

Hand Me Down Kids *Second child, second-hand treatment?*

By Glen Herbert

I once asked my father—perhaps a bit stung at the realization and wanting to get to the bottom of things—why there weren't nearly as many baby photos of me as there were of my older brother. There really were shockingly fewer, and no home movies of me at all. Not a one.

From time to time we would crank up the projector with the wobbly image of my brother creaking across the patio stones, while my first steps were entirely lost to time. I'm walking now, so clearly there were first steps, but they apparently failed to excite much cinematic interest. In any event, I think you can imagine my concern in all of this.

"Really?" he asked, as if he hadn't noticed. "Well there are lots of pictures of your brother. You looked just like that." Nice.

If you are an oldest sibling, you're probably nodding and smiling glibly at this. You were the first one, and have pride of place pretty firmly established. Congratulations. If you are a second child you're likely not all that surprised. Such is our lot. Who was the second person on the moon? Who led the second successful expedition to the top of Everest? Second children don't know either, but they know exactly what it feels like.

Certainly, simply having an older sibling should be punishment enough. My son, James, though just over a year old, already plays second fiddle to the widely accomplished Grace, and he's already showing signs of adaptation. No sooner did he learn to pick things up than he learned to hide them behind his back and run. While Grace could play at whatever she wanted barring electrical appliances and knives, James is limited by a sister who thinks everything he looks at is hers. (Probably because it is, or at least it was.) As the years continue, she will continue to manage him in the bossy way that older siblings have. He'll lose every fight, endure the teasing, and be the second to reach every milestone from solid food to speeding tickets. I already see it in his eyes. It's the beginning of a long, rugged road.

Second child, second parent

But it's not the older sibling who takes the photos or the home movies, or forgot about your graduation. That's what the parents do, and second children will invariably think that it's meaningful. It might be, but not in the way that we think. For parents, a growing family is more than just the increased number and more of the same. There's lots more that comes with it.

"In some ways it's easier," says Tracy Cooper, a fairly recent mother of two. "It's harder work, but I'm more relaxed. I don't spend my waking hours reading baby books now."

"It's amazing how Mary was fussed over in ways that I haven't fussed over Adelaide" she says. "I remember if Mary spit up on herself I would absolutely change her entire outfit. With Adelaide it depends how the spit up stains look on her."

The uncomfortable reality is that it can, at times, feel more than a bit like letting go. The spit up stain triage can begin to feel like the beginning of a slippery slope toward outright neglect, both for the older and younger children.

"I feel bad for the toddler," says Tracy, "because her world has been turned upside down, and all of a sudden there is this baby that takes the attention, and she has to share the attention."

"I worry about the baby because I'll never really have the intense time that I had with Mary, those hours on the couch gazing into each others eyes. I'm thinking that I should be doing those things with Adelaide, though I know I'll never be able to."

"It's not a lack of the same kind of love or anything," says Tracy, "it's a time thing."

If there is a comfort that comes from having done it all once, there is also the realization that there is a lot we are unable to do again, things that we loved the first time and looked forward to with the second. For many parents it's a difficult awakening.

"With Morley it was easy to sit down and read her a story," says Laura Hillyer, mother to Morley (4) and Justin (1). "With Justin it's almost impossible, [and ultimately] I just pack it in because I don't really have the time or the energy to really sit there and try to read him a story before bed. I try, but I can't try as hard as I would if I didn't have another kid."

Whether it's time together reading, food introductions, or play dates, or just time, it can open up a whole new world of parental guilt. "You feel a bit guilty because you can't do either one totally perfectly," says Laura, "but when they interact it is everything. It just warms my heart. I love when they hold hands in the car and they laugh. He's totally enchanted with her." It's an important point. The second child may not get all the bells and whistles, but, as she notes of Justin, "he has her." Of course, given that Laura is herself a first born, that's probably exactly what you would expect her to say.

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The Tale of the Tape

In 2007, researchers in Norway found that first children are smarter, typically by two to three IQ points, than their siblings. First borns also seem to be gallingly prone to a higher level of achievement. The majority of CEOs in Canada are first borns, a statistic that is shared with countries around the world. In the US, the vast majority of presidents—including Obama—have been first borns and those that weren't were the first boys in their families.

Psychologists (probably also first borns) tend to put a bit of faith in the clichés about birth order, that the first children are the achievers, the second children are brooding, touchy ones, and the third children the class-clowns, doing whatever they can to get noticed. More often than not, there seems to be a certain truth to the theories.

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