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The big one always has to do everything; Too dutiful and responsible for everyone: Many eldest

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The big one always has to do everything; Too dutiful and responsible for everyone: Many eldest daughters complain that their role has shaped them for life. How much does family influence our character?

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Body

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"I'm the eldest daughter, of course I'm the mother of my siblings," says a woman, looking seriously into the camera. "I'm the eldest daughter, of course I have to be good at everything." Another post on Instagram lists the tasks that come with growing up as the eldest daughter in a family: you are also the third parent, the therapist, the responsible one, the independent one.

Using the hashtag #eldestdaughter, adult daughters share their experiences on social media or describe how one can recognize that one is suffering from the so-called eldest daughter syndrome: for example, perfectionism or the feeling of being responsible for everyone; of having too high expectations of yourself. On TikTok and other platforms, some of these videos are viewed millions of times and liked thousands of times. For example, at the end of 2023, the satirical website Reductress jokingly posted that the eldest daughter diagnosis had now been officially included in the guide for mental disorders.

Of course, eldest daughter syndrome is not a mental illness. Neither therapists nor doctors use this term. Why do so many eldest daughters - including the author of these lines - find themselves portrayed as being overly responsible and putting their own needs aside in favor of the family? And why is the complaint of growing up as the eldest child in the family a predominantly female phenomenon? Under the hashtag #eldestson you can find family photos on Instagram that proud mothers take of their first-born sons.

"First-borns are no more reliable and last-borns are no more relaxed," says personality psychologist Julia Rohrer. Together with colleagues from Leipzig and Mainz, she evaluated the data from three studies with a total of more than 20,000 participants in Germany, the USA and Great Britain. "We found no connections between birth order and the Big Five," she says. The Big Five refers to the standard model of personality psychology, which divides personality into five levels: openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion - sociability -, and agreeableness, i.e. how considerate and willing to cooperate someone is.

Whether someone grew up as a firstborn, as a baby or as a sandwich child has no effect on how dutiful or willing to compromise he or she later becomes. "The only difference we found was a small decrease in intelligence quotient," says Rohrer. This means that firstborns scored a few points more on the IQ tests, probably because they received more undivided attention and support from their parents as children. "However, this effect is tiny," says the psychologist. "Even if the same person takes the same IQ test on different days, the result varies by a few points."

In another overview study, the psychologist examined whether the gender of siblings influences their personality. Together with colleagues, she analyzed twelve studies from around the world with a total of more than 85,000 respondents. Here too, she found no differences. A childhood with brothers or sisters did not determine how self-sacrificing or considerate someone became as an adult. "Our character is quite stable and less dependent on our family of origin than many people think," says Rohrer.

Formative expectations

And yet the researcher believes that the disappointment and anger that some eldest daughters feel towards their family of origin can have real causes. "It's not just our personality that shapes us, but also our role expectations," says Rohrer. It could well be the case, she says, that families unconsciously push their eldest daughters to take responsibility for siblings and to be confidants for their parents from an early age - even if it doesn't fit their character at all. "I can imagine that the frustration of many eldest daughters comes from this disproportion," says Rohrer.

Even today, many parents expect their daughters to clean up and take care of other family members. And not from the sons. A German survey from 2017 shows: The proportion of teenage girls who help around the house for more than 45 minutes a day is 25 percent higher than boys. If the daughter is also the oldest child, she has an advantage in knowledge and skills over her siblings, says Rohrer. "Parents are more likely to let a six-year-old clear the dinner table than a two-year-old." These patterns often become entrenched, even if the age difference no longer matters. "In the moments when the family comes together, you slip into your old roles," says the psychologist. "Even if the little brother is already in his mid-50s."

Parental expectations are of course much more difficult to measure than personality traits. They can often only be raised indirectly. A Swedish study tried this in 2017. The researchers compared Swedish population registers with university applications - in many Scandinavian countries, information on siblings is also recorded in a publicly accessible manner. They found: Firstborns were more likely to choose subjects that parents found more prestigious and that continued the family tradition: medicine or engineering. Those born later were more likely to apply for the "And what do you want to do with it later?" subjects; for example, they were more likely to want to study at art academies.

"But the effects in this study are also rather small," says Rohrer. "I guess gender has more of an impact on what parents expect from their child." In other words: Could and should one perhaps refer to the eldest - daughter syndrome as the daughter syndrome? Because what is created in childhood continues later.

"In adulthood, daughters take on more care work for their parents than brothers," says Diego Albrez-Gutierrez from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. "This effect is visible in all countries, for all types of care - whether practical or emotional." Of course, this doesn't apply to all families, he says, but on average adult daughters call their parents more often, organize necessary appointments for them or look after them as they get older.

The American psychologist Allison Alford even invented a verb for the tasks that daughters take on their parents: daughtering. From the expert's point of view, such linguistic markers are important and necessary: "Just as a verb like mother makes the work of mothers visible, a word is needed that values the work of daughters," says Alford. She conducted qualitative interviews lasting several hours with over 100 adult daughters between the ages of 20 and 70. "They took care of the parents long before they became old and needy," she says. "They organize family celebrations, they help find a doctor, they keep in touch - and they keep their mouths shut when it is beneficial to family peace."

"At least in previous generations, less help was expected from sons than from daughters," says Alford. "The sons' job was more to represent the family and carry on its tradition." A study that appeared ten years ago shows that in the USA, firstborns are twice as likely to care for their parents as their younger siblings. However, even more important factors are geographical proximity to parents and gender: daughters are three times more likely to care for their parents than their brothers. Often a single daughter takes on this task. If a family only had sons, they were more likely to share care.

Very few expectations are expressed openly, as Alford emphasizes. "Very few of them have learned how to 'behave' because they were given a list of tasks," she says. "It's a lifelong learning process. Daughters see how mothers take care of the family and adopt these behavior patterns."

A study from Denmark that was published in 2021 also shows how powerful role models are in the family of origin. Economist Anne Ardila Brenøe was able to use public administrative data to show that women with a younger brother earned slightly less on average than women who had a younger sister. They worked more often in the social sector or in nursing - professions that are particularly often chosen by women. They were also more likely to marry men with typically male jobs.

Brenøe cites gender-specific education as the reason for this. In families with siblings of both sexes, mothers would traditionally spend more quality time with the girls - while fathers would spend more time with their sons. When it came to playing together or helping with homework, the parents divided themselves accordingly - and thereby solidified the gender roles.

"And yet changes are emerging," says daughter researcher Allison Alford. "I notice that the daughters of Generation Z have had a less gender-specific upbringing - and many boys are also expected to help out around the house," she says. She hopes that this will lead to more equality between daughters and sons.

Will the eldest daughter syndrome be a thing of the past? Will sons and daughters alike complain about their childhoods under #eldestchild? A few young men are already using this hashtag to complain about their role as firstborns. "The narrative that you were the disadvantaged sibling in the family seems to be attractive to many," says personality psychologist Julia Rohrer. In the past few weeks she has already received interview requests about sandwich child syndrome and youngest child syndrome.

Franziska & Tom Werner



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