

You Asked: Dream Child and Hell Raiser

This answer comes from Beth Johnson

Q: Our two girls are close in age, 12 and 13. One is driving us crazy and the other is a dream child. How can they be so different, and what can we do with the twelve-year-old hell raiser?
At Wit's End

A: Dear Wit's End

How can they be so different? How well I remember asking this very same question when my daughters were young!

After being introduced to the concept of Family Constellation, it finally made some sense to me. Adlerian educators tell us that every child is looking for a way to belong and to find a special place in the family. Each time a new person joins the family, the relationship between all the family members has to readjust. It has been observed that children in a particular birth-order position in the family tend to develop similar characteristics. First born children often:

- Are used to getting a lot of attention,
- Are usually reliable and responsible,
- Attempt to live up to parent's standards,
- Are likely to become high achievers,
- May need to feel right, perfect, superior, in control. ¹

For the second born things are different. As a second born, picture yourself suddenly coming onto the stage in the middle of the second act of a play that is in progress, and having to figure out what your role is. There is already a tightly knit group of three. The first born has an established role and is usually more accomplished at everything than you are.

That first born child – although delighted to have a sibling – may also be a little miffed at having to share her parents with a newcomer, and she might possibly be feeling a little threatened about losing her special status. However, having established the habit of pleasing her parents, she might redouble her efforts to please. Being wise enough to be subtle about her objections, she might find it worthwhile to point out when her younger sister is misbehaving. She may be eager to teach her sister things, but she could on occasion encourage the little one to do things that get her into trouble. The younger sister then might become one who gets noticed for mistakes and misbehavior. That could lead to her becoming annoying in her attempts to compete with her older sister for attention, and she may decide that negative attention is better than not being noticed at all.

Here are some possible characteristics of a second-born child:

- She may become an AVIS (We Try Harder) child;
- She may develop characteristics opposite to the older child (e.g., may become irresponsible and rebellious if the older child is responsible and cooperative);
- She is likely more flexible and friendly and less of a perfectionist.

Can you now begin to see the progression into becoming a hell-raiser?

Discouraging? Yes, but all is not lost! People can change.

Kids change when adults change their responses to the children's behavior. Here are some things you could work on that will encourage your children and improve your relationships with them:

- Refrain from all comparisons between the two children: comparisons are harmful to both of them;
- Avoid taking sides in siblings' fights – encourage them to negotiate;
- Show interest in the things that your younger daughter is interested in;
- Look for positive behavior and contributions from her (catch her being good);
- Encourage her participation in activities that her sister does not do;
- As things begin to improve, give her responsibilities and believe in her ability to carry them out;
- Take the emphasis off your older child's good behavior – it is not easy being a “dream child” all the time;
- Engage the whole family in learning effective communication and problem solving skills.

Your children are entering that difficult age where they will become increasingly independent from the family as they figure out who they are. Don't expect smooth sailing! Remember that they still need and want your attention and guidance even though it doesn't seem like it at times. Do make an effort to get to know and to appreciate each of them as special individuals by listening and respecting their ideas and emotions. We predict that you'll see some shifts from the strong opposites in their personalities and that they will both become fine adults.

¹ Family Constellation handout, *Respectful, Responsible Parenting: A Facilitator's Guide* Beth Johnson & Janice Solem (2007) Saskatoon Adlerian Society

Beth Johnson and her husband, Dennis, raised four daughters and they now have six grandchildren. Adlerian Psychology was instrumental in moving Beth from being a discouraged parent to becoming a long-time parent educator, SAS board member, and SAS Newsletter editor.