

Bossiness in Firstborn Girls

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The social interactions of 40 firstborn girls and 40 firstborn boys was observed in 20-min play periods when they were paired with younger children. Bossiness was rated by two independent judges from videotapes of the sessions. Girls were significantly more bossy than were boys, and the highest mean was observed when firstborn girls were playing with younger girls.

Birth order of children is alleged to have considerable influence on their personality development (Schwartz & McNair, 1982). Firstborn children, particularly sons, have traditionally occupied a privileged place in families and in society. Historical laws of primogeniture favored the firstborn in the inheritance of properties and titles. In families, the firstborn becomes the centerpiece whose every move and developmental advance is celebrated. Firstborn children are doted upon and are given as many advantages as the family can afford. The place or rank of those who are first born is guaranteed by the fact of their being, whereas later-born children have to "try harder" to establish their place. For many crucial years, the firstborn is bigger, knows more, and possesses more than younger siblings. Younger children have to make do with hand-me-downs from older siblings who have outgrown clothes and toys. Studies by Polard and McQuirry (1976), Engles (1980), and Thurbridge and Caruthers (1985) have all found differences in temperament and personality in firstborns compared with later-borns.

Of special interest in the present study are differences in the ways that firstborn children relate to other children. As stated by Flynn (1965), "Firstborns who have younger siblings are used to dominating and having their way. They jealously guard their rank as *numero uno*" (p. 84).

The form that this domination takes appears to differ in boys and girls. Boys tend to dominate physically, to "throw their weight around" literally and figuratively (Milsap, 1969, p. 18). By contrast, girls tend to dominate verbally by ordering their younger siblings around. According to Ebel (1963), they become bossy

as a way of guarding and enforcing their dominant position. As Ebel (1963) described it, "Boys stand up and challenge all-comers with sharp-swords as King of the Hill, whereas girls use sharp tongues to organize things to their own advantage as Queen of the Castle" (p. 99). These views may appear sexist by today's standards, yet they probably contain more than a kernel of truth.

The word *bossy* has several meanings. As a noun it is an endearing term for a cow. There is no doubt, however, of its pejorative meaning when used in its adjectival form to describe the behavior of people. This distinction is epitomized in the old Scottish saying, "Better a lazy bossy than a bossy lassie." People are regarded as bossy when they adopt the worst qualities of a boss by being dictatorial, high-handed, arrogant, overbearing, domineering, and officious in their use of power.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether firstborn girls are indeed bossy and, if so, whether they are bossier than firstborn boys. Cognizant of the possibility that the behavior of girls might vary as a function of the gender of the person with whom they are interacting (the protagonist), gender is made into an independent variable in this research. The prediction is that firstborn girls are bossier than boys, and particularly so when the protagonist is of the same gender.

Method

Participants

A total of 40 girls and 40 boys, ages 4 to 5 years, participated in this research; all of them were firstborn and had at least one younger sibling. The children were recruited from five pri-

NOTE: This is a fictional article to be used only for purposes of research education.

vate preschools in Orange County, California. Parents of these children were mostly affluent, college graduates who occupied professional or managerial positions. Parents were approached through PTA meetings, and all volunteered the participation of their children. Parents signed a consent form and were promised a full report of the findings at a future PTA meeting. Parents were assured that the performance of individual children would remain confidential. All children were number coded for purposes of data analysis.

Protagonists were 3- and 4-year-old younger siblings of the study participants. They were not placed in interaction with their own siblings in order to see whether behavior patterns generalized outside of the family.

Setting and Play Sessions

Attractively decorated playrooms, approximately 10' × 10', were equipped with assorted toys and were set aside in each school for study purposes. Two strategically placed video recorders unobtrusively recorded the interactions within the room. Each firstborn child was paired with another younger and unrelated child. The two were introduced to each other and were instructed to play while their mothers were "right outside talking to the teacher." Half ($n = 20$) of the firstborn girls were paired with other girls, and half ($n = 20$) were paired with boys. Half of the firstborn boys ($n = 20$) were paired with boys, and half ($n = 20$) were paired with girls. Sessions lasted 20 min.

Ratings and Raters

Ratings of bossiness were made from the videotapes. A Checklist of Bossy Behaviors was constructed for this research. It included such behaviors as (a) tells other what to do, (b) tells other what not to do, (c) tells other how to do something, (d) insists on having own way, (e) claims possession of toy or game, (f) makes demands on other, (g) verbally intimidates other, (h) puts other down, (i) behaves in overbearing, dictatorial manner, and so on. Specific examples were given to differentiate "telling" or "commanding" from "suggesting." An example of suggesting was, "Would you like to play house with me?" An example of "telling-com-

manding" was, "Let's play house. I'll be the mother, you'll be the baby." Parallel examples were furnished for other bossy behaviors.

One male and one female psychology major served as raters in return for course credit for participating in research. They were given orientation about how to rate and were asked to study the manual before beginning. Ratings were made independently by the two raters at different times. They had access to stop-start replay apparatus so that they could back up to take another look at a scene if they needed to make sure of what had transpired.

The tapes (all of which were 20 min in length) were divided by markers into 20-s segments. There were thus 60 segments in each tape. Raters were asked to circle Yes or No to the question, "Did the older child (the older child had been identified by a head-on camera shot that appeared at the beginning of the tape) initiate bossy behavior in this segment?" If there were more than one incident per segment, it was counted as only one. An incident that was continued from the preceding segment was not counted again. When the data were collated, behavior during a segment was considered as bossy only when both raters agreed that it was. Total scores could range from 0 (no bossy behavior) to 60 (bossy behavior initiated in all segments).

Results

Data were treated in a 2 × 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA). Tests of skew, kurtosis, and homogeneity of variance met ANOVA assumptions. The respective means for girls and boys were 27.5 and 19.63 (see Table 1). As predicted, the highest mean, 30.5, was obtained by girls when playing with younger girls. This is in contrast to their mean of 24.5 when playing with

Table 1
Mean Bossiness Ratings of Participants When Playing With Boys and Girls

Participants	Protagonists		<i>M</i>
	Girls	Boys	
Girls	30.50	24.50	27.50
Boys	20.50	19.20	19.63
<i>M</i>	25.28	21.85	23.56

Table 2
Two-Factor Analysis of Variance of Participants' and Protagonists' Gender

Source of Variation	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F
Participant gender	1	990.312	990.312	10.694**
Protagonist gender	1	234.613	234.613	2.533
Participant Gender × Protagonist Gender	1	382.613	382.613	4.131*
Error	76	7,038.150	92.607	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

boys. A Tukey test revealed this difference to be statistically significant, $p < .01$. The means for boys were 20.5 when interacting with girls and 19.2 when interacting with other boys. As can be seen in Table 2, girls were significantly more bossy than were boys, $F(1, 76) = 10.694$, $p < .01$. Table 2 and Figure 1 indicate that the Participant Gender × Protagonist Gender interaction was significant, $F(1, 76) = 4.131$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to test the hypothesis that firstborn girls, as a group, have a distinctive character trait of bossiness. When contrasted to firstborn boys, this proved to be the case: The data clearly show that firstborn girls are significantly more bossy than firstborn boys. The bossiness ratings of the girls were higher when they were interacting with other girls than they were when interacting with boys. These data support the experimental hypotheses and lend credence to the formulations of Ebel (1963) and Milsap (1969). Not only does birth order make a difference in the trait under inquiry, but it has a differential effect on boys and girls.

We must keep in mind that we were dealing here with preschool children. It would be of

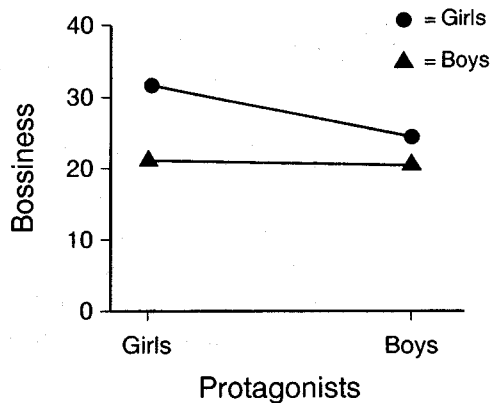


Figure 1. Mean bossiness scores by subject gender and protagonist gender.

interest in future research to extend the finding to other age groups. Only-children, although firstborn, were intentionally excluded from the study, but it would be illuminating to see whether they share the same behavioral characteristic of bossiness shown by firstborn girls who have younger siblings. It would also be worthwhile to develop a program of intervention that could ameliorate this type of behavior in firstborn girls.

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