



## Treating Children as Individuals

Do you treat all your children alike? Probably not. You should relate to and treat each youngster differently. Treating each child as an individual is part of what makes that child a unique person and is a way of appreciating his special characteristics.

A husband and wife become and learn how to be parents with their first child, who for a while is their only child. As a result, their relationship with that first child will be different from their relationships with subsequent children. Since parents develop and learn along with their children, parents' actions, conversational style, and displays of emotion will change with each new youngster.

Not only do parents change their style as they gain experience raising children, but each youngster has his or her own style and needs, initially because of birth order and inborn traits, and later because of experiences. Older children need to be treated differently from younger ones. High-strung children need different approaches than do easygoing ones. On every issue—rules, expectations, chores, responsibilities, rewards, and punishment—parents must individualize their parenting while trying to remain fair to all. This last goal is nearly impossible to achieve. Even if parents interact with their youngsters in a comparable manner, each child may perceive these actions differently.

Your behavior toward your children is determined in part by the age and developmental stage of each youngster. For example, you probably have tended to treat all your children in a somewhat similar way at the same age or level of development. A mother may be physically affectionate to her two children in their respective toddler years but less visibly affectionate when they reach school age. In a situation like this, the older child may perceive that the younger sibling is receiving more affection. Parents should treat children differently at different ages; problems occur when parents are not able to act appropriately for their child's developmental age and needs.

Birth order and family size also influence your children's development. The experience of an only child is different from that of a child in a larger family. An older child's experience is different from a younger one's: The older child has a younger sibling, while the younger child has an older sibling. A third child has two older siblings, and so on. Because of birth order and family size, no two children experience the same family the same way.

The birth order of your children also will affect the way you relate to them, the way they respond, the experiences they have, and thus the way they develop as individuals. For instance, firstborn children may feel neglected or unloved after the arrival of a new sibling. Though their parents may expect or at least hope for them to be more responsible and self-sufficient, firstborns may act younger or more babylike in order to attract parental attention. In turn, the parents may express frustration or anger with them because of their babyish behavior.

The temperaments of each parent and each child influence the way each interacts with the other. A parent whose temperament fares best with order and predictability could find raising a disorganized, spontaneous, impulsive child a daily challenge. On the other hand, easygoing parents and children can readily make allowances for one another.

Each pair of family members has a unique relationship. A child relates in different ways to his father and to his mother. His sibling relates to each parent in his or her own way. Each sibling relates to each brother or sister in a particular way. Children are quite sensitive to these differences within family relationships; they monitor them, respond to them, and relate to one another in a manner based upon the nature of their experiences and how they perceive them.

Therefore, some of the differences among siblings reflect how they perceive their roles and relationships within their families—how they have been loved, appreciated, respected, and understood. These factors can influence their self-confidence, sense of trust, and ability to cope with challenges and disappointments.

Over the years the relationships among siblings can contribute to increasing differences. Siblings compete for the affection and attention of their parents; they may compare themselves with one another, become aware of one another's strengths and weaknesses, and try to find the most comfortable and rewarding role for themselves within the family unit. In this dynamic interaction, differences develop and can become more pronounced with time, affecting everything from self-esteem and behavioral style to life goals and career choices.

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[Back to Top](#)

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