A study of self-esteem in middle children

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ABSTRACT

Louise Henshaw
A STUDY OF SELF-ESTEEM IN MIDDLE CHILDREN
2001/02
Dr. John Klanderman and Dr. Roberta Dihoff
Master of Arts Degree in School Psychology

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether middle children who are the only male or only female child in the family have higher self-esteem than those middle children who are the same gender as one or more of their siblings. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered to a total of fifty middle children, who ranged in age from ten through fourteen years old. These children were students in grades five through eight at a small, urban middle school in southern New Jersey. There were thirty-six students who had one or more siblings of the same gender as the student. The second group was comprised of fourteen students who had siblings of the opposite gender as the student.

A t-test was used to analyze the results obtained on the self-esteem scale. Results of the study found a significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups of students. The mean score of the group of middle children who were the only male or female child in their family was significantly higher than the mean score of the group of middle children who had one or more siblings of the same gender as the student.
MINI-ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether middle children who are the only male or female child in the family tend to have higher self-esteem than middle children who are the same gender as one or more of their siblings. Results of the study indicated that there is a significant difference in the scores of these two groups of middle children.
Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER ONE

Need

The results of this study hopefully will benefit middle children everywhere by making them aware that middle child syndrome does exist and that there are many middle children who are experiencing the effects that their birth order has had on their self-esteem. Also, for those who aren't middle children, they may become more understanding and patient with middle children who may suffer from poor self-esteem. In addition, for parents who have a middle child, it is important for them to acknowledge that birth order does indeed have an effect on their children's self esteem and recognize the unique qualities of each of their children, while reinforcing this idea especially with their middle children. Middle children have a tendency to feel that they are not unique or special in any way. A middle child is not the oldest, nor is he/she the youngest in the family. Therefore, the middle child often feels unimportant. However, if the middle child is the only boy or girl child in the family, he/she tends to hold a special status in the family, thereby providing a boost to self-esteem.

For those who aren't middle children, the need for the information presented in this study can best be understood by reading the following poem, which was written by a middle child. For those of you who are middle children, you can reflect on whether or not the poem accurately reflects your own circumstances.
Middle Child Syndrome

By Michelle L. Komis

I get so damn angry with all of you, Treating me like shit, and why? Precious oldest needs the attention, baby youngest can do no wrong, evil middle spit upon... ignored for three years, then seven more. you wonder why I harbor bitterness, when no harm was ever done? Seeking comfort in strangers, strangers that took my innocence away. turning to alcohol and drugs, anything to get away from you. Precious oldest needs the help, baby youngest always praised. cruel middle shunned forever. you ignored me when I spoke. denied me when I cried. screamed at me when I was angry, seemed to wish for the day I’d die. I do not seem to exist, I’m merely an effigy to be hated. I tried to tell you, longed to explain, but I’m a silly little girl, with no reason to complain. betrayed by friends, paranoid and mistrustful beyond belief, but precious oldest is getting married, and baby youngest is perfect like a peach. angry middle deserves none of your time, I was a waste of sex anyway.

Purpose

This study was undertaken with the purpose of determining whether middle children who are the only male or only female child in the family have a higher self-esteem than those middle children who have siblings of the same gender.
**Hypothesis**

Middle children who are the only child of their gender in the family will have higher self-esteem than middle children who have one or more siblings of the same gender.

**Theory**

There are numerous theories and studies concerning how birth order can affect child development. Dr. Kevin Leman in *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*, feels that birth order can influence everything from personality to love interests. Birth order can affect a person’s level of self-esteem. Middle children often exhibit what Leman refers to as the “Jan Syndrome”. In the television show, “The Brady Bunch”, Jan was the middle child. She was not beautiful and perfect like her first-born sister, Marcia. Nor was she cute and loveable like last-born sister, Cindy. Jan was essentially stuck in the middle. Leman writes that middle children often feel unspecial or unrespected.

Jeannie Kidwell writes that middleborns may have lower self-esteem since they are not “unique” like firstborn and lastborn children, who tend to get status, recognition and attention that middle children do not. Middle children often say that life is not fair because their elder sibling has all the rights and the youngest has all the privileges.

Like Kidwell, H. Arnstein (1978) proposed that the condition that distinguishes the middleborn position is its lack of perceived distinction and attention in the family. Arnstein feels that this lack of uniqueness may result in a tendency for middle children to be overlooked by parents and receive less special attention.

Alfred Adler describes the middle child as being “sandwiched in”. He says that middle children may feel squeezed out of a position of privilege and significance. They
need to work hard to achieve uniqueness and get ahead. They are very concerned with fairness and may have difficulty with social interactions with peers. They may have trouble finding a place in life or become a fighter of injustice. Adler indicated that it was impossible to estimate the harm that parental favoritism can inflict upon the non-favored child. He also writes that gender can become an issue between siblings, depending on the value given and perceived in that family to one gender. A middle child’s struggle for identity will be more pronounced if he or she is the same sex as the first-born. Along with birth order and gender role, Adler discusses the contribution of other factors in his Style of Life Tree, which illustrates his model of personality development. There are five roots to the Style of Life Tree established in early childhood: (1) Health and appearance, (2) social and economic position of the family, (3) Parental attitudes, (4) Family constellation, and (5) gender role. The trunk of the tree represents the five subordinate attitudes that develop during the adolescent period: (1) Attitude toward self, (2) Attitude toward difficulties, (3) Attitude toward others, (4) Attitude toward opposite sex, and (5) Attitude toward life. In the branches of the tree are the three tasks of life or challenges of adulthood: (1) Other people, (2) Occupation, and (3) Love and sex.

Sigmund Freud (1970) believed that sibling rivalry was solely due to children feeling that they are receiving unequal amounts of attention, discipline, and/or responsiveness from their parents. Freud thought that being the favored child leads to self-confidence and, ultimately a successful life.

Clifford E. Isaacson is the author of many books on the subject of birth order including Understanding Yourself Through Birth Order (1988), The Birth Order Challenge: Expanding Your Horizons (1991), and How To Love Your Children: Birth Order for Parents (1992). Isaacson reports that birth order personalities are formed early
in life. Each child has to solve particular problems by using a set of coping skills, which become birth order characteristics. He writes that second born children lose their parents’ attention as the first born aggressively takes it away, leaving the second child to feel as if he or she cannot do anything well enough to merit attention. As a result, they often feel inadequate and try to overcome this feeling by choosing perfectionism in some area of life. Second born children frequently feel neglected and that no one cares how he or she feels. As a result, the second born tries to suppress his or her feelings in order to avoid pain.

Meri Wallace (1999) writes that middle children often experience an identity crisis since they are neither the oldest nor the youngest. Wallace indicates that middle born children often feel that they are either too old or too young to be loved. Wallace states, “Most middle children try hard to carve out their own unique identity so that they will feel special.” (Wallace, 1999, p. 81). Sometimes middle children will resort to negative behaviors in order to get their parents’ attention. Some middle children may give up and withdraw instead. In addition to feeling a lack of attention from parents, middle children often face rejection from siblings as the oldest sibling often develops a stronger attachment to the youngest sibling.

Ronald Richardson and Lois Richardson (2000), who wrote Birth Order and You, also state that middle children are often confused about their identity. The Richardsons indicate “in one study of families with three of more children, the oldest child and the youngest child were the clear favorites of the parents.” (Richardson et al, 2000, p. 138) The middle child is forced to compete for attention with an older, smarter, stronger sibling and a younger, cuter, more dependent sibling. This results in the middle child vacillating between “trying to be grown-up and good like the older sibling and trying to
be helpless and cute like the baby, with no true sense of his or her own uniqueness.”

(Richardson et al, 2000, p. 139) The Richardsons report that middle children tend to be the lowest achievers academically and the least likely in their family to go to college. In addition, the middle girl with a younger and older sister has more of a disadvantage than the middle boy with a younger and older brother. The middle girl in this situation is the least favored gender in the least favored position. According to the Richardsons, however, “middle children whose siblings are all of the opposite sex may receive most of the attention in the family.” (Richardson et al, 2000, p. 147)

Definitions

1. A middle child is a child who has one or more older siblings as well as one or more younger siblings.
2. Self-esteem may be used interchangeably with the term self-concept. It is a measure of one’s own positive impression of oneself.
3. Middle child syndrome is a term used to describe the middle born child’s feeling that they are not special like their first-born and last-born siblings.

Assumptions

It is an assumption that the middle children in this study are representative of the middle children in the general population.

In addition, it is assumed that the factors of parenting style, socioeconomic status, culture and ethnicity are equally represented in this study.

Finally, it is assumed that the children who participated in this study completed the self-esteem questionnaire with integrity.
Limitations

One limitation of this study is the possibility of a limited sample size population of middle children in the group that I intend to distribute the self-esteem questionnaires to. The population that I will be using in this study consists of those identified middle children in grades four through eight in a small urban school district in southern New Jersey.

Overview

In Chapter 2, a review of pertinent literature, including recent studies is discussed. The design of the study will be presented in Chapter 3 and includes a description of the sample, measures used, design, testable hypothesis, analysis and summary of the design. Results of the study will be analyzed in detail in chapter 4, where the results will be interpreted.

The following chapter provides an opportunity to explore some of the current research in the area of middle children and self-esteem.
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Research studies have examined the effect of birth order on numerous topics, including intelligence, achievement motivation, career choice, social skills and self-esteem. Sulloway (1997) found that birth order is a better predictor of social attitudes than is gender, class or race. In addition, some researchers indicate that birth order can be used to predict almost any perspective of an individual’s life including one’s philosophy, choice of friends or spouse, and future job performance. In this section, general research on birth order will be reviewed briefly. In the next section, studies regarding birth order and self-concept will be examined. Then research studies pertaining to middle children will be investigated. Lastly, studies that specifically involve middle children and self-esteem will be discussed in more detail.

Birth Order Research

Numerous research studies on the effects of birth order in the past have shown contradictory results. For example, Sampson & Hancock (1967) found that firstborn and only children have higher achievement motivation scores than later borns. However, studies by Munz, Smouse and Letchworth (1968), Rosen (1961) and Rosenfield (1966) did not find any effects of birth order. Critics of birth order research argue that factors that correlate with birth order such as social class and family size are not controlled.
Current researchers indicate that these inconsistencies stem from methodological problems in the design and interpretation of the results and that potential confounding variables were not controlled. Variables such as socioeconomic status, sex, family size and age spacing between siblings need to be taken into account. For example, Falbo (1981) indicates that middle borns are more likely to come from larger families than first or lastborns and that larger families tend to be lower in socioeconomic class. Falbo states that the contradictory results in birth order studies are due to the failure to consider the impact of social class and family size on the birth order findings. Falbo also reports that researchers frequently combine only children with firstborns. In Falbo’s study, Relationships Between Birth Category, Achievement and Interpersonal Orientation, results showed that firstborns had significantly higher educational aspirations than middle and lastborns. Additionally, results indicated that firstborns have higher self-esteem than lastborns. This was also found to be true in studies by Bayer (1966) and Schachter (1963), which reported that firstborns are more likely to attend prestigious colleges, and have higher grade point averages than later born individuals. A study by Hall and Lee (1981) showed that firstborn boys had significantly higher level-of-aspiration scores than later-born boys and later-born girls. Also, firstborn boys showed greater need for achievement and actually performed better on gross motor tasks than firstborn girls or later-born children of either sex.

Schooler (1964) found that later born children have lower social competence. A study by Gates (1988) found that firstborn children showed less depression, less anxiety and had higher self-concept scores than second born or last-born children. Another factor that has been studied in birth order research is the spacing between siblings. Sulloway (1977) and Toman (1976) both found that when the age gap between two
siblings is very small or very large, there is less of an effect of birth order on personality
characteristics than when the age gap between siblings averages two years.

**Birth Order and Self Concept**

Savin-Williams and Demo (1983) conducted a study, which found that birth
order, in addition to social class, number of siblings, pubertal maturation and sex of the
respondent were more critical determinants of overall self-feelings than temporary
conditions, such as physical setting. Results showed that oldest or only children had
more positive self-feelings than youngest or middle children. A study by Coopersmith
(1967) and by Sears (1970) reported that firstborn and only children have higher self-
estee than later-born. Two studies by Schwab and Lundgren (1978) confirm these
results. The first study involved 82 male and 82 female undergraduate students and
found that firstborn children had higher self-esteem than later-born children. In the
second study, over-all birth order differences approached, but did not attain statistical
significance. However, results significantly showed that firstborn females did tend to
have higher self-esteem than later born females.

In studies of high school students, Rosenberg (1965) and Bachman (1970)
reported that only children have slightly higher self-esteem than others. Rosenberg also
found that later-born boys with predominately female siblings have exceptionally high
self-esteem.

A research study conducted by Nystul (1981) supports the findings of a study by
Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970), which showed that individuals from families of
mixed-sex siblings (two same sex siblings with an opposite-sex sibling) have lower self-
concept than individuals from families of same-sex siblings. Nystul’s hypothesis that in a
three-child family, males and females with one same-sex sibling do not have different self-concepts than those with two same-sex siblings was rejected, which showed that males and females with one same sex sibling have lower self-concepts. The researcher indicated that when there are two siblings of the same gender with one of the opposite gender, the same gender siblings compete to determine who is “the boy” (or the girl) of the family. If there are three siblings of the same gender, this competition may not be necessary because each sibling inherits “a special place” in the family by being “one of the boys/girls”. When there are two siblings of the same gender and one of the opposite gender, the siblings of the same gender compete for their special place in the family. As a result, their self-esteem suffers. This research study suggests that further research is needed to determine the long-term effects of this supposition as to whether one or both of the same gender siblings develop a negative self-concept. However, this study did not determine the effects on self-esteem for the child who was the only child of his or her gender in the family.

Research Involving Middle Children

A majority of the birth-order research studies compare firstborns to laterborns, without specifying a difference between middleborns and last borns. One of the reasons for this is because it is easy to identify a firstborn child, while the definition of a middleborn child is somewhat ambiguous. In a family of four, either the second and/or the third child could be considered to be the middleborn child. As stated previously in the definitions in Chapter One, for the purpose of this study, a middle child shall be defined as having one older and one younger sibling or two older and two younger siblings.

A study by Gallagher and Cowen (1977) found that middle born children are
more likely to exhibit shy or anxious behavior or learning problems in school. Research on the association between birth order and suicide by Lester (1987) found that first and middle born siblings complete suicide more than last-born siblings and more middle and youngest siblings attempt suicide than oldest siblings.

**Middle Children and Self-Esteem**

A study of birth order and self-concept in adolescence by Gecas and Pasley (1983) with a sample of 208 high school students, found a slight tendency for middleborns to have the lowest self-evaluations. In addition, there was some association between middleborns with a same sex sibling (either older or younger) and lower self-concept; however, their results were not significant. The researchers attributed their insignificant findings to the omission of variables that were not considered, such as the ages, sex and spacing for all of the children in each respondent’s family. In order to consider all of these variables, the researchers indicated that a very large sample size would be required. Their research was based on a sample of 208 families using two different measures of self-evaluation: Gecas’ Self-Evaluation Scale and Harter’s self-perceived competence scale.

Kidwell (1981) found that adolescent males tend to perceive their parents’ behavior toward them differently depending upon their order of birth. In addition, middle born children reported significantly more negative perceptions of their parents’ behavior toward them than did firstborn or last-born children. The study also showed that the effects of birth order will be strongest as sibling spacing decreases and as the number of siblings increase, and will probably have little or no effect with few siblings and with wide spacing between siblings. Kidwell attributes a middle born child’s lower self-esteem to a lack of uniqueness in his birth position. She reports that the firstborn child
is unique and receives more time and attention from parents. The lastborn child is also
unique and enjoys the attention of being the baby of the family. However, the middle
born child lacks uniqueness and as a result, does not receive any special attention or
recognition from the parents, which affects the child’s self-esteem. Another study by
Kidwell (1982), investigates whether being the only male or only female child in the
family would enhance the self-esteem of a middle born child. The initial sample
consisted of 2, 200 tenth grade boys. Kidwell administered a self-report questionnaire.
The independent variables included in the research were: birth order (first, middle born,
lastborn, only), number of siblings, sibling spacing, sex of siblings, school performance,
race, socioeconomic status, parental support, parental praise, amount of family transiency
and intactness of parents’ marriage. The first hypothesis was that the self-esteem of
middleborns would be lower than that of firstborns and lastborns. A second hypothesis
that was studied was that the birth order effect would be stronger when the space between
siblings is narrower and the more siblings the middle born child has. As a third
hypothesis, Kidwell researched that the self-esteem of the middle born will be
significantly enhanced if the middle born enjoys a unique gender status among the other
siblings. Kidwell’s findings are that middle born children have a significantly decreased
self-esteem compared to firstborn and lastborn children. In addition, when middle born
children’s siblings are spaced two years apart, self-esteem is lower compared to intervals
of one, three or four years between siblings. This indicates a curvilinear effect, where
there is a sharp and significant drop in self-esteem from the one year to the two year
spacing, followed by increases at the three and four year spacing between siblings. Also,
self-esteem in middle born children decreases as the number of siblings increases, but is
significant only when the siblings are spaced at an average interval of two years apart.
Kidwell’s findings also proved her third hypothesis with the results of the study showing that the self-esteem of the middle born male is significantly enhanced if all his siblings are female as opposed to all male or mixed gender siblings.

SUMMARY

While some studies involving birth order research have shown contradictory results, overall results indicate that birth order has a significant effect on self-esteem, as well as other variables. Studies that considered the effects of other potential confounding variables tended to have more significant results. Also, research that provided for the categories of firstborn, middle born and lastborn are able to generalize their results more readily than those studies that only compared firstborn to later born.

The majority of these studies indicate that self-esteem in middle born children tends to be lower when compared to firstborn and lastborn children. These findings then support the “uniqueness theory,” which proposes that middle born children lack the uniqueness of their firstborn and lastborn siblings. The fact that a one-year interval of space between siblings has a more positive effect on the self-esteem of the middle born child than a two year interval might suggest that there is less time to develop and solidify the uniqueness of the firstborn and lastborn siblings when there is only a one year interval between them. As a result, there is less distinction between the three birth positions. In addition, results of these studies showed that when the middle child is the only male with female siblings, his self-esteem is higher than those who have siblings of the same gender. Thus, being the only male (or female) adds uniqueness to being a middle born child. This demonstrates that perhaps middle born children can overcome their lack of uniqueness by compensating in another area that they could excel in.
Many of the previous studies used only male subjects. Further research would be beneficial using female subjects. In addition, longitudinal studies would be useful to investigate whether the effects of birth order on self-esteem in middle children is a long term effect that persists into adulthood. Additional research on the topic of middle born children and self esteem is needed to further investigate the role of gender, which is the one of the reasons for this study.

In chapter three, the design of the study will be presented with a description of the sample, measures being used, testable hypothesis, analysis and summary of the design.
CHAPTER THREE: DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Sample

Participants in this study are fifty middle children who are students enrolled in grades four through eight in a small urban school district in southern New Jersey. The socio-economic conditions of this sample group range from poverty level to upper middle class. One group consists of thirty-six students who have one or more siblings who are the same gender as the student. Ten (27.8%) of the students in this group are female and twenty-six (72.2%) were male. The ethnicity of these students is as follows: 7 African-American (19.4%), 13 Hispanic (36.1%), 1 Asian (2.8%) and 15 Caucasian (41.7%). In the second group, fourteen students have siblings who are of the opposite gender as the identified student. In this group there are three females (21.4%) and eleven males (78.6%). The second group is comprised of 3 African-American (21.4%), 3 Hispanic (21.4%), 1 Asian (7.2%) and 7 Caucasian (50%). The students in both groups range in age from ten through fourteen years of age.

Measures

There are two independent variables, which are the two groups of middle children. The first independent variable is the group of middle children with one or more siblings who are the same gender as the subject. The second independent variable consists of students who are middle children whose siblings are all of the opposite gender. The dependent variable is the score of the subjects in both groups on a self-esteem scale. The scores of the middle children in one group were compared to the
scores of the middle children in the second group.

Self-report questionnaires and checklists are the most frequently used instruments used in assessing self-esteem. Self-esteem is the evaluative component of the self-concept. A definition of self-esteem by Crandall (1973) is “liking and respect for oneself which has some realistic basis.” Another definition by Coopersmith (1981) defines self-esteem as “an expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes himself or herself competent, successful, significant and worthy”.

To measure the self-esteem of the identified middle children in this study, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered. The Rosenberg Scale consists of ten items with a four-point response scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This scale contains both positively and negatively worded items regarding the respondent’s opinion of his or her self-worth. Positively worded items and negatively worded items are interspersed in order to reduce the effect of respondent set. The total self-esteem score is obtained by reversing the scoring of negatively worded items, adding the score for all items and then computing the mean by dividing the total score by ten. Scores range from a maximum of 4 (indicating high self-esteem) to a low of 1 (indicating low self-esteem).

The original sample used in the standardization of the scale in 1965, consisted of 5,024 high school juniors and seniors from 10 randomly selected high schools in New York State. The Rosenberg Scale has high reliability with test-retest correlations ranging from .82 to .88. Cronbach’s alpha for various samples are in the range of .77 to .88 as reported by Blascovich and Tomaka (1993) and Rosenberg (1986).

Studies have demonstrated both a unidimensional and two-factor (self-confidence and self-deprecation) structure to the scale. Gray-Little, Williams and Hancock (1997)
report that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a reliable and valid measure of global or unidimensional self-esteem. Silber and Tippett (1965) reported a two-week test-retest reliability of .85, as well as convergent validity coefficients ranging from .56 to .83 with several similar measures of self-esteem. Crandall (1973) found that the Rosenberg Scale has a correlation of .60 with the Coopersmith Self-Esteem inventory.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was designed to be a brief and easy measure to administer. However, it is reported to be thorough in measuring self-esteem with considerable evidence of its reliability and validity. The scale is one of five self-report questionnaires used to measure self-esteem reviewed by Lian-Hwang Chuiu. (1988). He highly recommends the Rosenberg Scale for those who wish to use a brief scale in their studies related to self-esteem. In their comprehensive review of measures of self-esteem and self-concept, Blascovich and Tomaka (1993) identified Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale as the most frequently used measure of its kind.

In a study by Hagborg in 1996, he indicates that “the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale continues to be one of the most popular brief measures of global self-esteem.” The subjects in the Hagborg study were selected from a middle school in a rural community and consisted of 15 boys and 15 girls in grades 5 through 8. The subjects in Hagborg’s study are similar in age (10-15) to those in this study. However, Hagborg’s subjects were not identified middle children. Another difference between Hagborg’s study and the study in this thesis is that Hagborg’s subjects were all Caucasian and from predominantly middle class socioeconomic backgrounds in a rural community. The results of Hagborg’s study revealed a mean score of 3.0 with a standard deviation of .6 for boys, a mean score of 2.9 with a standard deviation of .5 for girls and a mean score of 3.0 with a standard deviation of .5 for the total sample. Hagborg reports a coefficient alpha of .84. Analysis
of variance was computed to examine gender and grade differences and main effects were not significant for gender, grade or their interaction. Hagborg states, "The construct validity of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was supported by its relationship with a multidimensional self-concept measure (Harter’s Self-Perception Profile for Children).

Method

In order to identify the middle children in the school being studied, a survey was distributed to all of the students during their homeroom period (see Appendix A). Surveys were distributed to 250 students and yielded a sample of 50 middle children, with 36 students in group one and 14 students in group two. Group One consists of middle children who have one or more siblings of the same gender as the subject. Group Two consists of middle children who are the only male or female child with two or more siblings of the opposite gender as the subject. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered to each of the students in both groups. The resulting scores of the two groups were analyzed to see if there is a significant difference in their overall self-esteem.

Design

This study is an experimental design even though the two independent variables being studied are not randomly assigned. The groups are considered to be in-tact groups and are mutually exclusive.

Testable Hypothesis

Null hypothesis: There is no difference in self-esteem scores between Group One and Group Two, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale.

Alternate hypothesis: There is a difference found in the self-esteem scores between Group One and Group Two, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale.
Analysis

A t-test was utilized to investigate whether there is a significant difference between the self-esteem scores of Group One and Group Two.

Summary

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered to two groups of identified middle children. Group One consists of those middle children who have one or more siblings of the same gender as the subject student. Group Two includes those middle children who are the only male or female child in the family with two or more siblings of the opposite gender as the subject student. Fifty students in grades five though eight at a small, urban middle school in southern New Jersey were the subjects for this study. A t-test was utilized to analyze the results.
The purpose of this study was to investigate whether middle children who are the only child of their gender in a family will have higher self-esteem than middle children who are the same gender as one or more of their siblings.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

The Null hypothesis: There will be no difference in self-esteem scores between Group One and Group Two, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was rejected. The Alternate hypothesis: A difference will be found in the self-esteem scores between Group One and Group Two, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was accepted.

As shown in Figure 4.1, the mean score for Group One was 3.0028 while the mean score for Group Two was higher at 3.4929. The scores for Group One ranged from a low of 1.90 to a high of 3.90, where the range of possible scores could be a low of 1.00 to a high of 4.00. In Group Two the scores ranged from 2.40 to 3.90. The frequency of scores for all of the students combined, ranging from 1.9 to 3.9, can be seen in Figure 4.2, which is a bar graph and also in Figure 4.3, which is a pie chart.

In Table 4.1, the Descriptive Statistics show the mean score, standard deviation and number of subjects in each group. Results of the t-test were $t_{(48)} = -3.505$, $p \leq .001$. These results are shown in Table 4.2 and indicate that there is a significant difference in the mean scores between Group One and Group Two, thus supporting the alternate hypothesis.
FIGURE 4.1: MEAN SCORES OF GROUP ONE AND GROUP TWO

FIGURE 4.2: FREQUENCY OF SCORES FOR ALL STUDENTS
BAR GRAPH
FIGURE 4.3: FREQUENCY OF SCORES FOR ALL STUDENTS
PIE CHART

TABLE 4.1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Number in group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group One</td>
<td>3.0028</td>
<td>.4802</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Two</td>
<td>3.4929</td>
<td>.3269</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
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TABLE 4.2: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether middle children who are the only male or only female child in the family have higher self-esteem than those middle children who are the same gender as one or more of their siblings. The results of previous studies involving birth order research indicate that birth order has a significant effect on self-esteem. The majority of these studies have found that self-esteem in middle born children tends to be lower when compared to firstborn and lastborn children. These findings support Kidwell’s “uniqueness theory,” which proposes that middle born children lack the uniqueness of their firstborn and lastborn siblings.

In this study, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was administered to a total of fifty middle children, who ranged in age from ten through fourteen years old. These children were students enrolled in grades five through eight at a small, urban middle school in southern New Jersey. There were thirty-six students who had one or more siblings of the same gender as the student. The second group was comprised of fourteen students who had siblings of the opposite gender as the student.

A t-test was used to analyze the results obtained on the self-esteem scale. Results of the study found a significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups of students. The mean score of the group of middle children who were the only male or female child in their family was significantly higher than the mean score of the group of middle children who had one or more siblings of the same gender as the student. As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted.
CONCLUSIONS

As indicated in Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1, the mean score of the students in Group Two was significantly higher than the mean score of the students in Group One. This study was successful in proving the hypothesis which stated that middle children who are the only child of their gender in the family will have higher self-esteem than middle children who are the same gender as one or more of their siblings.

DISCUSSION

Results of this study support Kidwell’s uniqueness theory. Being the only male or female child in the family adds uniqueness to being a middle born and results in a higher self-esteem than other middle children. Thus, the effects of middle child syndrome can be overcome when the middle child feels unique or special. Perhaps even those middle children who have siblings of the same gender can overcome their lack of uniqueness by compensating in another area in which they excel. Parents and teachers need to recognize that these middle children will require much encouragement and praise in order to boost their self-esteem.

It is interesting to note that none of the middle children in this study achieved a “perfect” score of 4.0 on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. There were one student in Group One and two students in Group Two who achieved a score of 3.9.

While the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was promoted as one of the most popular brief measures of global self-esteem and has been used extensively in studies with children of similar ages, many of the students in this study required clarification of some of the statements. The use of negatively worded items may have been confusing to some of the students. For example, 52% of the students responded that they strongly agreed or agreed with item number 8. Item number 8, a negatively worded statement, is “I wish I
could have more respect for myself." Five of these students disagreed or strongly disagreed with all four of the remaining negatively worded items. This leads me to believe that perhaps they misinterpreted the meaning of item number eight. If so, then their self-esteem scores would have been higher and could have altered the findings of this study.

In general, the results of this study confirm the findings of Kidwell’s study, which showed that the self-esteem of the middle born male is significantly enhanced if all of his siblings are female as opposed to all male or mixed gender siblings.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Due to the small sample size in this study, additional research would be beneficial using a larger sample size. Also, future studies may consider using an instrument to measure self-esteem that is specifically designed for children, rather than the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In addition, longitudinal studies would be useful to investigate whether the effect of birth order on self-esteem in middle children is a long-term effect that persists into adulthood.
REFERENCES


Arnstein, H.S., (1978), Brothers and Sisters/Sisters and Brothers, New York: Dutton


Toman, W., (1976), *Family Constellation,* New York: Springer.

APPENDIX A

Survey
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brothers’ names:</th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sisters’ names:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>4) _______________</td>
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<td>5) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) _______________</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please list all of your brothers and sisters, whether they live with you or not. If you do not know their ages, list whether they are older or younger than you. Thank you.

Researcher: Louise Henshaw
APPENDIX B

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale
**ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE**

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. If you strongly agree, circle SA. If you agree with the statement, circle A. If you disagree, circle D. If you strongly disagree, circle SD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. At times I think I am no good at all.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. I certainly feel useless at times.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.</strong></td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>