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## **Negotiating the Birth Order: Children's Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the ways in which children perceive the relative opportunities and constraints of their birth order position within their families by comparing and contrasting the views of oldest, middle and youngest siblings. It shows that birth order and age can be experienced at times as a constraint on sibling behaviour and at other times as a resource that can be utilised in a dynamic and creative manner. Thus, although birth order is important in shaping children's experiences of sibship, relative benefits have to be actively maintained and limitations of each position in the sibling order are not passively accepted and are often contested. The paper argues that birth order and age are not fixed hierarchies but can be subverted, contested, resisted and negotiated through children's everyday experiences of family life. It is based on a qualitative study of 30 families with three children between the ages of 5 and 17. In-depth individual and group interviews were conducted with 90 children from this sample of 30 families of mixed socio-economic backgrounds in central Scotland.

## **Introduction**

Traditionally the study of sibling relationships has been dominated by psychology (for example Dunn, 1984; Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 1982; Stocker et al., 1989) and recently there has been some social work research on sibling care (Kosonen, 1996), family support (Sanders, 2004) and child protection issues (Mullender, 1999). Furthermore, child-parent relationships have tended to dominate family research at the expense of intra-generational relations between siblings (see also Mauthner, 2005; Mitchell, 2003). However, more recently a sociological approach has been contributing new insights to our understanding of the nature of sibling interactions (Brannen et al., 2000; Edwards et al., 2005, 2006; Mauthner, 2002, 2005; Punch, 2001, 2008). This paper builds on this new sociology of 'sibship' by exploring children's perspectives of the relative opportunities and constraints of their birth order position. It considers the ways in which children understand sibling relationships by focusing on how the negotiation of sibling roles varies according to birth order and age.

Psychological literature has tended to perceive siblings in relation to the 'roles' and 'expectations' of their birth order position (Boer and Dunn, 1992; McGuire et al., 2000; Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1970) and can thus underplay children's agency. Research on birth order tends to focus on the impact that birth order has on children's futures, considering how it may shape their personalities (Berthoud, 1996; Sulloway, 1996) as well as influence their successes and failures as adults (Conley, 2004; Leman 2002). However, there is very limited sociological research which explores children's own understandings of the ways birth order may shape their childhoods (Edwards et al., 2006). This paper examines the ways in which the birth order is socially constructed, highlighting that certain characteristics tend to be related to different positions in the sibling order and that these are recognised by the children themselves, their siblings and their parents. It then explores how the birth order hierarchy and expectations surrounding birth order roles are played out in everyday sibling interactions, thereby highlighting children's agency in their daily negotiations with siblings. In particular, it indicates how children both accept and resist hierarchical power relations between siblings.

## **Methods**

In contrast to much of the psychological research, this paper is based on children's own perceptions and understandings of sibling relationships and birth order. The study began with an exploratory phase of essay-based classroom research at three Scottish schools where 180 children (aged 7-14) wrote essays about their experiences of sibling relationships. This stage informed the design of semi-structured interviews and enabled access to be negotiated with a sample of 30 families with three children between the ages of 5 and 17. Each of the 90 siblings were interviewed individually in their homes, followed by 30 focus group interviews with all three siblings together. The group interview allowed for some sibling interaction to be observed and for group discussion of issues raised in the individual interviews (see Punch, 2007).

The children were all full siblings of mixed socio-economic backgrounds, mostly living with both of their biological parents except for three single mother households. Hence, this sample was based on shared biological parents and co-residence, but it is worth remembering that the dynamics between step-siblings or half-siblings may be different from the interactions described in this paper. The siblings were all white<sup>1</sup> and non-disabled so ethnicity and disability are not considered in this study and the limitations of the sample size mean that the impact of social class and different household forms cannot be fully explored. Nevertheless, the in-depth and exploratory nature of the

research has allowed for a consideration of children's experiences of sibship and birth order in families with three siblings aged 5-17. All of the interviews included task-based methods in an attempt to minimise unequal power relations between the adult researcher and child participants (Punch, 2002).

In group interviews, I asked the siblings to brainstorm what they perceive to be the benefits and limitations of being the oldest, middle and youngest. They did this by creating a spider diagram where the body of the spider indicated which position they were discussing, and each of the spider legs mentioned the relative opportunities and constraints of being older, younger or in the middle. This was then used as a basis to explore these issues more fully. In the individual interviews I asked the children and young people a general question on how they felt about their location in the birth order, and followed this up by asking them what they perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages to their position. In this paper the recognised traits of each position are discussed in turn followed by an exploration of the ways in which the birth order hierarchy is negotiated in practice.

### **Being the Oldest Sibling**

All of the oldest siblings were between ten and sixteen years of age. The majority of them indicated that there are a clear mixture of advantages and disadvantages attached to their position as the eldest sibling: "It's got its good points and bad points" (Susan 12, oldest). The key areas of discussion about being the oldest included notions of power, being the first, autonomy and responsibility. In particular, being at the top of the birth order hierarchy was perceived as having certain advantages in relation to different aspects of power and 'getting what you want' (Dowding, 1996: 50). Some oldest siblings talked about having the potential capacity to boss their younger siblings about:

I don't think I'd be able to do the 'get me that thing' if I wasn't the oldest or at least older than them.  
(Samuel 16, oldest)

Older siblings are recognised (by themselves and, as we shall see, by their younger siblings) as having an advantage over their younger siblings in relation to the exercise of power, partly because they tend to be bigger and physically stronger: "If they really annoy me I can just push them away or batter them but I don't have to worry about that from them" (Simon 14, oldest). Other older siblings liked to be able to take advantage of their greater linguistic experience:

Sometimes if you're in an argument you always win 'cos you can make a more decent point than they can and just say a load of rubbish and then you'll get credit for it and you might get what you want. ... If you're fighting you've got a better chance, you've got a sharper tongue when it comes to making nasty comment so better at that. (Janice 13, oldest)

Others used their wider knowledge of the social world in a more positive manner by recognising that their younger siblings could learn from them. Some found that teaching their younger brothers and sisters things could be an enjoyable experience as well as increasing their own sense of self-esteem and status by being looked up at:

Well, you get to like stand up for them and that and that's OK, you get to help them with things and that's good and they look up to you a lot so you've got to do the right thing with them. Cos if you do the wrong thing they'll like copy, especially Alison, she's younger. (Lisa 16, oldest)

Another common characteristic which was mentioned regularly in relation to being the oldest was the enhanced sense of status that is achieved through being the first sibling to undertake certain activities.

It's good as well like because I can do things before them, like I can go to all the trips at school before them ... Because then they can't come home and go "ha ha I've been before you, ha ha", and then tell you all about it and then it ruins it so. (Henrietta 11, oldest)

Henrietta's comment reflects some of the rivalry that can occur between siblings, showing how their position enables them to do things before their younger brothers and sisters. Some oldest children indicated that this may also mean that they receive more attention which may increase their sense of importance within the family context: "You can get a lot more attention from relatives and stuff, like when you turn thirteen and stuff like that" (Jackie 15, oldest).

Many of the children's quotations about 'being first' are linked to notions of growing independence for young people: "being allowed more to do what I want than Lucas and Annabel. ... Going out later and staying out later and staying out longer and stuff like that" (Raul 14, oldest). The life course is socially constructed in such a way in Britain, that the central phase of adulthood tends to be desired more than other lifecourse stages. This is because it tends to be perceived as the more autonomous, powerful and least vulnerable stage of the lifecourse (Hockey and James, 1993). Thus, children are often keen to push the boundaries on the restrictions which adults place on their lives in relation to where they can go, what films they can watch and the levels of autonomy they experience. Interestingly, not all the oldest siblings indicated that being the first to have particular experiences is necessarily positive:

You are the person who has to go first into everything, like being the first with school ... cos I can't ask my brothers what's it like, what do I have to bring? So that's the worst thing about being the oldest. (Susan 12, oldest)

Whilst on the whole 'being the first' to do things was mainly perceived positively, it could also put the oldest child under more pressure. Another downside of 'being the first' to get certain privileges often meant that younger siblings began achieving these same benefits at an earlier age than they had. Older siblings were often frustrated by the injustice of this. Thus, 'being first' can have both advantages and disadvantages attached to it, as can having greater levels of responsibility which was usually in relation to sibling care or doing more household chores:

It can be annoying because like when it comes to doing jobs, I'm the one that has to do it, cos they're not old enough and they don't know how (Samuel 16, oldest)

Some clearly enjoyed being asked to look after their younger siblings, as George said: "I just like being in charge" (George 11, oldest). Other older siblings pointed out that it could be irritating if it restricted their own movements, but the clearest downside to being responsible was that parents tended to expect the oldest sibling to set a good example and behave more 'maturely'. This meant that when they did not behave in such ways, they felt that they were much more likely to get into trouble than their younger siblings:

I always get blamed for stuff, like for fighting I get blamed for it because I'm the oldest and I should know better. (Henrietta 11, oldest)

## Being the Middle Sibling

In this study, the middle children were between the ages of eight and fifteen. Interestingly, the responses in relation to being the middle sibling were more mixed and less clear cut than the more well defined advantages and disadvantages to being the youngest or oldest. Many of the comments tended to reflect that the middle sibling was both an older sibling to the youngest one, and a younger sibling to the oldest one, therefore they experienced a greater range of benefits and limitations in relation to each of these roles.

In a way I'd say it's better cos you've got somebody to stick up for you and you've got somebody you can boss about as well. (Leo 12, middle)

In much of the psychological birth order literature there is an assumption that the middle child suffers the most (Berthoud, 1996; Conley, 2004). They are perceived to be the most hard done by, stuck in the middle, receiving the least attention because they are not the first nor the last to do things (Leman, 2002). However, what was striking about this research, was that rather than seeing it as 'getting the worst of both worlds', the middle children tended to express it as having the best of both worlds: "It's quite good 'cos you're younger than somebody and you're older than somebody so you know what it's like to be like both of them" (Edward 9, middle). In particular, most of them liked the flexibility of the middle position as they had more choice in terms of being either an older or younger sibling:

It's quite good because you get a mixture of both. And if you like your younger brother better, you can play with your younger brother more and if you like your older brother better, you can play with your older brother more. (Christian 8, middle)

As with the responses from the oldest and youngest siblings, the middle siblings recognised that an age and status hierarchy surrounds the birth order positions:

I can bash Mandy but Steven will just bash me (Josh 13, middle)

... you've someone to ask questions and then you've got someone you can sort of look down on and they look up to you and ask you questions ... it makes you feel more grown up. (Tim 9, middle)

The teaching hierarchy of the birth order enables siblings to pass down advice, resulting in the middle sibling benefiting from being in both a teaching and learning position. "I think it's OK cos I'm still older than Jackie. I like teaching her stuff and all that. But Josephine sometimes can really teach us stuff" (Aleyda 12, middle). Looking after their younger sibling enables middle siblings to distance themselves from the role of being cared for, increasing their sense of power and responsibility. Graded levels of autonomy often become translated into different degrees of privileges for older and younger siblings in relation to pocket money, bed-times and independent geographical mobility. Thus, parenting practices of setting different age-appropriate rules reinforce the status and age hierarchy of the birth order. Some siblings found this to be frustrating at times: "Like going to bed, Richard is first, then me, then Ian. I wish for a week it was Me, Richard, Ian" (Angus 13, middle).

A key advantage of being a middle sibling that emerged in the interviews is being able to engage in both older and younger activities:

It's quite good being the middle one because I'm not too young to go do stuff but I'm not too old to do stuff. Like sometimes you have to be a certain height to go into stuff but if you're over that height

you won't fit in 'cos you're too big. So being the middle one I'm just about the right size usually.  
(Nigel 9, middle)

This quotation indicates that sometimes a middle sibling can suffer least exclusion, so rather than being the 'odd one out' as many psychological birth order books suggest, middle children can experience their position as being the most included. The adult perspective of the middle child suffering the most, may be partly as a result of forgetting certain experiences that are important to children during the 'here and now' of their childhoods which may be more easily overlooked from an adults' point of view. This emphasises the importance of seeking children's own opinions of their sibling relations and birth order position.

The age and status hierarchy is also reinforced by material goods, such as clothes and bicycles, being passed down from an older to a younger sibling: "It's OK cos you get like, my old sort of stuff goes down to Alison and then I get Lisa's old stuff and then Alison gets even more" (Maisie 12, middle). Again the middle sibling is in both a receiving and giving position, thus reflecting that their role tends to have both advantages and disadvantages attached to each of its features. However, some middle children pointed out that one of the downsides to being located in the middle is that they are rarely first (or last) to do things:

Well it's kind of annoying because Samuel is the big one. He gets to know all the things like how to cook and stuff. It's okay but it's quite annoying that Samuel gets to do everything first. And I have to inherit stuff from him. (Nick 11, middle)

The oldest and youngest siblings tend to benefit from the extra attention attached to being at the extreme ends of the birth order hierarchy. Middle children may receive less attention compared with the oldest and youngest siblings within a family but, as Jack reminds us, there can be advantages attached to not being the first child and learning from your older sibling:

I can take up on points that my brother makes. 'Cos I can get tips off my brother 'cos he's been through things, he's sort of set the path and he can give me tips and stuff. And I'm not the youngest, I'm not the wee brat in the family. (Jack 15, middle)

Compared with oldest and youngest siblings, middle children showed a greater range of positive and negative aspects in relation to their birth order position because their role entailed being both an older and younger sibling, thereby involving benefits and limitations attached to each. They tended to express relatively positive comments about their location in the sibling order which is perhaps a bit surprising given traditional adult negative views of being 'stuck in the middle'.

### **Being the Youngest Sibling**

In this research, the youngest children were between the ages of five and twelve. The majority of youngest siblings considered that there were definite advantages and disadvantages attached to their birth order position: "Sometimes good and sometimes it's bad" (Stuart 6, youngest). Being the youngest typically involved three broad characteristics that had fairly clear cut advantages and disadvantages attached to each of them: having less power, experiencing less autonomy and receiving more attention compared with their older siblings. The biggest disadvantage was clearly outlined by the majority of youngest children as being bossed around by their older siblings:

I just don't like being the youngest 'cos you've got two people older than you and so you've got two people who think they're bigger than you so think they can boss you around so I've got two people that do that. (Martin 11, youngest)

Susan always thinks we are her slaves so we have to do, switch the telly off, put the channel on, put it on, close the door, get stuff, I really hate doing that. (Tom 5, youngest)

The extent to which youngest siblings carried out their older siblings requests varied greatly but what was clear was that older siblings are perceived to have greater levels of social and physical power whether or not this is played out in practice.

Some younger siblings explained that they could be manipulated by threats of having access withdrawn to older siblings' resources: "You really have to do it or else. Like they'll say or else you won't be able to play on playstation on my games ever again or something" (Tom 5, youngest). They can also be at a disadvantage because they are generally physically smaller and not as strong as their older siblings:

They think they can push me around because I'm the smallest and they're bigger, so they think they're better than me which gets me annoyed. (Joseph 11, youngest)

I usually lose when we're having a rough and tumble. (Stuart 6, youngest)

Some of the youngest siblings try to fight back but it is rarely successful if it is a physical struggle: "I pulled Julianne's hair and she just pulled mine really tight and lots of my hairs came out" (Yasmine 6, youngest). However, youngest siblings not only have less physical power compared with their older siblings, but their power of language also tends to be more limited:

Strength, Josh isn't that hard to beat but Steven's a lot stronger and he might like, he knows a wee bit more, things come back, if you say like go away he might say something back which you never, he might know some words to get back at you. Not swear words, just like words that have to get you thinking before you can come back at him again. (Mandy 11, youngest)

Many of the youngest siblings recognised that their relative lack of power compared with their older siblings could be compensated by securing greater parental support. Generally, parents were perceived as being more likely to intervene in a fight or an argument in order to offer greater protection to the youngest sibling: "my mum says 'stop it he's only young'" (Joseph 11, youngest). Another upside to youngest siblings' relatively limited social and physical power within the birth order hierarchy is that they are less likely to get into trouble with their parents: "My mum and dad wouldn't shout at me, well they did but not that much, they shouted at my sisters more" (Yasmine 6, youngest).

The second key disadvantage to being the youngest sibling is their relative lack of autonomy and independence compared with their older siblings. Many youngest siblings talked about their frustration of not being able to do the same activities as their older brothers and sisters, which is linked to age and size restrictions as well as to notions of age-appropriate behaviour:

Sometimes it's all right but sometimes it's pretty annoying 'cos like say we go to a theme park when we're on holiday and there's like an age limit on the rides and they're older and they can go on it and I can't and it gets me annoyed. (Joseph 11, youngest)

The disadvantage is that like they're doing all these cool sort of sports and stuff that I can't do ... Well it's like if they're going somewhere for their birthday that's like twelve and up or something then I can't do it, or something like that. (Jason 10, youngest)

Furthermore, many children indicated that parents tend not to allow younger siblings to be as geographically mobile as their older siblings: "There's one thing bad about being the youngest - I'm not allowed to go into town on my own. I once went in with Paul but that's about the only time" (Alan 11, youngest). As Alan indicates, younger siblings can be enabled to do things if their older siblings accompany them. In addition, several youngest children recognised that they tended to end up doing activities earlier than their older siblings had been able to because they are benefiting by following the paths already trodden by their older brothers and sisters: "Sometimes it can be all right because ... I get to stay up later than they would at my age" (Douglas 9, youngest). Youngest children tended to be aware that their parents were more lenient towards them in terms of the amount of autonomy they have as well as the amount of discipline they receive. This at times eased some of the frustrations of not being able to engage in the same things as their older siblings.

Having less autonomy could be difficult to accept for many of the youngest siblings, but the positive side was that they had less responsibility and fewer expectations in terms of sibling care, housework and domestic duties, and homework:

Well I actually feel OK I think I'm the best when I'm youngest 'cos I don't really have to do that much work. Because Angus, well, he has to do a lot of work and I like being the smallest for about two reasons. First reason because I always get to play and don't have to do that much things. Second, well, when I'm helping I don't really have to do that much 'cos they've done most of the stuff. (Richard 8, youngest)

The majority of youngest siblings agreed that one of the best things about being the youngest was that they tended to get the most attention as being the smallest one in the family:

Well it's all right because you get a bit spoiled by like grannies and grandpas and things. (Douglas 9, youngest)

It's quite good because like you get pampered quite a lot. Like they would just like brush my teeth for me or something. (Kathryn 9, youngest)

Youngest children considered receiving the most attention to be a positive aspect to their location in the birth order. However, their older siblings did not always agree with this view and felt that it could result in their youngest sibling being too spoilt and acting too 'childishly'. At times this led to younger siblings being rejected as playmates by their older siblings:

Well being the youngest, the older ones like, some of the older ones of my friend because I'm young they think it's not cool to be playing with the young one so it's unfair sometimes. (Beatrice 7, youngest)

Thus although the youngest siblings may receive most attention from parents and from other relatives, this was not always the case with their older siblings who at times perceived their younger siblings to have less social status. This process of older siblings distancing themselves and excluding younger siblings from their social group would be 'in order to shore up the construction of a new and tenuous 'grown-up' identity' (Edwards et al., 2006: 51).



## Negotiating the age and birth order hierarchies

Therefore, as we have seen, the distinct birth order positions offer particular traits which do at times lead to siblings experiencing different treatment from each other or from their parents in particular. However, there were also many exceptions where siblings did not conform to the expected characteristics of the birth order hierarchy. For example, some older siblings considered that their younger siblings could learn from their experiences: “you know I can test the limits whereas Rosemary, you know will have learned from, she can kind of learn from my mistakes” (Heather 16, oldest). In contrast, Tony is not convinced that his younger siblings do learn from his experiences: “People will say that if you're oldest they're supposed to like look up to you and stuff and like learn from you but they don't” (Tony 15, oldest). This indicates the variety of sibling responses and that whilst some patterns exist in relation to the expectations and roles of being the oldest, there are no set configurations regarding how these are played out in children's everyday lives.

Therefore, recognised roles and expectations surround different birth order positions but, just as Finch and Mason found in their research on family responsibilities, these have to be *worked out* in everyday interactions, and ... ‘thus become a matter for negotiation between individuals and not just a matter of following normative rules’ (Finch and Mason 1993: 12). A common thread throughout the data was that there is recognition amongst the children that a birth order hierarchy does exist, even though in practice it is often not respected. For example, many children acknowledged that older siblings tended to be ‘bossier’ than younger siblings, but their demands were regularly resisted or negotiated (see also McIntosh and Punch, 2009):

- Rhoda: Well, nobody bosses you around or anything... Well, I think sometimes they try but they're not really successful. Because I just say 'oh you're younger than me'
- Sam: So it's more successful if you boss them?
- Rhoda: Yeah I think, none of us can boss each other around really, or that just ends up in an argument usually. ... It's just cos they're used to me I think. And they know I can't really do anything else to them. They know there's nothing I can do to force them to do something. (Rhoda 12, oldest)

Compared with child-parents relations, there are greater power struggles and increased resistance within the intra-generational sibling relationship. Elsewhere I have shown that the power siblings attempt to wield over each other is less effective and that ‘ultimately children are more likely to cooperate with or cede to parental power’ (Punch, 2005: 185). Although the nature of the ways that power is played out amongst siblings is more reciprocal and quite different from that between children and parents, this paper has highlighted that there are certain traits which are linked more to one birth order position than another. For example, in the birth order hierarchy the oldest sibling is generally perceived to be the bossiest one and the youngest can be considered as the most annoying one: “My brother's annoying and bullies but my sister's the more annoying one” (Barry 9, middle). Similarly, Craig as the middle child talks about the difficulty of being in between a bullying and annoying sibling:

... you can't really pick on anyone. Cos Roxanna is really annoying and she's just really annoying, and Gareth will just beat you up, so it's like you don't have anyone to... You can't really take your anger out on Gareth cos he'll just beat you up, whereas Roxanna you can, but you couldn't do it for that long cos she'll remember something and she'll annoy you about it. (Craig 11, middle)

These socially constructed roles relate to the nature of power and social status within the birth order hierarchy. Oldest siblings are at an advantage in terms of social and physical power compared with their younger siblings. Physical power is linked to the relative size and strength of siblings where

the oldest tends to be bigger and stronger, whereas social power tends to refer to the wider knowledge which older siblings are more likely to possess through their greater life experience. Consequently younger siblings use a range of tactics in order to assert some power over their older siblings. One such strategy is to take advantage of the greater attention they tend to receive from relatives and parents, and play up to their role as the 'baby' in the family. They may use this to get their older siblings into more trouble as they are aware that their parents are more likely to allow them 'to get away with more' compared with their older siblings who are expected to be more responsible. As we saw earlier, several older siblings said that their parents expected them to behave more 'maturely' and not to retaliate in arguments with younger siblings. The oldest sibling in particular is expected to be more responsible: "my mum says he's meant to be the grown up" (Pat 12, youngest) and younger siblings often use this in order to call on their parents' help during sibling disputes:

Pat: Well, they can, my older brothers, they usually go out more and they get the phone more.

If I want to use the phone, they can just fight me off. ... They're more stronger than me.

Sam: How do you cope with that?

Pat: I just usually tell mum. ... It's quite good because if I get annoyed and he starts getting annoyed, I usually get my way! ... I suppose 'cos they get in trouble 'cos they're meant to be more mature and everything. (Pat 12, youngest)

Thus, some youngest siblings manipulate their more vulnerable position in the birth order to acquire parental support so that they are able to counteract some of their older siblings' power. They have a range of tactics in order to assert some power over their older siblings so do not passively accept their position at the bottom of the sibling hierarchy. Younger siblings may also use being spoilt and receiving additional treats in order to gloat to their older siblings, in particular when they know they are doing things at an earlier age compared with their older siblings. These strategies of counteracting some of the older siblings' power, can be perceived by older siblings as particularly irritating. Hence, youngest siblings' key weapon in sibling power struggles can be their ability to be exceptionally annoying and wind up their older siblings: "She was just pestering me, popping up behind me and kept on grabbing my feet and trying to pull me off my chair and things" (Nicola 14, middle).

Therefore, youngest children may consider that receiving the most attention and being spoilt is a positive feature to their birth order position whereas older siblings are likely to perceive it negatively. This may lead to the view that the youngest sibling can be the most annoying even though it may also be one of the ways in which they are able to fight back at their older siblings. In some ways, this is not dissimilar to the oldest sibling being perceived as the 'bossiest' one. The oldest siblings tend to consider their potential ability to boss their younger siblings around as a positive feature of their birth order position, but their younger siblings rarely perceive this as a beneficial trait. Consequently the perceived benefits of a particular birth order position may be considered negatively by those in other birth order locations.

In practice it can be difficult for siblings to live up to the perceived traits of their birth order position. For example, as Rhoda points out, at times it could be very difficult for older siblings to fulfil parental expectations in relation to the responsibility attached to their birth order role:

I think if we had an argument cos I'm meant to know not to argue as much. Like if somebody says something, I should just ignore them, but I don't usually! ... If the boys are arguing, I should just try and stop them. But if I'm involved, I'll just carry it on usually. (Rhoda 12, oldest)

For Rhoda, it is particularly difficult as she is only two years older than her younger brother, so she feels that an automatic distinction between them both is not always helpful. Her following quotation acknowledges the parental expectations often placed on older siblings as well as her own expectations in having some kind of authority over her younger brothers. Interestingly she recognises that in practice these expectations and characteristics attached to the birth order positions are not played out in a straightforward manner during everyday sibling interactions. Finally she also indicates that there are a range of both positive and negative aspects in relation to her location at the top of the birth order hierarchy:

Well, I think mum and dad expect me to be more responsible for some things and more mature and things but Jeremy's only about two years younger than me, I don't think there's that much difference, well there is, but not that much. I think that I get the blame for most things and stuff like that. But cos you think that you can boss them around but you can't. I don't know if that's just because they're used to it or, erm, used to me bossing them and they'll just ignore me but you can't really. But when you're the oldest, if you make the effort, they are quite nice back, and you can give them advice and stuff because you're the oldest, like school and things like that. (Rhoda 12, oldest)

This quotation illustrates that there are particular expectations and roles which are linked to different birth order positions but that in practice the ways these emerge in everyday interactions between siblings is not fixed. A key feature of sibling interaction is that children regularly do 'deals', 'barter' and negotiate with each other (McIntosh and Punch, 2009). Thus, the birth order and age hierarchies do not automatically reflect the flows of unequal power between older and younger siblings. Common currencies of exchange in sibling negotiations include goods such as sweets, toys or the use of computer games or CD players; services and favours such as carrying out chores or guarding secrets; and money. These items are often used by both older and younger siblings in order to persuade a brother or sister to do something for them; payment for their time or labour (McIntosh and Punch, 2009). Sibling power struggles involve a mixture of conflict, negotiation and compromise (Punch, 2008), highlighting the complexity and dynamism of the different ways in which age, status and birth order are played out in everyday interactions.

### **The contingent nature of the birth order hierarchy**

This research emphasises that different locations in the birth order are socially constructed in particular ways and that, to a certain extent, they are perceived to have distinct characteristics. Each birth order position has relative advantages and disadvantages attached to it, but in practice the ways in which these emerge and are managed depend on a range of factors, including individual competencies and preferences, gender, age gaps, sibling composition and parental intervention. Throughout this paper examples of sibling interactions have pointed to the contingent nature of the birth order hierarchy. Giles' comment below illustrates this:

You've always got to be the more responsible one, you'll get away with less because you're the oldest and everything so. Good things: you get more trust from mum and everything, you're allowed out and she'll probably sometimes take your word for things and other times she won't so it entirely depends on things. (Giles 14, oldest)

Whilst he recognises that the responsibility of his role tends to lead to greater trust from his mother, it would not be automatic and would depend on the particular social context. This example emphasises the contingent nature of the advantages and disadvantages that are attached to the different birth order roles.

The extent to which typical characteristics of the birth order emerge in sibling practices may depend on children's particular competencies, resources available for bargaining and parental intervention. In addition, it may also depend on the sibling composition in relation to gender and age gaps. For example, an older girl and an older boy, whose middle siblings were close in age, suggested that there was not much difference in their roles because of the smaller age gap: "I don't really think there's much difference, at least in us, cos we're all fairly close in age, just a couple of years between us" (Paul 15, oldest). However, several other oldest siblings indicated that perhaps there *should not* be so much difference because of the small age gap between themselves and the next sibling, but in practice their parents tended to treat them differently:

- Gareth: I hate being the oldest 'cos parents say "be responsible, you're the oldest, you're not 9" or whatever age Roxanna is. ... they say "you should be responsible and not argue and stuff. Be more mature"
- Sam: What do you think about that?
- Gareth: Well, it's not really fair. Craig is nearly my age and he never gets that. (Gareth 13, oldest)

Gender compositions of sibling groups also influenced how older and younger siblings could be perceived. For example, at times it could be difficult being the only boy or only girl in a family but this could also have its advantages:

I think it's slightly unfair that she gets more choices than us, like all she needs to do with our dad is just turn her little blue eyes on him and she gets whatever she wants... And I feel it's really unfair because whenever I used to try on our daddy just said shut up Barry or I'm trying to watch something Barry.... I think it is because she's the youngest and she's the only girl. (Barry 9, middle)

Some children suggested that they would rather their older or younger siblings were the opposite sex so that there would be gender matching between them: "It's a bit better to have an older brother cos then they can do things with you and they're a boy, it's a boy as well" (Edward 9, middle). In particular being the only girl or the only boy in the family may lead to some extra attention from parents but may also result in being 'ganged up on' by the other two same-sex siblings. Therefore, age gaps and gender are sometimes important and other times less so. Different families uphold or challenge age and birth order hierarchies to different degrees depending on the particular social context and on a range of factors, including children's competencies and preferences, available resources for bargaining, parenting style and parental intervention, sibling composition, gender and age gaps. Hence, the recognisable traits of the sibling order will vary both across and within families.

## Conclusions

Until recently the status hierarchy of the birth order has been perceived as ascribed and fixed rather than socially constructed, thus this paper contributes to recognising the importance of social context and children's own understandings of the sibling order (Edwards et al., 2006). The paper has explored some of the opportunities and constraints that are linked to different positions in the birth order during childhood. What is interesting to note is that the children's responses indicated a wide range of both advantages and disadvantages for each birth order position. No position was clearly perceived to be more beneficial than others. Only a minority of children were particularly negative about their own location in the sibling order, and the majority of siblings considered that there were both benefits and limitations in relation to their own position. However, several children commented that it was difficult to know whether they preferred their own position in the birth order because they had not experienced the other locations:

That's pretty impossible... because you've never been the oldest and you've never been the youngest. If you had 24 hours being each it would be easier. I quite like being the middle one 'cos I don't know about the other two. (Christian 8, middle)

Although some of the children were not sure which position they might prefer if they had a choice, this research has shown that, in families with three children, the siblings perceived that there are clear benefits and limitations to being the oldest and youngest sibling. For example, generally it was recognised by all the children that there are advantages to being older because of the oldest's relatively more powerful birth order position, such as wider knowledge and life experience, greater size and physical strength, and the social power they get from their enhanced status and responsibility. However, there were also a range of disadvantages attached to each of these potential benefits including being more likely to get into trouble with parents, being expected to set a good example, having to look after younger siblings and often being the first child in the family to undergo particular childhood experiences. Similarly, as we have seen, there are some clear advantages to being the youngest sibling, including getting the most attention, having the least responsibility, being looked out for by older siblings, and getting away with more with their parents. Each of these benefits are counterbalanced by a similar range of disadvantages: being bossed around, having relatively less social and physical power, less autonomy and not being allowed to do what their older siblings do which sometimes results in feelings of being left out. It is also important to bear in mind that some features of birth order positions can be perceived positively by some siblings and negatively by others, and some characteristics involve both advantages and disadvantages for the same sibling.

The benefits and limitations attached to the middle sibling are relative to the fact that middle children can take on both older and younger sibling roles in relation to each of their older and younger brothers and sisters. However, it is interesting that generally middle children do not perceive themselves as being the most hard done by, suffering from their sandwiched role in between the oldest and youngest. On the contrary, most middle children considered that their position enabled them to experience the advantages of being both an older and a younger sibling, thereby having the 'best of both worlds'. This challenges the popular adult assumption that this position is the most difficult as such children are 'stuck in the middle' (Berthoud, 1996; Conley, 2004).

Nevertheless, not all middle children saw their role in a more positive light. Barry's comments sum up some of the difficulties of being in the middle and indicate the diversity of children's responses as well as highlighting that there are strengths and weaknesses in relation to each of the birth order positions:

Ashley thinks it's bad being the oldest because you get all the responsibility. Beatrice thinks it's bad to be the bottom because you're the ones who gets bullied but being in the middle I reckon's the worst because you're getting annoyed by your little sister and bullied by your big brother so you're getting both annoyed and bullied at the same time. And if both are in the same room Beatrice is fussing about can she play with something and Ashley's sometimes bullying me. And Ashley I reckon thinks it's good to be the oldest because he always pretends to be a grown up like telling me off as though he thinks he's a grown up. And Beatrice thinks it's good to be the little one because she gets good excuses for everything, she always gets let off. (Barry 9, middle)

This quotation reveals some of the key concerns of this paper which has brought to light issues of power, status and the birth order hierarchy that are central to the children's experiences of sibling relations. It has been argued that younger siblings can employ particular tactics such as using

knowledge about an older sibling in order to encourage them to carry out a particular task: “She seems to be more devious than Josh so I mean she like, she’s got blackmail on her side sometimes” (Steven 15, oldest). Younger siblings may tend to have less physical power and authority compared with their older siblings, but they draw on a range of strategies in order to subvert and resist the power imbalances of the age and birth order hierarchies. Similarly, older siblings recognise that their positioning at the top of the sibling order, does not automatically grant them advantages and authority over their younger brothers and sisters. They also have to work to put potential benefits of their position into practice as younger siblings tended not to passively accept the older sibling’s role. Thus, oldest siblings also acknowledged that bribes and bartering would often have to be used during sibship interactions (McIntosh and Punch, 2009).

Therefore, although birth order is important in shaping children’s experiences of sibship, the relative advantages and disadvantages of each position have to be managed on a daily basis in their interactions with each other. The characteristics of the different sibling order positions are diverse and complex: they may be enabling or constraining or both, but they are not fixed. This paper has shown that age and birth order hierarchies are flexible and dynamic, often subject to negotiation, compromise and resistance as well as acceptance and compliance.

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<sup>1</sup> The sample does not include families from minority ethnic groups which is partly a reflection of their distribution of 1.6% in the total Scottish population (Scottish Office, 1999).