The Youngest Child's Guide to Survival

And Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Being the youngest child in the family is not an easy position to hold. The lastborn is often prone to teasing or bullying from older siblings, and they are often overlooked or underestimated by family members. I am the youngest child in my family, and have often told my stories of the terrors that I as a lastborn had to endure. This thesis is a collection of many of those stories, along with the research I have done on birth order and its effect on a child’s personality. I will outline research of the effects that birth order has on a lastborn’s personality, and then follow with my own personal account of my difficulties as the youngest child.
Acknowledgements

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- I would also like to thank my family, without whom I would have no stories to tell.
Creative Thesis Rationale

"The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way."

John Ruskin

As I reflect back on my college career, a mere five weeks from graduation, I can think of many achievements of which I am proud. Staying in the Honors College and maintaining a high GPA have involved countless hours of studying, writing papers, preparing for exams, then taking them and worrying about what grade I received. But throughout my four years here at Ball State University and my five months of study abroad at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia, my studies have been based primarily on learning what others have discovered. I have done innumerable research papers in which I have had to cite a different source every other sentence. I have taken tests based on books written by experts, and have created projects that reflect the ideas of many great minds. However, aside from an Honors class or two, my course instructors have never asked me to explore my own thinking. I have never been asked to describe my family's structure or to try to discover why I am the way I am. And while I have gained a great deal of knowledge from my classes, I have never really stopped to reflect on my own personal life and how everything I have learned is related to me.

Through my thesis, I have been able to do just that. I was able to look back on my childhood experiences and explore a facet of the college curriculum in which I had never been encouraged to be involved—creative writing. While I
did use research from outside sources, I was actually able to apply it to my own life, and that was a significant and fulfilling experience. I will carry this thesis with me forever, and despite the previous four and a half years' worth of knowledge, this thesis is my favorite lesson Ball State has given me. It has taught me about myself, and that lesson is invaluable.

It is not easy to be the lastborn child in a family. Lastborns are prone to teasing or bullying from older siblings, and they are often overlooked or underestimated by parents. Because I am the youngest in my family, I can appreciate the trials that these children face. For years, I have shared my stories with friends and family, looking for a laugh or sometimes a sympathetic nod. Now, as I watch my nieces and nephews grow up, I can see the youngest experiencing the same things I did: being ignored, taken for granted, and continuously trying to step out of the shadow cast by a bigger, stronger, faster older sibling. I can sympathize with them and their struggle, and I try to offer them encouragement, usually followed by something like, "Well, at least your brother didn't (insert horrible act here) like mine did."

As I began to examine my childhood with a view to writing this thesis, I began doing research on the impact that birth order has on personality. I found most of it to be eerily accurate in assessing my character. For example, one source describes lastborns as being family clowns and outgoing charmers who use humor as a way of securing parents' attention ("Your Birth Order"). I then realized that I was indeed the clown in my family, and that I often used humorous stories (ironically, those which drew upon my experiences as the youngest child)
to capture my parents’ attention. Also, lastborns are characteristically the most financially irresponsible in the family (“Personality Traits”). It is actually a running joke among my family that I have accrued the most debt (the vast majority of which is owed to my father) throughout my college career. And the parallels do not stop there. Children with a certain birth order tend to mimic the parent who shares that birth order (Sulloway). My father, also a lastborn, was in a great deal of debt until he met my firstborn mother, who quickly took control of the finances.

As I learned more about birth order research, I gained a broader perspective on myself. My thesis, therefore, is a collection of stories from my youth, preceded by research describing typical lastborns and how they may have been affected by their birth order. I simply took a bit of research and told a childhood story to match. For example, I quoted a line from Dr. Kevin Leman’s The Birth Order Book, which advised parents to encourage their lastborns, as those children are the ones who feel the most unimportant. I then told a story of how I had always been a sucker for praise and had cleaned my plate to get recognized by my parents as being a “good eater.” I also added that it was probably this regular occurrence that made me the “big-boned” girl in the family.

Originally, I had planned on my audience being a younger group, from the ages of 10 to about 16. However, after researching the target market of other books similar to mine, I found that adults as old as 85 enjoy humorous anecdotes. And age is not always in direct proportion to maturity; as one source notes, the lastborn tends to always be known as the “baby” of the family, and is the most likely to “still have a pet name although he’s 29 and has a masters
degree" ("Personality Traits"). Therefore, lastborns of any age can appreciate my stories, no matter how juvenile.

To be shamefully honest, I originally thought that this thesis would be an enjoyable—and easy—endeavor. However, I found that writing creatively takes much more preparation and skill than writing a research paper. I read countless books of short stories, from *Chicken Soup for the College Soul* to *Front Porch Tales*. I then jumped into books about writing and online research on how to write a bibliography. I learned more about passive verbs and improperly used adjectives than one person should ever know. (In fact, many sources advised against flowery language, and emphasized simply getting the point across, which is my justification for this rationale not being the typical 7-12 pages.) I had to choose a target audience before I even began writing, and I found that my writing style changed once my target audience did. I found myself writing as though I was going to be graded on grandiloquent content, and revised my words to make them more easily understood by a larger, more diverse audience.

My major is Hospitality and Food Service Management. I have found that professors in those areas are not very interested to hear my thoughts on cost control or sanitation regulations, and therefore, I have not had much creative writing practice. This forced me to learn creative writing techniques, and to practice writing for hours before even beginning on my story. I learned how to write without thinking, which is more difficult than it sounds. Some of my creative ramblings have become a cherished journal, and have inspired me to keep writing daily.
I used Elizabeth Berg’s Escaping into the Open to plan my entire thesis. She had a long list of P’s that I used to organize my writing and keep my focus: purpose, plan, place, perseverance, priorities, privacy, proofreaders, etc. The book took plenty more planning and preparation than I could have perceived. I had my “writing time” each week in which I sat down and wrote about a memory and how the research I had found related to it. My parents and I had a wonderful time exploring old family albums and recounting days of homemade Halloween costumes and childish sibling fights. Our stories, told from two different viewpoints, did not often match—but they were always entertaining. I learned more about how I was as a child, and they learned more about how they were as parents. It was an added bonus to this thesis, another memory to add to the compilation.

That was not the only bonus, however. As I wrote about old memories and related them to my research, I learned more about myself. I was also better able to see myself in other youngest children once I knew what to look for. I feel this thesis will serve as an aid to these other lastborns, to show them that they are not alone, to give them someone else to laugh at and to sympathize with. If I had known growing up that what I was experiencing was normal for lastborns, the teasing and being taken for granted would not have been as difficult. Socrates said, "Employ your time in improving yourself by other men's writings, so that you shall gain easily what others have labored hard for." I want what I have “labored hard for” to be of some use to others.
I was careful, however, to include an afterword that included the following line: "As important as a child's order of birth may be, it is only an influence, not a final fact of life forever set in cement and unchangeable as far as how that child will turn out" (Leman 230). I warned against using birth order as an excuse, or losing hope by believing that one is born into having certain characteristics. I finished with telling what I learned about myself. I learned that my childhood helped to shape me into who I am today. I also learned that, once put into perspective, I had a great childhood. I also learned more about myself by sharing my stories with family. They told their sides to those stories, and I learned about myself by learning how others saw me.

I did not include other things that I learned during the course of this thesis. For example, I learned that "creative" does not by any means imply "easy." I learned that those authors who appear on "Oprah" do indeed work hard enough to deserve to meet the talk show wonder. I found that my reason for wanting to write about my childhood memories fell onto the side of "good reasons to write an autobiography"—to leave a message to future generations, to pass on my heritage, to process experiences, and to share what and who I am ("How to Write"). I found that through my writing, I have learned more about myself. I think E.B. White best captured the beauty of creative writing: "All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation—it is the self escaping into the open."
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Introduction

I should start by saying that I had a wonderful childhood. I grew up in a small town in Indiana, and had a loving family who raised me well. I would not take back one single experience, nor would I trade any of the joys—and sorrows—that accompanied my younger years.

That said, I can now move on to what this book is about. I am the youngest child in my family, and with that role comes a good deal of difficulty. The youngest children are the ones who get picked on, who can’t play the games because they are “too little.” They are the smallest for most of their lives, leaving them open to the most abuse and the least attention. It is not easy to be the youngest child.

Now that I am grown, I feel that I should share what I have learned over the years with other youngest children. They should know that they are not the only ones, and that there is hope for a life of getting to do what their siblings can do and being as good at things as grown-ups are. I only hope my wisdom and experience can make a difference in someone’s life, no matter how old he or she may be (because we youngest all know that we shall forever carry the title of “the baby of the family”).

I researched the influence of birth order on personality, and found that the characteristics typically assigned to youngest children go hand in hand with my stories. For example, it has been shown that children who share a birth order with a parent are more likely to become like that parent (Sulloway). Because I share a birth order with my father, we share many similar traits: our attention to detail, our compulsive cleaning habits, etc. This also means that growing up, I received the most sympathy from my father, who could identify with my situation. Therefore, when I really wanted something, I knew which parent to ask. Also, I am known to be
financially irresponsible, which my father was in his youth, and which is also a characteristic of lastborns ("Personality").

The youngest carries a curse of not being taken seriously (Leman 103). As I grew, comments went from “you’re too young to play” to people asking my parents, “is this your baby? I can’t believe she’s in college!” Leman also notes that lastborns are suckers for praise and encouragement (105). I still call my parents to tell them I received an A on a test, just to hear them tell me I’m smart.

Because the later born children are weaker and less smart than older siblings, they must use wheedling and social skills to overcome their disadvantage (Sulloway). I am entering the field of sales, which relies on these skills. Youngest children tend to use humor as a way of securing attention ("Birth Order Personality Traits"). I actually use my humorous stories about being the youngest child to receive attention! www.parenting.com has a birth order personality quiz in which one answers a series of questions, and then is placed in one of the birth orders. I was accurately assigned to the last-born category.

With research to confirm my behaviors and experiences, I feel more confident in knowing that I am not the only one who suffered in my
childhood, and in knowing that there must be others of you out there going through it right now. Read my stories, and know that you’re not alone!
My family is not an overly large one. I have two older sisters and one older brother. Lydia is almost three years older than I—we fought a lot in our childhood years. Ricky, the only boy of the family (therefore making him the king) is seven years older. And Laura, who was always babying me, is the oldest. She is ten years older. My parents are still happily married and we are still a close-knit family. But I learned a lot about them over the years.

Being the youngest often means being sheltered. So often, talk turns to whispers with the words “you’re too young to understand” used as the rationale. Because of this, I was—am—a naïve girl. I had to learn things by accident, or by luck, just being in the right place at the right time. That is how the fateful day came about that changed my perception of my father forever.

My dad (we call him Pop) is one of the kindest people I know, as I suppose most girls would say about their dads. He can eat at a restaurant and before we leave, he’ll have made friends with the owner and the owner’s wife, and the next year they’ll exchange Christmas cards. He was not the
disciplinarian, so I never saw him yelling at or spanking any of us. I thought the world of him.

One day, a little bunny hopped into our yard. Being 6 years old, I was excited and ran to tell whoever would listen that Peter Cottontail was hopping around in our yard. Maybe it was the Easter Bunny! I didn’t know why my parents didn’t share in my excitement, or why my dad reached for my brother’s bb gun. I only remember standing by the door, watching hopelessly as he took a shot at the rabbit, walked towards it, took another shot, kept walking, and finally, with the third shot, the rabbit fell. I screamed and cried and asked him how he could kill an innocent creature. When he saw I was not going to go for his excuse that the rabbit ate the vegetables in our garden, he tried to say “but I was only trying to scare it!” He scared it to death, all right.

I cried all day, and had a funeral, and buried the poor animal. Lydia laughed at me and said I was stupid for caring about something as silly as a rabbit. A few years ago, she and my dad and I went to Paris for spring break. We ate dinner at a friend’s house, and it was delicious. My dad rattled on in French while my sister and I sat, eating. After we had finished, my dad told us that the wonderful meat was rabbit. Some things never change; I felt guilty, and Lydia again laughed at me.
Louie

Every young child wants a dog. I was no exception to this rule, and when I was 10, I begged for a puppy. My parents tried the standard excuses—I wouldn’t take care of him, dogs are too much work, and they’re expensive—and I responded with the standard child responses—I promise I’ll take care of him, they aren’t too much work, and I’ll pay for him. In time, they gave in, and I spent $200 of my money (a child’s whole savings) and just like that, we had Louie.

My brother and sister picked the name. Of course, seeking their approval, I agreed that his full name would be Louis, and we could call him Louie for short. Louie was a caramel-colored cocker spaniel (not the smartest breed of dog) who enjoyed chasing cars, jumping on people, and tormenting the cat. It wasn’t long before, just as predicted, my mother began taking care of him. She cleaned up his messes, she took him for walks, and she tried to train him. Looking back, I don’t remember getting in trouble for not keeping up my end of the bargain, which is why Louie’s fate came as a huge shock to me.

My dad had built a fence in the backyard where Louie could run around. On a day just like any other day, I was playing inside when I looked out a window and saw my parents talking to a lady, and everyone was staring at my dog. Confused, I went outside to see what was going on. As I walked out, my parents avoided making eye contact with me. It was the strange woman who said, “And you can come and visit him on the farm any time you like!” I looked at my parents who laughed nervously, and ran in the house crying.
I found out later that they had put an ad in the paper, behind my back, for a “free” dog. All of my life’s savings were gone for a pet that we had less than a year. I was so upset that I demanded that they buy me a new pet. They agreed on a bird. I never really even wanted Peaches (obviously an orange bird), which is probably why he lived for 8 years. As luck, or irony, would have it, my poor mother ended up taking care of that bird for all those years.
Where’s My Quarter?

On parenting the last born: “Applaud accomplishments...lastborns are well known for feeling that nothing they do is important. Make a big deal out of accomplishments.” (Leman 226)

Being the youngest child often meant finding something I could excel at, and then using that to get praise from my parents. Eating was always one of those things. I remember Lydia, who is a picky eater, always leaving food on her plate. At an early age, I learned that if I finished what was on my plate, my parents would tell me what a good job I had done. I never understood why my grandpa would give Lydia a quarter to finish her plate when I was doing the same thing for free.

For years, I was the “good eater,” which oddly enough also made me the fat kid in the family. My sister stayed petite, and I quickly passed her in size. I continued to take seconds when my mom offered. Suddenly, she quit offering. I would ask for a second helping of garlic bread, and she offered me steamed broccoli instead. I never knew it then, but my parents were actually concerned that I was getting too fat. The doctor told them that I was just “on the high end” of the acceptable weight for my height. So they tried taking me for walks and offering healthier food. If only they’d praised me for leaving food on my plate, I might have been the same size as my sister.

Now that we’re grown, Lydia is still 4 inches
shorter and 30 pounds lighter. I still clean my plate, and I still take seconds when my mom offers, just to make her happy. And once I brought it to his attention, my grandpa made sure to offer me a quarter to clean my plate the next time we ate dinner together.
Never met a stranger

"You're the type of person who never met a stranger; you can immediately make others feel at home...you're energized by the presence of other people." ("Birth Order and Your Personality")

When Lydia and I were younger, we often competed. Because we are so close in age, it was natural that we fought the most—both verbally and physically. I was the more outgoing one; I was never afraid to talk to strangers, I loved petting random dogs as they walked by with their owners, and I wasn’t scared of going underwater (until my brother informed me that if I got too close to the drain at the bottom of the pool, it would suck me under). I was the first to try things, and once Lydia saw that I lived, she would do them too.

But as we grew up, Lydia began to experience things first. As older siblings often do, she paved the way for later curfews and more lenient rules. I learned what to do (and what not to do) by watching all of my siblings, but mostly Lydia. I wore all of her clothes in middle school, I played the same sports in high school, and I went to the same college. As I plan a wedding, I am using her resources and her list of do’s and don’ts. Somewhere along
the line, I found that waiting for someone else to try things first isn't such a bad idea.
"Don’t go again, Mommy"

"Compared to laterborn children, firstborns tend to be...less willing to take risks...as a result, firstborns are overrepresented among American presidents...while laterborns are overrepresented among skydivers and boxers.” (Sulloway)

The youngest child is often pegged as being the risk-taker of the family. I never would have been described as such. I didn’t go to camps because I couldn’t stand leaving my parents for longer than one night. In my early elementary years, I used to cry on Sunday nights because I didn’t want to start the next week at school. It wasn’t because of any traumatic school experiences—I was one of the brightest in my class, I had a lot of friends, and I loved my teacher. I just did not want to leave home.

College was always hard for me. I cried the entire day I moved into the dorms, and after four years, I still cry when I leave my parents’ house to go back to school. Somehow, after never being away from my parents for longer than three weeks, I decided to heed the advice of my favorite college professor—I was going to study abroad.

I chose Perth, Australia, which also happens to be about as close to halfway around the world from Rochester as one can get. It is 11,047 miles away. On my way over, I stopped in Hawaii and New Zealand, where I went skydiving (to fulfill my risk-taker prophecy). I was away from home for six months.

When I returned, my mother told me a story. “When you were about three years old, your dad and I went to Paris for a week and we left you with your aunt. When we returned, you gave me a hug and said, ‘don’t go again, Mommy.’” 18 years later, with tears in her eyes, my mother looked at me, gave me a hug and said, “Don’t go again, Myra.”
Hanging by my shorts

“Characteristics of the last born child: risk takers, outgoing, creative, humorous” ("Birth Order")...and often overlooked.

When I turned three, I became the last child to stay at home during the day with my mom. My older siblings trotted off to school each day, and I would follow my mother around, play by myself, and take a break only for Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers. It is said that parents have less invested in their last child; therefore, they don’t always pay as careful attention to them. I found this to be true one day as I was playing by myself in the backyard on our swing set.

My father built the swing set, and it was wonderful—it held a slide, a tree house, swings and monkey bars. One sunny morning, as I began swinging across the monkey bars, I felt a pull on my shorts. I tried to swing again and found myself hanging from my shorts by a nail. I kicked and screamed and tried to wriggle free, but it was no use. The monkey bars were too far above my head to grab, and I wasn’t strong enough to lift myself up anyway. I just yelled for my mom, who claims that she “couldn’t hear” my cries. I eventually managed to get down, after hanging for a while and ripping the shorts.

As I ran inside, I was crying and told her how she had abandoned me. I remember getting a hug and a “oh honey, I’m so sorry,” and thinking that all the agony had been worth it for the hug.
Getting Lost

I recently went on a cruise with my best friend, Catherine, during my college spring break. On “formal night,” we dressed up in our gowns, spent too long on our hair and make-up, and proceeded to go to the main auditorium along with everyone else on the cruise ship. We were sitting at our table, enjoying our drinks and waiting for everyone to arrive when it happened. Above the thundering noise of people talking and laughing, a voice came over the speakers. It came from a cruise employee, standing near the stage with a small boy of about eight.

“Excuse me folks, can I have your attention, please? We have a little boy here by the name of Tyler Walters. Could someone in his family please come and pick him up?”

Catherine never understood why my eyes got misty as a boy and a girl, several years older than Tyler, ran up to the stage to pick up their crying brother. Over our next cocktail, I explained that I had been that little boy—more than once.

The first time it happened, I was at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry with my parents, my three siblings, two aunts, an uncle, and two cousins. We were having a grand day—as a 7-year-old, I was having an especially good time playing in the children’s area. Our family met at one point in the afternoon to discuss splitting up and meeting again later. As everyone stood in a group, I sat on the bench nearby. I was reading my book as I heard talk of “OK, then you go with me and you go with them and we’ll meet in two hours.” It wasn’t long before I looked up from my book to see whose group I was in, only to find that the group had dispersed. I looked around and saw no one with a familiar face. I was lost.
I ran in one direction and the other, but did not find anyone from my family. So, very calmly, I walked up to the nearest stranger and said, “Excuse me, ma’am. I am lost.” The woman was obviously there with her children, and she started to panic. “Oh! Well, let’s...let’s hurry and get you somewhere and—excuse me, officer! Officer, we have a lost child here!” What I had thought was not a big problem suddenly seemed to be an alarming situation. As the security officer took my hand, I began crying. He offered a gruff, “It’ll be OK, kid—we’ll find your parents,” I became very scared. It had never occurred to me that we wouldn’t find my parents.

The man took me down to what I guess was a lost-and-found booth in the middle of the museum. He handed me over to a tall black woman who said, “Hey, honey. Whasho name?” I mumbled that it was Myra, and she said, “Eh? Margaret?”

“No, Myra,” I corrected, still crying.

“Well, don’t worry, Myra. Someone will come for you sooner or later.”

I’m sure it was sooner, but to me it sure felt like later. I remember seeing my mother frantically running toward the booth, and I ran to her and hugged her and said, “Mommy!” The black security woman, trying to use what she learned in training, asked skeptically, “Is this your mother?” I think that even as a 7-year-old, I just looked at her, confused by the stupid question.

My parents told me later that as everyone was walking around, they happened to meet up again and discovered that one group thought the other one had me, and vice versa. Of all the places to lose me, they had chosen a multi-story building with thousands of people on a Saturday afternoon. Needless to say, my revenge came in their panic.
Then, only six months later, the same thing happened with the same group of family. We went to the beach on Lake Michigan for a fun-filled day of sun and swim. The kids all decided to go in the water to play, and I tagged along. We were having a good time until my brother decided we needed rafts. Not surprisingly, I was nominated to go up to the beach and bring back rafts that would undoubtedly be used by everyone but me.

So, I began my trek up to the beach, began walking straight ahead, and found that we had drifted down the beach as we played. My parents were no longer where I had left them, and in fact, they were nowhere near where I remembered them being. This time, I didn’t even panic—I was a pro at this. I smile now as I think of the poor man who was approached by a chubby little girl in a pink polka-dot swimsuit who informed him that she was lost and needed to be taken to the lost-and-found booth.

This time, my parents didn’t run to get me as they heard their names being paged over the speakers. They scolded my siblings, who were forced to play with me the rest of day, and I was allowed to get ice cream from the concession stand.

None of my other siblings were ever lost. It was just that the baby was so easy to overlook. Because everyone else was grown up enough to take care of themselves, it was assumed that I was too. It’s no wonder that the youngest children are always fighting for attention.
“I didn’t do it!”

“Psychiatrists and psychologists have stressed the overwhelming formative influence of parents on children. In reality, many or most children spend far more time with siblings than with parents, whether at play, in laughing together, or in exchanging love, hate, and jealousy.”

(Sulloway)

My niece, Hannah, is five years old. Her brother Justin is three. When I watch them play together, I am reminded of my early relationship with my older sister. Hannah is the boss. She plays with Justin when she wants, and knows that he is always there waiting for her to decide that he is worthy enough. When Hannah tells on him, I tend to side with Justin because he’s so young and innocent and there is no way it could be his fault.

My mother, being an oldest child, never had that perspective with me. So even when something went wrong that wasn’t my fault, I didn’t really get the benefit of the doubt. As young children, we did not have a lot of toys. Cabbage Patch dolls were our major toys, and I loved mine. When I was about four years old, Lydia decided to let me play with her. She happened to be playing with her Cabbage Patch, and she decided we should put lipstick on them. It started on their lips, and quickly moved to their entire faces. We
were laughing and enjoying ourselves, and I wanted to go show my mom what we had done.

We walked outside, calling, “Look at our dolls, Mom!” My mother turned around, slowly dropped her rake, and picked up my doll.

“Hmm. Well, it appears that you can’t appreciate the toys you have, so go in and wash their faces. We’re taking them to Goodwill where some little girl can enjoy them.”

I was devastated. But it wasn’t the first time I’d been screwed over by my siblings. In fact, as far as I can remember, any time I ever got into trouble around that age was due to Lydia’s bright ideas. That same summer, my mom was grinding tomatoes so she could can them. Her machine had a plastic bowl on the top which funneled into a grinder. She pushed the tomatoes down into the funnel by using a wooden piece.

One day, she left the machine unattended and Lydia urged me to push the tomatoes in so she could grind them. Of course, I obliged. I didn’t quite have the strength to work the wooden piece, so Lydia told me to “just use your hands!” It went well until I pushed a little too far and she ground my little fingers. I screamed and cried, and my mom ran to see what had happened. I expected her to make it better and to give me some sympathy. Instead, she put it on ice and scolded me for using my hand. As always, Lydia quietly listened and offered no confession.

Several years later, when I was old enough to know better, Lydia played another one of her tricks on me. I still have the diary entry, written in newly learned cursive, which can tell the story better than I:

_Today Lydia said she’d play with me if I licked her foot and bit her toe. So I did and she still didn’t play with me so I went to Mom who called me STUPID! I hate them both!_
Many of my diary entries include statements describing Lydia as a "butthead"; usually, her name even has a circle around it and a big X through it. We fought rather regularly until I was in high school. It took her leaving home to go to college for us to become friends.

In fact, though my mother insisted on daily gatherings around the supper table, our family was not very close. I’ve been told that it’s because when I was little, the rest of the family could not talk about “grown-up” things around me. Now that I too am a “grown-up,” our family is very close. They can still be buttheads, but at least I don’t cross out their names in my diary any more.
Abuse Indeed

"Lastborns can take a lot of abuse, pressure, resentment, and teasing from older brothers and sisters... when counseling parents of lastborns, I usually tell them to err on the side of helping the baby of the family stand on his own two feet and cope, even if it means getting teased or intimidated on occasion." (Leman 226)

Lastborns have a rough situation: because their older siblings see them as young and vulnerable, it is common for these older children to take advantage of the youngest. However, the lastborns are also suckers for praise, which makes them even more likely to agree to the ridiculous demands of their older brothers and sisters.

One of these demands came from my brother. When I was four or five, he used to make me put on a big, bulky motorcycle helmet and run down the sidewalk. He and my sisters would laugh so hard that when I reached the end of the sidewalk and came back, they would make me do it again. I recently asked Rick why he found it so humorous and he shrugged, "I don’t know. There is just something really funny about watching a fat little girl in a big helmet run down the street."

After church on Sundays, we kids would all run to the car and wait for our parents, who invariably stayed back and talked to their friends until our car was the last one in the parking lot. Whether it was raining or snowing or 30 below, somehow I always was volunteered to go and try to drag our parents back to the car. For some reason, I never questioned the authority of my brother when he would say, "Just go get them, Myra. Now." I always did it, and even now when my brother says "Myra, go get me a glass of water—now," I still do it.
"And let's face it. It is hard for Mom or Dad to get excited about the third or fourth lopsided pencil holder or paperweight to be brought home from school art class in the last five or ten years." (Leman 227)

The abuse did not come solely from my siblings. In one specific example, I was in the second grade. My class was going to be making construction paper parrots, and I was excited. The first day, we cut out a shape that was going to be the parrot's body, once we added a beak and wings. The idea was to leave the parrot at school until it was a finished product.

For whatever reason, I took mine home the first day. It was just a purple abstract shape, resembling nothing of a parrot. But I still held it up proudly and said, "Look, Mom! I made a parrot!" She oohed and ahhed over the ugly thing, and I forgot all about it...until the next day at school. When our teacher told us to get out our parrot bodies, I cried because I did not have mine. My teacher, Mrs. Denton, took pity on me and allowed me to use her parrot body. I promised to bring mine in the next day.

When I got home from school I ran to my mom and told her I needed my parrot back. She looked at me and then at the kitchen trash can—"Oh honey...I...I threw it away." I just stared at her as I...
always thought my artwork was more special to my mom than anything else. I ran to my room and cried and she apologized profusely, but I blame my decline of effort in all of my following art classes to my one traumatic experience with that parrot.

I was still telling that story well into college; my family would still laugh, and my mom would still hang her head. One weekend, I came home to find purple parrots covering my door. My mom had gotten the pattern from my second grade teacher, and made enough parrots to allow me to forgive her. I still tell the story—only now, it has a happy ending.
Afterword

After researching birth order and its influence on personality, I came across my favorite line, words that I feel would make a nice conclusion to my stories: “As important as a child’s order of birth may be, it is only an influence, not a final fact of life forever set in cement and unchangeable as far as how that child will turn out” (Leman 230). It is important for us to remember that no matter what our birth order, we are in charge of ourselves. Millions of factors influence us and shape us into who we become, and I strongly believe that birth order is one of those factors. However, our birth order alone does not determine the kind of person we will become.

One of Socrates’ most well known teachings is “gnothi seanton,” know thyself. Learning more about our birth order helps us to learn more about ourselves. It is a tool that helps us to see why we are the way we are. However, be careful not to confuse birth order with an excuse. In other words, try to refrain from reading that lastborns are financially irresponsible and then shrug, buy a ticket to Las Vegas, and spend every dime you have just because you’re the lastborn and that’s what you’re “supposed” to do.

Rather, use your birth order to learn about yourself. I learned more about myself as I wrote these stories. I learned that all of my childhood experiences, no matter how terrible they seemed at the time, have shaped me into who I am today. I also learned more about myself by sharing my stories with my parents. Together, we had a wonderful time exploring old family albums and recounting days of homemade Halloween costumes and childish sibling fights. Our stories, told from two different viewpoints, did not often match—but they were always entertaining. I learned more about how I was as a child and what I have to look forward to—and to dread—when I have children of my own.
Most importantly, I learned that once put into perspective, I actually had a great childhood. As I looked back on it and remembered my biggest concerns, I couldn’t help but laugh at their triviality. (It makes me wonder if several years down the road, I’ll look back on the time when I graduated without a job or a clue as to what I wanted to do with the rest of my life and laugh). I wish I could have told that chubby little worrywart that everything was going to be OK. That the teasing and bullying was only going to be temporary and that soon, she would become best friends with her evil older sister. That one day she would be big enough to play the grown-up games (and that they’re really not that fun anyway). That she would grow up and be taken seriously. That she would graduate and get married and be the center of attention for more than one day. But knowing that little girl, I don’t think she would have believed me.
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