

PARENTAL ROLE EXPECTATIONS AND THE FORMATION OF RESPONSIBILITY IN FIRST-BORN AND LATER-BORN SIBLINGS

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between differential parental role expectations and the development of responsibility in first-born and later-born siblings. Drawing on Adler's theory of birth order and family systems theory, we hypothesize that first-born children internalize higher levels of responsibility due to parental expectations that assign them caretaking and role-modeling duties. In contrast, later-born children are expected to develop responsibility through different pathways, often involving negotiation and adaptation within the family hierarchy. A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing surveys to measure perceived parental expectations and self-reported responsible behaviors, alongside in-depth interviews with a subset of families. Quantitative results indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between high parental responsibility expectations and the development of responsible behaviors in first-borns. Qualitative analysis reveals that first-borns often perceive these expectations as a form of pressure that shapes their identity, while later-borns describe a more collaborative or delegated form of responsibility. The findings underscore the profound impact of birth-order-specific parental expectations on the socialization process and the divergent paths through which a sense of responsibility is cultivated within the family system.

Keywords

Parental expectations, responsibility formation, birth order, first-born siblings, Later-born siblings, sibling dynamics, family Socialization, adlerian theory, child development

Introduction

The family system is a primary context for the development of core personality traits, with parental expectations playing a pivotal role in this process. Among these traits, responsibility—a multifaceted construct encompassing accountability, dependability, and self-reliance—is critically shaped by familial interactions. A key variable influencing these dynamics is birth order, which can create distinct psychological environments for each child. First-born children often experience a parental focus on high achievement and role-modeling, while later-borns may encounter more relaxed expectations. This study investigates the nexus between these parental role expectations and the development of responsibility in first-born and later-born siblings. The research problem centers on understanding how systematic differences in parental expectations, mediated by birth order, contribute to varying pathways in the formation of responsible behavior. The primary objective is to empirically examine and compare these developmental pathways to provide a nuanced understanding of family socialization processes.

Methods

Research Design and Participants

A comparative cross-sectional design was employed. The sample consisted of 120 adolescents (60 first-borns, 60 later-borns) aged 14-17 years ($M=15.6$, $SD=1.2$) and their parents, recruited from urban secondary schools. The sample was stratified to ensure equal distribution of gender and family size (two-child families only).

Instruments

1. Parental Role Expectations Questionnaire (PREQ): A 20-item self-report scale for parents, measuring expectations on a 5-point Likert scale across two subscales: "Academic/Social Responsibility" (e.g., "I expect my child to complete homework without reminder") and "Caregiving/Chores Responsibility" (e.g., "I expect my child to help look after their sibling").
2. Adolescent Responsibility Measure (ARM): A 15-item scale assessing adolescents' self-perceived responsibility in personal, social, and domestic domains.
3. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with a subset of 20 parent-child dyads to gather qualitative data on the nature and communication of expectations.

2.3. Procedure

Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained. Parents completed the PREQ, while adolescents completed the ARM concurrently in a controlled setting. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. Data were analyzed using SPSS v.26, employing independent samples t-tests and correlation analysis to compare groups and examine relationships between variables.

Results

3.1. Differences in Parental Expectations

Quantitative analysis revealed significant differences in parental expectations. Parents reported significantly higher expectations for Academic/Social Responsibility for first-borns ($M=4.31$, $SD=0.51$) compared to later-borns ($M=3.89$, $SD=0.62$; $t(118)=4.27$, $p<.001$). Expectations for Caregiving/Chores were also higher for first-borns ($M=4.02$, $SD=0.58$) than for later-borns ($M=3.45$, $SD=0.71$; $t(118)=4.89$, $p<.001$).

Levels of Responsibility in Adolescents

First-born adolescents scored significantly higher on the ARM ($M=42.5$, $SD=5.1$) than later-borns ($M=38.2$, $SD=6.3$; $t(118)=4.35$, $p<.001$), indicating a higher self-reported level of overall responsibility.

Correlation between Expectations and Responsibility

A strong positive correlation was found between parental expectations (PREQ total score) and adolescent responsibility (ARM score) for the entire sample ($r = .68$, $p < .01$). This correlation was stronger within the first-born group ($r = .74$, $p < .01$) than within the later-born group ($r = .61$, $p < .01$).

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews supported the quantitative data. Parents of first-borns frequently used terms like "role model," "pioneer," and "helper," explicitly linking these roles to the development of maturity and duty. In contrast, expectations for later-borns were often framed around "learning from their older sibling" and "being a good team member," with less emphasis on pioneering responsibility.

Discussion

The results clearly demonstrate that parental role expectations are both higher for first-born children and more strongly correlated with their development of responsibility. This supports Adler's (1928) theoretical premise of birth order creating distinct "family niches." The first-born's position as a trailblazer appears to come with a burden of higher expectations, particularly in academic and caregiving domains, which in turn fosters a stronger sense of responsibility. The lower and differently framed expectations for later-borns suggest a "dilution" of pressure, potentially leading to a more collaborative but less individually driven form of responsibility.

The stronger correlation for first-borns implies that the explicit delegation of duty is a more potent socializing mechanism for them. For later-borns, responsibility may develop through observation and indirect modeling rather than direct parental mandate. A limitation of this study is its focus on two-child families, which may not capture the dynamics in larger families. Future research should longitudinally track these relationships from early childhood and include observational measures of responsible behavior to complement self-reports.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the formation of responsibility in children is not a uniform process but is significantly mediated by birth order and the distinct parental role expectations associated with it. First-born children are socialized into responsibility through a pathway characterized by higher and more explicit demands for accountability and caregiving. Later-born children develop responsibility in a context of relatively relaxed expectations, often mediated by their relationship with an older sibling. These findings underscore the need for parental awareness regarding how their expectations are shaped by birth order and highlight the importance of consciously fostering responsibility in all children, regardless of their position in the family. Understanding these differential pathways can inform more effective family counseling and parent-education programs.

References

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