Of all the things that shape who we are, few seem more arbitrary than the sequence in which we and our siblings pop out of the womb. Maybe it's your genes that make you a gifted athlete, your training that makes you an accomplished actress, an accident of brain chemistry that makes you a drunk instead of a President. But in family after family, case study after case study, the simple roll of the birth-date dice has an odd and arbitrary power all its own.

The importance of birth order has been known—or at least suspected—for years. But increasingly, there's hard evidence of its impact. In June, for example, a group of Norwegian researchers released a study showing that firstborns are generally smarter than any siblings who come along later, enjoying on average a three-point IQ advantage over the next eldest—probably a result of the intellectual boost that comes from mentoring younger siblings and helping them in day-to-day tasks. The second child, in turn, is a point ahead of the third. While three points might not seem like much, the effect can be enormous. Just 2.3 IQ points can correlate to a 15-point difference in SAT scores, which makes an even bigger difference when you're an Ivy League applicant with a 690 verbal score going head to head against someone with a 705. "In many families," says psychologist Frank Sulloway, a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, and the man who has for decades been seen as the U.S.'s leading authority on birth order, "the firstborn is going to get into Harvard and the second-born isn't."

The differences don't stop there. Studies in the Philippines show that later-born siblings tend to be shorter and weigh less than earlier-borns. (Think the slight advantage the 6-ft. 5-in. [196 cm] Peyton Manning has over the 6-ft. 4-in. [193 cm] Eli doesn't help when he's trying to throw over the outstretched arms of a leaping lineman?) Younger siblings are less likely to be vaccinated than older ones, with last-borns getting immunized sometimes at only half the rate of firstborns. Eldest siblings are also disproportionately represented in high-paying professions. Younger siblings, by contrast, are looser cannons, less educated and less strapping, perhaps, but statistically likelier to live the exhilarating life of an artist or a comedian, an adventurer, entrepreneur, GI or firefighter. And middle children? Well, they can be a puzzle—even to researchers.

For families, none of this comes as a surprise. There are few extended clans that can't point to the firstborn, with the heir-apparent bearing, who makes the best grades, keeps the other kids in line and, when Mom and Dad grow old, winds up as caretaker and executor too. There are few that can't point to the lost-in-the-thickets middle-born or the wild-child last-born.

Indeed, to hear families tell it, the birth-order effect may only be getting stronger. In the past, girls were usually knocked out of the running for the job and college perks their place in the family should have accorded them. In most other ways, however, there was little to distinguish a first-, second- or third-born sister from a first-, second- or third-born brother. Now, with college and careers more equally available, the remaining differences have largely melted away.

"There are stereotypes out there about birth order, and very often those stereotypes are spot-on," says Delroy Paulhus, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. "I think this is one of those cases in which people just figured things out on their own."

But have they? Stack up enough anecdotal maybes, and they start to look like a scientific definitely. Things that appear definite, however, have a funny way of surprising you, and birth order may conceal all manner of hidden dimensions—within individuals, within families, within the scientific
studies. "People read birth-order books the way they read horoscopes," warns Toni Falbo, professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas. "I'm a middle-born, so that explains everything in my life'—it's just not like that." Still, such skepticism does not prevent more and more researchers from being drawn to the field, and as they are, their findings, and the debate over them, continue to grow.

**Little sibs, big role**

For eldest siblings, this is a pretty sweet deal. There is not much incentive for them to change a family system that provides them so many goodies, and typically they don't try to. Younger siblings see things differently and struggle early on to shake up the existing order. They clearly don't have size on their side, as their physically larger siblings keep them in line with what researchers call a high-power strategy. "If you're bigger than your siblings, you punch 'em," Sulloway says. But there are low-power strategies too, and one of the most effective ones is humor. It's awfully hard to resist the charms of someone who can make you laugh, and families abound with stories of last-borns who are the clowns of the brood, able to get their way simply by being funny or outrageous. Birth-order scholars often observe that some of history's great satirists—Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain—were among the youngest members of large families, a pattern that continues today. Faux bloviator Stephen Colbert—who yields to no one in his ability to get a laugh—often points out that he's the last of 11 children.

Such examples might be little more than anecdotal, but personality tests show that while firstborns score especially well on the dimension of temperament known as conscientiousness—a sense of general responsibility and follow-through—later-borns score higher on what's known as agreeableness, or the simple ability to get along in the world. "Kids recognize a good low-power strategy," says Sulloway. "It's the way any sensible organism sizes up the niches that are available." Even more impressive is how early younger siblings develop what's known as the theory of mind. Very small children have a hard time distinguishing the things they know from the things they assume other people know. A toddler who watches an adult hide a toy will expect that anyone who walks into the room afterward will also know where to find it, reckoning that all knowledge is universal knowledge. It usually takes a child until age 3 to learn that that's not so. For children who have at least one elder sibling, however, the realization typically comes earlier. "When you're less powerful, it's advantageous to be able to anticipate what's going on in someone else's mind," says Sulloway.

Later-borns, however, don't try merely to please other people; they also try to provoke them. Richard Zweigenhaft, a professor of psychology at Guilford College in Greensboro, N.C., who revealed the overrepresentation of firstborns in Congress, conducted a similar study of picketers at labor demonstrations. On the occasions that the events grew unruly enough to lead to arrests, he would interview the people the police rounded up. Again and again, he found, the majority were later- or last-borns. "It was a statistically significant pattern," says Zweigenhaft. "A disproportionate number of them were choosing to be arrested."

**The holes in the theories**

The birth-order effect, for all its seeming robustness, is not indestructible. There's a lot that can throw it out of balance—particularly family dysfunction. In a 2005 study, investigators at the University of Birmingham in Britain examined the case histories of 400 abused children and the 795
siblings of those so-called index kids. In general, they found that when only one child in the family was abused, the scapegoat was usually the eldest. When a younger child was abused, some or all of the other kids usually were as well. Mistreatment of any of the children usually breaks the bond the parents have with the firstborn, turning that child from parental ally to protector of the brood. At the same time, the eldest may pick up some of the younger kids' agreeableness skills—the better to deal with irrational parents—while the youngest learn some of the firstborn's self-sufficiency. Abusiveness is going to "totally disrupt the birth-order effects we would expect," says Sulloway. The sheer number of siblings in a family can also trump birth order. The 1% income difference that Black detected from child to child tends to flatten out as you move down the age line, with a smaller earnings gap between a third and fourth child than between a second and third. The IQ-boosting power of tutoring, meanwhile, may actually have less influence in small families, with parents of just two or three kids doing most of the teaching, than in the six- or eight-child family, in which the eldest sibs have to pitch in more. Since the Norwegian IQ study rests on the tutoring effect, those findings may be open to question. "The good birth-order studies will control for family size," says Bo Cleveland, associate professor of human development and family studies at Penn State University. "Sometimes that makes the birth-order effect go away; sometimes it doesn't." The most vocal detractors of birth-order research question less the findings of the science than the methods. To achieve any kind of statistical significance, investigators must assemble large samples of families and look for patterns among them. But families are very different things—distinguished by size, income, hometown, education, religion, ethnicity and more. Throw enough random factors like those into the mix, and the results you get may be nothing more than interesting junk. The alternative is what investigators call the in-family studies, a much more pointillist process, requiring an exhaustive look at a single family, comparing every child with every other child and then repeating the process again and again with hundreds of other families. Eventually, you may find threads that link them all. "I would throw out all the between-family studies," says Cleveland. "The proof is in the in-family design."

Ultimately, of course, the birth-order debate will never be entirely settled. Family studies and the statistics they yield are cold and precise things, parsing human behavior down to decimal points and margins of error. But families are a good deal sloppier than that, a mishmash of competing needs and moods and clashing emotions, better understood by the people in the thick of them than by anyone standing outside. Yet millennia of families would swear by the power of birth order to shape the adults we eventually become. Science may yet overturn the whole theory, but for now, the smart money says otherwise.

— Reported by Dan Cray/Los Angeles