

PSYCHOLOGY

Firstborns Seem Smarter

In provocative studies, intellectual achievement was linked to birth order, with ability descending from the eldest child through his younger siblings.

► INTELLECTUAL achievement seems to descend in stairstep fashion from the first-born to the younger siblings.

In two large surveys, the eldest of two, three and four children earned better scores on mental achievement tests, reported Dr. William D. Altus, professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Firstborns appear to be attending colleges in greater numbers than those of later birth-rank. It is a "fairly safe assumption," said Dr. Altus, "that there is a kind of academic primogeniture operating at the college level."

Dr. Altus referred to an unpublished study, done by Robert C. Nichols of the National Merit Scholarship Corporation, of gifted high school students. Of 1,311 Merit finalists coming from families of two to five children, firstborns made up 60% of the total. Among some 550 students who had one brother or sister, eldest children accounted for 66%.

Results of the Merit competition are similar to those Dr. Altus found in a study of 4,000 university students in Santa Barbara. In tests of verbal intelligence, firstborns scored higher than laterborns. In quantitative or mathematical ability there seemed no connection with birth order.

Children without brothers and sisters did even better in Dr. Altus' study than firstborns.

Since 1874 scientists have been searching for a link between eminence and birth order. Surveys have included British and

American scientists, people in "Who's Who," and Italian university professors. In every case firstborns were overrepresented. Dr. Altus said he found no study that diverged from this tendency.

One important contrast divides the early eminence surveys and the two detailed by Dr. Altus.

In the early studies the youngest child of a family would usually rank a numerical second among distinguished persons, with intermediate siblings taking up the rear. But both the California and the scholarship researches revealed a downward progression, according to strict birth order.

The best explanation for firstborn intellectual talent lies in the special treatment parents give their first child, Dr. Altus believes.

Parents tend to be stricter with their first child, according to research. Later offspring receive more relaxed, permissive treatment.

If the first child absorbs to a higher degree the expectations and mores of his parents, he will probably take to school more readily, commented the psychologist.

Despite the data, Dr. Altus noted in Science, Jan. 7, 1966, that firstborn predominance in mental achievement is far from 100%.

Further, he emphasized that "birth order is effectively linked to aptitude only at the top level," that is, in this case, only among the finalists.

• Science News Letter, 89:55 January 22, 1966

PSYCHIATRY

Tell Truth to Dying

► PHYSICIANS can do more for their dying patients by helping them meet death head on than by attempting to deceive them.

This is the consensus of a panel of three psychiatrists and one psychologist who examined the problem "Death and Dying: Attitudes of Patient and Doctor." Proceedings of the symposium were published in booklet form under the same name by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP) in New York.

Patients dying from cancer or from heart disease are threatened less by death than by the anticipation of progressive isolation and a sense of aloneness, stated one member of the symposium, Dr. Samuel L. Feder, psychiatrist at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

Dr. Feder observed that when he started his study with terminal cancer patients, most were not being told they had a malignancy. But they were suspicious and anxious.

With the psychiatrist the patients could and did openly express their great concern.

"I believe this established a relationship that enabled us to deal appropriately with other concerns (of daily life) as they emerged," said Dr. Feder. "I don't have any idea how we help a person to die, but I am sure we can do much to help a person to live until the time of death."

A second panelist, psychologist Dr. Herman Feifel of the Veterans Administration Out-patient Clinic in Los Angeles, revealed that in his research, a great majority, 82%, of the terminal patients wanted to be informed of their condition.

But 69% to 90% of the physicians thought they should not be told.

Both Drs. Feder and Feifel encountered wariness and even opposition from doctors during their research.

Most seriously ill patients "prefer honest and plain talk from physicians and family about their illness. They want to voice their doubts, affirm their faith, and communicate

what their impending separation means to them," observed Dr. Feifel.

Physicians, on the other hand, have above-average fears concerning death, he stated. A pilot study of 40 physicians indicated that they think less about death, but are more afraid of it.

Dr. Robert H. Dovenmuehle from the Center for the Study of Aging at Duke University, Durham, N.C., charged that the physician engages the patient in a "conspiracy" of avoidance. "In this, the doctor's behavior may reinforce feelings of helplessness rather than decrease them."

The patient is "denied his chance to feel that his real problem is understood and shared."

Dr. Irwin M. Greenberg, staff psychiatrist at the Hillside Hospital in Glen Oaks, N.Y., also participated in the symposium moderated by Dr. Alvin I. Goldfarb, professor of psychiatry at the New York School of Psychiatry.

A telegraphic poll conducted by SCIENCE SERVICE five years ago revealed that leading cancer authorities also believe truth is best for terminal patients, with a few exceptions. The physician's approach and manner of telling were stressed as most important elements in the patient's adjustment. Results of this "Grand Jury" were published in the Science News Letter 80:299, 1961.

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PSYCHOLOGY

Racism Could Inhibit Birth Control Efforts

► AN UNDERCURRENT of racism directed against the birth control movement in the United States could inhibit planned parenthood efforts in some areas.

Published reports emanating from black militant groups have charged that birth control programs are, in reality, an attempt to limit Negro and Oriental populations in the interests of white supremacy.

Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher, head of the Planned Parenthood Federation in New York, told SCIENCE SERVICE these charges could keep people who need birth control services away from clinics.

The real function of his organization is to provide birth control methods to people who cannot pay for it, said Dr. Guttmacher. Consequently, much of the Federation's work is in depressed areas where relatively more Negroes live than whites.

But large clinics are also located in areas of small Negro population. He estimated that roughly 70% of all Americans using birth control are white.

The suspicion that birth control is for Negro, not white, is "nonsense," he said.

Moreover use of the clinics is purely voluntary.

An article equating birth control efforts with white supremacy appeared in a recent issue of the Black Muslim newspaper, Muhammad Speaks.

A similar story also appeared in a New York daily.

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