line, and indeed he entered a presidential campaign before being assassinated. And when Robert was killed, Edward stepped forward as a political leader and a possible presidential candidate. Here we see how changes have reverberations throughout a family system. Each time a brother was killed, the roles of the survivors were altered. At the same time, throughout their many tragedies, the Kennedy family has consistently drawn together, showing a pervasive thread of unity within the family system.

The Kennedy children seem to be fertile ground for an analysis of birth-order position. The oldest offspring, Joseph, was the serious

and intellectual one. The second son, John, was at first somewhat nonacademic, but as often happens with second borns, he quickly assumed the role of leader and intellectual when his older brother died. The third son, Robert, exemplifying a child in the middle, was known as an activist and a physical enthusiast; he was gregarious and somewhat more pragmatic than his elder brothers. Edward seems to have suffered from many of the difficulties that confront the baby in the family. He was a spoiled youngster, had difficulty maturing, and sometimes displayed a tendency to be discouraged and to "throw it all away" (Burns, 1976). How well he has handled responsibilities as the last Kennedy son remains a controversial matter.

## The Community

In considering the child's place midst parents and siblings, we have examined the narrowest circle within which socialization takes place. But shortly after infancy, and with increasing frequency once they begin to attend school, children enter into daily contact with a wide sphere of humanity: neighbors, relatives, peers, and other individuals, as well as with institutions in the community. Not only are they placed in a situation characterized by many rules and regulations, but they now must form relations with other adults—teachers, custodians, police—and, especially, with others of their own age.

Each of these factors in the community contributes to the child's subsequent development, although individual children will be influenced differently in diverse social settings. Because of our interest in the factors molding young Americans, we shall focus on forces of undeniable importance in our society. First we shall examine the effect of the peer group—a factor that becomes increasingly central as children develop. Then we shall consider a less visible but equally potent influence: the individual's social-class background. This influence is especially crucial because it cuts two ways: social-class factors influence not only the child's own behavior but also the way others treat (and respond to) the child.

### THE PEER GROUP

Traditionally, the family has exerted the largest influence on the child's development. Indeed, earlier in our own history and in many other contemporary cultures, children have had only intermittent contact with other children outside their families until they are seven or so. Today, however, the influence of peers seems to be rising sharply. Researchers have accordingly focused on the effects of peers at different ages, of opposite sexes, and in diverse cultures.

Groups of young contemporaries arise spontaneously in every culture, even when peer interaction is not deliberately encouraged (Hartup, 1970). This interaction may reflect the strong tendency among primates (including humans) for such grouping, which generally occurs by age and sex. As children's egocentrism declines and their ability to adopt the perspective of others grows, they can engage in more organized and sustained kinds of activity—such as games—with their peers. A shift can then be noted from a mere collection of children who happen to be playing in tandem to a genuinely cohesive group (Piaget, 1932).

Specific changes have been observed in peer relations during children's early years. Even in infancy, children will look attentively at peers (Eckerman and Whatley, 1977) and will sometimes behave differently toward them than toward their mother (Young and Lewis, 1979), for example, directing a greater variety of facial expression toward the mother, more abrupt, intense, and active motor movements toward the peer (Fogel,