Directions: Read the following material, then answer the questions in the space provided.

There are thousands of studies attempting to find some correlation between birth order—that is, a child’s position in the family with regard to two or more siblings—and personality. All such studies have serious drawbacks. The most obvious obstacle is the number of variables affecting personality, including:

- age
- age spread between children
- gender differences
- socioeconomic status
- racial or ethnic differences
- religious differences
- adopted versus biological children
- marital changes brought on by divorce or death
- parental neglect or abuse of children

To date, no coherent research model for birth order has been established. Nevertheless, some general conclusions emerge from the existing studies. The first study by Alfred Adler in 1931 is also one of the most famous. Adler based his theories largely on data drawn from his observations of the behavior of a number of clients and from their life stories as told to him. Adler maintained that personality differences among the oldest, middle, and youngest child in a family could be attributed in part to their belonging to a unique social group based on their order of birth in the family. Subsequent studies argued Adler’s conclusions, but most agree that some general principles regarding birth order and personality do exist.

The first-born child, by virtue of being born first and being the only child for a period of time, has a special place in the family. The first-born is more apt to be indulged and protected by the parents, who are new to parenting. The first-born does not need to compete with siblings for the attention and affection of parents. Because of this favored status, first-born children tend to be high achievers, both academically and socially, and are most likely to pursue leadership positions as adults.

When the second child is born, the first-born loses his or her only-child status and must suddenly share parents’ attention with the newborn. This may confuse or even enrage the first-born, and first-born children often become insecure as a result. If parents work to prepare the first-born for the arrival of the second child, the first-born may show traits of responsibility and protectiveness as a result. With the birth of the second child, the first child may develop an exaggerated need to be “first” in all pursuits, which may continue throughout life.

The second-born (or third-born) child, lacking the experience of being the “only one” is, in general, more competitive than the first-born. Middle children are often ambitious as a result of constantly striving to catch up to the older sibling. A middle child may attempt to compete in an area in which the older sibling has already excelled, and may develop feelings of inferiority when performance levels do not measure up. A middle child may also pursue a different avenue; if the older child is an academic achiever, the middle child may pursue a career in the arts.

The youngest child, as the “baby of the family,” is often the spoiled child. The older children, as well as the parents, tend to indulge the youngest child. This may result in a personality trait that is noncompetitive by nature, as the child will continually seek the approval of others in an attempt to maintain favored status. Frequently youngest children have the most “power” in a family and are apt to be more manipulative emotionally, using tears or acting “cute” as a way of getting what they want. Because of this dependent status as a child, the youngest child may grow into a dependent-personality type as an adult.
Only children occupy a unique position within a family. They are like first-born children in that they do not have to compete with siblings for the parents' attention (unlike first-borns, they retain this status), and they are like last-born children in that they never feel the pressure of being thrust out of the limelight by a younger sibling. As with youngest children, they tend to be spoiled by parents. As a result, only children tend to be self-centered. They also tend to be oriented toward achievement and in general do well in the academic arena.

Many conclusions have been drawn about the effects of birth order on personality. Such conclusions are, at best, very general. A child's order of birth in a family cannot absolutely predict the child's personality traits. We do know, however, that birth order does affect the personality development of children. We may use this knowledge in a general way, but we should not use it to precisely predict behavioral patterns or to try to cure emotional problems on the basis of expected behavioral patterns. At best, knowledge of birth order effects enables psychologists to have a greater understanding of personality dynamics but should never be used to simply label an individual.

Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions in the space provided

1. On each of the following scales, select a point that you believe best describes a first-born, second-born, and last-born child based on the reading and your own observations of friends and siblings.

   Independent

   Competitive

   High Achiever

   Ambitious

   Dependent

   Noncompetitive

   Low Achiever

   Content

2. What is your birth order position within your family? Do you exhibit any of the traits discussed? What other factors contributed to the development of your personality?

3. Birth order studies show that a disproportionately high number of congressional representatives and United States presidents are first-born children. Research the family history of two presidents and two of your state's senators or representatives to check the accuracy of this information. Report your findings in a list.