SIBLING EXPERIENCE AS A FACTOR IN THE MANIFESTATION OF TRUST IN ADULTHOOD

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Abstract. This section presents the results of an empirical study of the psychological characteristics of an individual's trust in themselves, other people and the surrounding world, depending on their sibling status within the parental family. *The subject* of the study was the psychological characteristics of trust in oneself, in other people and in the surrounding world during adulthood, as mediated by an individual's sibling status (only child, eldest, middle or youngest child) within the primary family system. The research *methodology* was based on the use of a set of psychodiagnostic tools to collect empirical data via an anonymous online survey. It comprised an original questionnaire and the standardised 'Methodology for Assessing an Individual's Trust / Distrust of the World, of Other People and of Oneself' by A. Kupreichenko (adapted by V. Petrenko and O. Savchenko). The study sample comprised 240 respondents (63% women, 37% men) aged between 18 and 35, who were categorised according to sibling status as only children, younger siblings, older siblings and middle children. *The findings* of the study demonstrated that the specific nature of childhood interactions within the parental family directly shapes unique patterns of trust in adulthood. Specific strategies were identified for each group. In particular, older children (first-borns) demonstrated pronounced rationality, pragmatism, hyper-responsibility and the highest propensity for control. They rely on logic and facts, and in crisis situations tend to rely exclusively on themselves, which is a consequence of their childhood experience of mentorship. In contrast, only children were characterised by a high level of autonomy and a deeply ingrained desire for emotional transparency in relationships. They demonstrated the highest level of basic

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trust in the world, but at the same time exhibited heightened caution and wariness in their interactions with wider society due to a lack of childhood experience of competition. At the same time, the youngest children are characterised by highly developed intuition, which functions as an adaptive emotional resource, whilst their need for trust is underpinned by an acute need for emotional security. In crisis situations, they display compensatory hyper-mobilisation of their own 'self' and constant anxiety regarding social rivalry. Middle children, on the other hand, demonstrated the highest level of psychological flexibility, a capacity for diplomacy and empathy – developed through their role as mediators between their siblings – yet they often suffer from 'invisible child' syndrome and have the lowest subjective assessment of their own trustworthiness. Respondents in all groups reported an average level of self-trust and a high level of trust in others, whilst trust in the world was low among only children and eldest children and average among youngest and middle children.

In light of the data obtained, it has been empirically demonstrated that sibling experiences are a system-forming factor that determines an individual's social sensitivity and the strategies through which they express trust in adulthood. A child's position in the family hierarchy shapes a differentiated attitude towards oneself, trust in one's intuition and a propensity for competition. These findings *allow for* the expansion of theoretical concepts regarding the influence of the primary social system and have practical value for family and individual psychological counselling.

Dovira – zvir polokhanyi, vteche.
Vin liubyt tykhu pamoroz dystantsii.
Tse harnyi zvir, bez noho zle zhyvetsia.
Ale ne treba klykaty yoho.
Vin pryide sam i vzhe ne vidsakhnetsia.
Lina Kostenko
Trust is a skittish beast; it will run away.
It loves the quiet frost of distance.
It is a fine beast; life is hard without it.
But there's no need to call it.
It will come of its own accord and will no longer shy away.
Lina Kostenko

INTRODUCTION

In the psychology of interpersonal relationships, trust in oneself – in one's own ability to build relationships with others, and indeed with the world at large – is a marker of the functionality of many phenomena, in particular self-esteem, emotional intelligence, the development of internal resources, and confidence in one's social effectiveness. The parental family, with its holonic subsystems (particularly the sibling and parent-child relationships), plays a significant role in this process of building trust in its various manifestations.

Trust is generally regarded as one of the fundamental constructs of human existence, determining the nature of social interactions and the harmonious development of the individual. In contemporary psychology, the phenomenon of trust is conceptualised as a complex, multi-level system that encompasses an individual's attitude towards the world, other people, and the self [11]. Theoretical approaches to understanding this construct demonstrate that the capacity to trust not only serves as the foundation for establishing secure interpersonal bonds [3], but also acts as a crucial component within the structure of personal resilience [8].

The issue of forming basic trust versus mistrust is acquiring particular relevance today, as reflected in the specific nature of social representations among contemporary youth and adults regarding methods of interaction in a dynamic world [12]. The primary environment in which the foundations of interpersonal trust, empathy, and communicative patterns are established is the family, notably through the experience of sibling interaction. A. Adler previously highlighted the pivotal role of family structure and sibling status [1]. Contemporary research confirms that siblings exert a profound influence on personality development throughout the lifespan [2]. Specifically, during childhood and adolescence, brothers and sisters act as 'social buffers' that assist in coping with life crises and in regulating internalising and externalising behavioural problems [5]. They directly influence identity formation [4], the development of mutual empathy [7], and, more broadly, future interpersonal interactions [10].

Despite considerable scientific interest in both phenomena independently, the specific impact of early sibling experience on the capacity to trust others, yourself and the world at all. in adulthood remains insufficiently explored. The nature and subjective perception of relationships with siblings are not static;

they undergo significant transformations over the course of growing up [6; 9], yet they continue to deeply govern how adults construct close relationships.

The aim of this study is to identify the psychological characteristics of the manifestation of trust in oneself, in others and in the surrounding world in general amongst today's young people, as mediated by their experience of sibling status within the parental family.

To identify the characteristics of how trust manifests in individuals with different experiences of sibling status, a survey was conducted using Google Forms based on a questionnaire devised by the author (eight questions: seven open-ended, answered on a five-point Likert scale, and one closed-ended question, plus a set of questions to collect socio-demographic data) and A. Kupreichenko's 'Methodology for Assessing an Individual's Trust / Distrust in the World, in Other People, and in Oneself' (adapted by V. Petrenko and O. Savchenko) [11]. A total of 240 people took part in the voluntary and anonymous survey, of whom 63% were female and 37% male, aged between 18 and 35 (mean age 22.8 years). In terms of sibling status, the respondents in the sample were distributed as follows: only child – 32.5%, youngest – 27.5%, eldest – 25%, middle child – 15%. The results obtained and their analysis are presented below.

1. Directions of Life Trust and the Choice of Reference Points in the Modern World Depending on Sibling Status

In response to the open-ended question in the author's questionnaire*, 'In today's world, I trust most…',* individuals with the sibling statuses outlined above gave the following responses (Table 1).

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 1, respondents classified as *'older children'* demonstrated the highest level of self-confidence in the modern world. Presumably, in line with the logic of the psychoanalytic tradition, this is linked to the process of dethronement (the loss of the sole focus of parental love) – the arrival of a younger sibling. We hypothesise that this relates to the experience of early maturation and the responsibility of caring for a younger sibling, which in turn fostered an exaggerated sense of independence. Interestingly, this is the only group where technology/artificial intelligence emerged as the primary object of trust. This may indicate a pragmatic approach: the search for an impartial source of information rather than people's subjective judgements.

Table 1

Results of the analysis of respondents' answers to the question 'In today's world, I trust most'

Answer option	Respondents' sibling status			
	Only child	Eldest	Youngest	Middle child
Themselves	61.5%	70%	63.6%	50%
My immediate family and close friends	30.8%	20%	9.1%	33.3%
I trust myself the most, but I take the views of those closest to me into account	-	-	9.1%	-
People in general	-	-	-	16.7%
For a pet	7.7%	-	18.2%	-
Technology, artificial intelligence	-	10%	-	-

The situation with *younger children* can be explained by the fact that they grew up in circumstances where there was often a risk of older siblings breaching their personal boundaries, and where their authority was called into question. Thus, the high percentage of respondents choosing 'myself' in this case is more likely a defensive mechanism of emancipation – a desire to prove their adulthood and independence from the family hierarchy, although there is also a latent sense of separation anxiety (particularly when it comes to a pet). This is because the younger child was trying to strike a balance between their own 'self' and their habitual dependence on the approval of family members.

The only child also chose, first and foremost, to trust themselves, followed by their immediate circle (though to a lesser extent) and their pet. We explain this by the fact that the only child developed a predominantly internal locus of control from childhood, as they had no need to share toys or their parents' affection with siblings; consequently, their sense of self was formed within a space adapted to their individual needs. At the same time, a third of respondents who chose their immediate circle illustrated the phenomenon of a protective space of parental care, in which they often occupied the position of the emotional centre within the wider family system and where parents strove to ensure maximum safety and support. Consequently, this allowed a fairly secure microcosm to form within the parental family, whilst the macrocosm (humanity as a whole) remained alien.

We agree with A. Adler's view regarding the aptitude for diplomacy and social adaptation among individuals who occupy the *middle* position within the sibling subsystem, as they are forced from birth to manoeuvre between different poles within a large family [1]. The middle child learns to navigate life through communication and the ability to negotiate; consequently, their belief in the inherent goodness of human nature and their social orientation are stronger than those of siblings who are accustomed to closed, autonomous or strictly controlled microsystems.

Consequently, the responses to questions about trust in the modern world made it possible to categorise respondents according to the type of social integration they had developed during childhood (specifically, their sibling status). Only children and eldest children demonstrated a rigid, autonomous strategy for expressing trust (in themselves or in rational systems/artificial intelligence tools), reflecting their experiences of isolation and dethronement. Individuals with the status of youngest children are in the process of separation-based defence, seeking safe emotional niches (for example, compensation through pets). Middle children exhibited the greatest externality and decentralisation of trust, demonstrating a willingness to step beyond the boundaries of their own 'self' towards their immediate environment and society at large, which is determined by the vector of family mediation.

Let us examine the respondents' answers to the following question*: 'In a critical situation*, *I find it easiest to trust'*, taking into account the factor of sibling status (Table 2).

The results presented in Table 2 allowed us to conclude that individuals with the status *of 'only child*' within the sibling subsystem demonstrated the most balanced distribution between internal autonomy and interpersonal trust: they are able to transition very quickly from a state of independence to engaging with those in their immediate circle. We hypothesise that this was made possible by the reliable, focused parental support that the only child received during childhood. As, in their experience, the parental figure was never preoccupied with another sibling at a moment of danger, a pattern was formed: 'My family is a stable source of support'.

Table 2

Results of the analysis of respondents' answers to the question 'In a critical situation, I find it easiest to confide in'

Response option	Sibling status of respondents			
	Only child	**Eldest**	**Youngest**	**Middle child**
Themselves	53.8%	50%	72.7%	50%
My immediate family and close friends	46.2%	40%	18.2%	33.3%
A specialist	-	10%	9.1%	16.7%
Author's summary	*The balance between autonomy and parental support*	*The habit of relying on oneself and managing crises*	*Hyper-mobilisation of the 'self' as a reaction to helplessness syndrome*	*Intuitive autonomy and openness to professional help*

At the same time, *the eldest child's* access to external help was blocked, causing them to become self-reliant: this is why they are rational and pragmatic. Metaphorically, this might look like: 'If I give in to panic, the whole system will collapse. I must act on my own.' They are accustomed to being the rescuers, rather than those who are rescued: it was to them that their parents delegated the responsibility for maintaining peace in the home from the moment their younger siblings arrived. As for those (40%) who are prepared to confide in their loved ones, they seek from them not so much protection as an equal partnership or confirmation that their actions are effective. Nowadays, if a crisis goes beyond their personal control, they tend to turn to a higher authority (such as a lawyer, doctor or psychologist), as they are used to acting according to clear and functional protocols.

Those who were younger in sibling order demonstrated a certain paradox in their responses: traditionally, they received the most care and influence from their family; however, their self-assessed level of self-confidence in critical situations proved to be the highest among all participants in the study (almost 73%). We hypothesise that this is a mechanism of compensatory hypermobilisation of learned helplessness. The younger child, who in everyday life often delegated decision-making to older siblings, subconsciously blocks the family system when faced with real threats (and there are many of these at present due to the war). Presumably,

a feeling arises that, in a crisis, her loved ones will once again begin to treat her as small and helpless, limiting her agency. Therefore, this is more a matter of a sharp break from the role of the one being cared for, an attempt to prove (first and foremost to herself) that she is capable of resolving even a critical situation on her own.

Those with the *'middle child'* sibling status demonstrated a high degree of differentiation and flexibility in their strategies. Half of the participants chose to rely on themselves, which is a consequence of their habitual family status as the 'invisible' child, having become accustomed to coping with their emotional crises on their own as early as childhood, when their parents were preoccupied with the problems of the first-born or the baby. It is telling that middle children had the highest level of trust in a 'professional' (16.7%) among all groups.

Thus, only children and eldest children view a critical situation through the prism of family structure: they either rely on themselves as adults or return to a reliable, tried-and-tested family system, where they either defend or acknowledge positions of authority. In situations of acute stress, the youngest children fundamentally reject family support, demonstrating a reaction of emancipation and proving their ability to live autonomously. Middle children are the most psychologically flexible and decentred.

Let us present the results of the analysis of the study participants' responses to the question *'What do you consider to be the best indication of trust in interpersonal relationships?'* (Table 3). Firstly, it is worth noting that what an adult considers to be the primary evidence of trust is both a fundamental emotional need and a reflection of how expressions of trust were perceived within their family of origin.

In view of the results presented in Table 3, individuals with *'only child'* status demonstrated a wide range of expectations regarding relationships, which may indicate a high level of demands and a nuanced understanding of what trust in relationships entails. Having no experience of real sibling conflicts or betrayals, as adults they seek to find everything at once in acquaintances, partners and friends. For them, honesty and sincerity are signs of a desire for the kind of mature, deep, authentic dialogue to which they are accustomed with their parents (this is also confirmed by their choices in the categories 'unconditional support / always taking your side' and 'no secrets'). Consequently, trust for them means absolute unity, where

the partner acts as a source of safety, sincerity and predictability in the emotional sphere.

Table 3

Results of respondents' answers to the question 'What do you consider to be the best argument for demonstrating trust in interpersonal relationships?'

Answer option	Respondents' sibling status			
	Only child	Eldest	Youngest	Middle child
'Honesty and sincerity in communication'	38.5%	50%	36.4%	33.3%
'Stability and predictability'	15.4%	40%	18.2%	16.7
'Willingness to help in a crisis'	15.4%	10%	18.2%	-
'Unconditional support and always taking your side'	15.4%	-	9.1%	33.3%
'No secrets'	15.4%	-	9.1%	16.7
'No fear of being vulnerable around me'	-	-	9.1%	-
Author's summary	*Diversification of requests and the pursuit of ideal contact*	*The cult of predictability and rational interaction*	*Emotional vulnerability and the need for secure acceptance*	*An acute lack of emotional alliance and recognition*

Those with the status *of eldest children* demonstrated the highest levels of pragmatism, rationalism and a certain maturity in the trust indicators. Almost half of the group (40%) are focused on stability and predictability – the highest figure among representatives of all four groups we are comparing. We hypothesise that, psychologically, this is a sign of a direct correlation with their childhood experience of a change in family roles. Thus, when a younger sibling is born, the first-born's perception of the world loses its stability and reliability regarding their parents' behaviour, as the familiar rules change. As a result of this childhood experience, the older child, as an adult, fears chaos, ambiguity and sudden changes in relationships.

The complete absence of responses regarding 'unconditional support / taking my side' or 'no secrets' indicates that older children respect personal boundaries (both their own and those of others) and are not prone to infantile egocentrism. For them, the most important thing is that their partner acts as honestly as possible, follows clear rules and keeps their word.

Since *younger children* in their parents' family often find themselves in the role of either a cheerful little one or the weaker party in an interaction – whose serious concerns may be dismissed by their elders – their need for trust in adulthood is accompanied by an acute need for emotional security. Thus, the emergence of the response 'not being afraid to be vulnerable around me' and the choice of 'willingness to help in a critical situation' (18.2%) likely indicate that, for younger siblings, trust is a space where habitual social roles and defences are set aside. Since in childhood they were often dependent on the strength and decisions of their older siblings, in adult relationships they seek either confirmation of their own strength (when a partner is not afraid to be vulnerable with them) or a reliable figure who will support them in a crisis.

The choice by a third of respondents with *'middle child'* status of the option 'unconditional support and always taking your side' is the highest relative indicator amongst all sibling status groups. Most likely, middle children more often feel like outsiders or arbiters in conflicts between older and younger siblings. Therefore, the best demonstration of trust for a middle child is the formation of a psychological triad or coalition in which the partner demonstrates total loyalty. For them, trust is not simply about honesty, but about an act of unconditional acceptance and affirmation of their unique value – something they often lacked within their parental family system.

Thus, childhood experiences within the parental family form the basis for the development of indicators of interpersonal trust in adulthood. Older children project their experience of losing control onto their demand for stability, rationality and transparency in the rules of the relationship. Only children expect total emotional comfort and honesty from a partnership, striving to preserve the safe and familiar format of a non-competitive existence. Younger children try to find in trust an opportunity to naturally let their guard down and make vulnerability (both their own and their partner's) acceptable. Middle children, through trust, try to compensate

for their childhood invisibility by demanding absolute emotional devotion, unconditional support and exclusive alliance from their partner.

Below are the results of the analysis of the study participants' responses to the question *'I listen to my own intuition and* premonitions' (Table 4).

Table 4

Respondents' answers to the question 'I listen to my own intuition and premonitions'

Response option	Respondents' sibling status			
	Only child	**Eldest**	**Youngest**	**Middle child**
Frequently	53.8%	40%	54.5%	50%
Always	30.8%	10%	27.3%	33.3%
Sometimes	15.4%	50%	9.1%	16.7%
Never	-	-	9.1%	-
The author's interpretation	*Confident cognitive balance and inner harmony*	*The cult of logic and the suppression of the irrational*	*Intuition as a safety radar and emotional defence*	*The intuitive flexibility of a family mediator*

Before examining and interpreting the above data, let us first note that intuition often acts as a mechanism for rapid pattern recognition without awareness of the analytical process itself. The extent to which a person is inclined to trust their premonitions depends directly on their need for strict rational control, which in turn is shaped by the significance of their role within their family of origin. The recorded results allowed us to conclude that *only children* place significant and consistent trust in their inner impulses (a total of 84.6% answered 'often' or 'always'). As they grew up without the need to constantly justify their actions to brothers or sisters or to argue logically to prove they were right in childhood conflicts, they have no internal taboo against irrationality. An only child is, a priori, accustomed to deep reflection on their own 'self'. Their intuition is not a source of anxiety, but a conscious inner resource, formed in a safe environment where their feelings and thoughts were taken seriously by significant adults from childhood onwards. They are not afraid to trust their hunches, because their 'ego' is not overburdened by the experience of defensive rationalism.

Older children were found to have the lowest tendency to trust their intuition amongst all groups, which is consistent with the classic

psychological profile of the first-born child (A. Adler, S. Freud, R. Richardson, R. Toman). The position of the first-born requires them to develop strong control functions: it is important to think first, and only then to act. As they bear responsibility for their younger siblings, their decisions must be well-founded, logical and easily explained to their parents. For the eldest child, relying on intuition or a hunch means relinquishing control and succumbing to chaos, which is unacceptable to their 'Superego'. The 50% figure for the 'sometimes' option likely indicates that first-borns consciously block irrational prompts from their psyche, preferring to rely on facts, rules and tried-and-tested procedures, reserving intuition only as a last resort.

We attribute the high level of reliance on intuition among *younger children* (over 81% 'often' / 'always') to their position in the family hierarchy. The youngest child is usually physically weaker and less cognitively experienced than older siblings or parents. Therefore, in order to adapt successfully, they are forced to develop not so much logic as a high sensitivity to changes in the family's emotional climate – to understand their mother's mood and recognise latent aggression or affection from an older brother or sister even before they express it. Consequently, their intuition is a well-developed resource. However, the emergence of the 'never' response illustrates the flip side of this process. If the family atmosphere was too unstable or manipulative, the child may have experienced the trauma of unpredictability, as a result of which their 'premonitions' became associated exclusively with anxiety. In such cases, the adult suppresses their intuition altogether, attempting to protect themselves in ways that are unfamiliar to them from unsettling unconscious impulses.

For *the middle child*, intuition is the primary tool for survival. Acting as a constant buffer and diplomat between the eldest – the leader – and the youngest – the favourite – the middle child has learnt to sense the dynamics of relationships intuitively. As they are often deprived of clearly defined privileges (unlike first-borns or the youngest children), their behavioural strategy cannot be fixed in rigid rules. The high overall level of trust in intuition (83.3%) reflected, in our view, their flexibility and ability to navigate situations thanks to an inner sense of the moment. Middle children understand perfectly well that the logic of relationships is often irrational, so they confidently rely on their hunches as a natural and time-tested mechanism for social manoeuvring.

Thus, the distribution of responses to the above question clearly demonstrated that the need for rational control is inversely proportional to the level of trust in one's own intuition: older children, shaped by early responsibilities, often consciously suppress their premonitions, demanding rational evidence and logical structures. Only children rely on intuition as a natural, safe extension of their 'self', as they have no experience of traumatic boundary violations. Younger and middle children use intuition as an emotional resource, formed in childhood by the need to adapt to complex, changing hierarchies and moods within the sibling subsystem.

Below is an overview of the results that reflect the content of the respondents' own definitions in response to the open-ended question *'I believe that trust is…'* (Table 5).

Table 5

Respondents' answers to the question 'I believe that trust is…'

	Respondents' sibling status			
	Only child	**Eldest**	**Youngest**	**Middle child**
Semantic cores of the responses and their meaning	*Trust as exclusive acceptance and 'security without secrets'* 'when people have no secrets', 'do not hide anything', 'being confident that a person will not leave', 'the foundation of a relationship, first and foremost, with oneself', 'not being afraid to show one's true self and not fearing judgement', 'weakness at times'	*Trust as functional reliability, responsibility and a 'treat'* 'the certainty that a person will keep their word', 'when you take responsibility for your words and this is backed up by actions', 'sharing life situations without anything left unsaid', 'when you can leave a treat out and it won't be eaten'	*Trust as an emotional refuge and the acceptance of weakness* 'allowing oneself to be weak', 'expressing one's fears without fear of judgement', 'you will be listened to and not judged', 'the absence of any barriers to communication', 'confidence in the reliability and competence of a system or another person'	*Trust as a way of overcoming hyper-control and finding peace* 'when you can tell someone or entrust them with something you would usually prefer to do yourself', 'unconditional acceptance', 'feeling at peace when you're with someone', 'the ability to always rely on someone'

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 5, for *only children*, trust represents a total, almost absolute blurring of boundaries in relationships. Indeed, the phrases 'when there are no secrets' and 'they hide nothing' reflect their experience of transparent, child-centred parenting, where there was no need to hide anything from siblings. It is telling that it was the only child who proposed the formula for trust as 'the foundation of relationships, first and foremost with oneself', which confirmed their high level of self-reflection and cognitive autonomy. At the same time, the phrase 'being certain that a person will not leave under any circumstances' points to a subconscious fear of losing this exclusive status. For an only child, opening up their inner world to someone else can sometimes be seen as a sign of weakness; therefore, they expect therapeutic, non-judgemental acceptance from their partner, regardless of gender.

For *first-borns*, the concept of trust is as down-to-earth and rational as possible, and is tested through real actions. They define trust in terms of responsibility: 'keeps their word', 'proven by actions'. As they were expected to be clear and reliable in childhood, they place the same strict demands on the world. A striking example of psychological self-reflection, which projects sibling rivalry, is the response: 'When you can leave a treat out and it won't be eaten'. The eldest child, who constantly faced younger siblings encroaching on their personal belongings, space or food, defined trust as respect for their boundaries. For the first-born, to trust is to know that one's personal resources are safe and that no one is encroaching upon them.

Whilst for those with the status of an older sibling, trust is an action and a contract, for *younger siblings* it is a safe emotional space. Their responses were dominated by the theme of protection from criticism: 'without fear of judgement', 'you won't be judged', 'allowing yourself to be vulnerable'. Younger children often grow up in circumstances where their cognitive abilities or seriousness were viewed with condescension by their elders, which is why, as adults, they feel a keen need to finally be heard and listened to. The phrase 'confidence in another person's competence… or even in the system' also caught our attention. Younger siblings are accustomed to delegating their sense of security to external figures (parents / older siblings), so for them, trust is the opportunity to relax, let down their social

defences and rely on someone else's strength or authority without fear of being ridiculed.

The responses *from middle children* revealed their unique inner drama. The definition of trust as the ability to 'entrust to someone else something that one would usually do better oneself' is particularly telling in this regard. Middle children, caught in the family hierarchy, often develop a compensatory 'I'm on my own' strategy, believing that no one will protect them better than they can themselves. For them, therefore, trust is a complex but necessary act of surrendering their own hyper-control, an ability to share responsibilities. The second important aspect is 'feeling at ease in someone's company'. As they constantly act as buffers and peacemakers in family dramas, middle children are the most drained by emotional tension. For them, trust is linked to the need to manoeuvre, defend themselves or prove something to someone.

The findings described above reflect the essence of the concept of basic trust (E. Erikson), whilst at the same time refining it through the sibling-link subsystem. The only child conceptualises trust as individual transparency and an intimate bond in which there is no room for secrets. The eldest child interprets trust as a social contract and the inviolability of their autonomous boundaries ('don't touch my treat'). The youngest child seeks refuge for their vulnerability in trust, where they can acknowledge their weakness without the risk of emotional punishment. The middle child sees trust as a source of emotional peace and a release from the need to control everything on their own.

Let us consider the results of respondents' subjective assessment of their own trustworthiness at this stage of their lives (*'Rate yourself: how trusting* are *you today?'* on a scale of 1 to 5), which revealed a marked discrepancy between individuals with different sibling experiences. Not a single respondent in the sample rated themselves as '1' (indicating absolute distrust), yet the average scores and the internal distribution of scores within the groups clearly demonstrated how childhood family experiences shape an individual's overall openness or caution in adulthood (Fig. 1).

Paradoxically, *first-born children* proved to be the most trusting based on their answers to the above question; at the same time, 60% rated themselves above average (scores of '4' and '5'). In our view, subjective trustworthiness in this case is not about childish naivety, but rather a declaration of strength

and confidence in one's own psychological defences. It is about trust from a 'superior' position, based on a well-developed 'Superego' and confidence in one's own abilities.

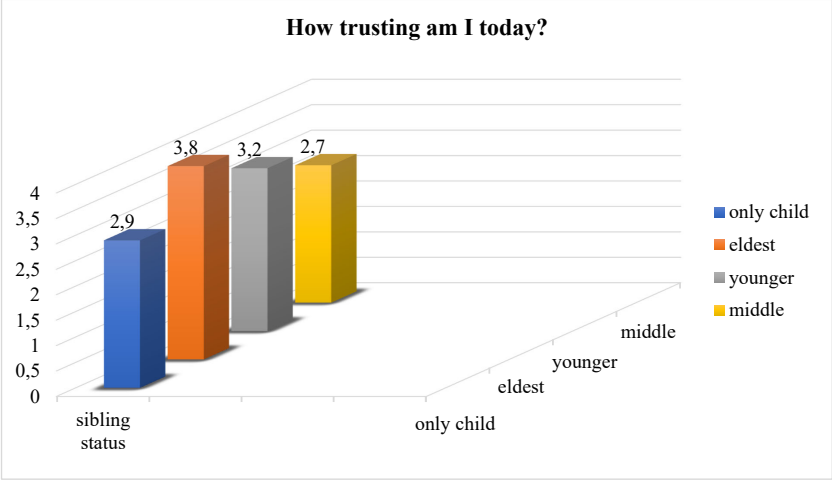


Figure 1. Responses to the question 'Rate yourself: how trusting are you today?'

In the case of those with a *younger* sibling status, the results showed an even distribution around the mean (mean score: 3.2), encompassing the full spectrum of responses, including the highest score. For younger children, trust is a natural and familiar coping mechanism from childhood. They grew up in an environment where there were always people nearby to whom they could shift responsibility or delegate difficult decisions (parents, older siblings). We believe this has enabled them to develop a more relaxed, less anxious attitude towards social interactions. They confidently incorporate this experience of trust (almost 37% rated themselves above average), as they subconsciously expect the support from the world that they are accustomed to receiving within their family. However, the fact that 27.3% of responses were rated '2' indicates that some younger children, in adulthood, go through a painful phase of separation, artificially lowering

their level of trust in order to protect themselves from the familiar childhood feeling of dependence on authority figures. Consequently, younger children demonstrated a pattern of entirely natural emotional openness.

It is worth noting that *only children* showed a tendency towards lower self-assessments (average score: 2.9); at the same time, no respondent rated themselves as high as '5', whilst the majority fell within a moderately sceptical range (38.5% rated themselves as '2', 38.5% as '3'). As respondents with 'only child' sibling status grew up without the experience of daily group interaction amongst children, emotional ups and downs, or sudden conflicts with siblings, their world is predictable and safe thanks to their parents, but inward-looking. In adulthood, upon entering wider society, only children tend to adopt the role of rational and cautious observers. The complete absence of maximum trust ratings indicates that they are, a priori, not prone to being overly captivated by people. They maintain a clear psychological distance. For them, low subjective trust (a score of '2') is not a traumatic fear of the world, but a conscious, considered strategy for individually protecting their autonomous space from unauthorised intrusion.

Middle children demonstrated the lowest level of self-assessed trust (at '2.7'), whilst the overwhelming majority (66.7%) settled on a rating of '3', and none chose a higher rating. They are chronically sceptical, as they presumably lacked attention from childhood. This assumption of the 'invisible child' is confirmed by the complete absence of '4' and '5' ratings, whilst '2' and '3' scores dominate entirely. They may often feel emotionally lonely, subconsciously doubting society's unconditional affection for them, and adopt a stance of maximum emotional neutrality, which allows them to avoid opening up completely to anyone and to protect themselves from a repeat of their childhood experiences of emotional neglect or the disregard of their interests.

Thus, only children or younger siblings are not the most trusting or naive due to overprotection. The highest subjective willingness to trust was demonstrated by the eldest child, who is also the person most ready to take on control and responsibility. In contrast, respondents with middle-child or only-child sibling experiences displayed marked defensive caution, establishing rigid boundaries for their adult 'self' in the form of low indicators of personal trustworthiness.

2. Trust in the World, in Others and in Oneself Among Individuals with Different Sibling Statuses

Let us now turn our attention to the results obtained using A. Kupreichenko's methodology. An analysis of responses to the statement *'I trust my ability to build relationships with close people',* taking sibling status into account, revealed that the role of the primary microenvironment of the parental family in a person's self-assessment regarding intimacy has become even more pronounced and clearly defined.

Among those with the sibling status of *'only child'*, 53.9% chose the 'confident' option; at the same time, this group showed the highest level of uncertainty (38.5% of respondents answered 'difficult to determine'). Since only children grew up in a world where closeness with adults (parents) was usually a constant, requiring no daily struggles or compromises with siblings, in adulthood, when there is a need to build relationships on a horizontal level (with partners, friends), they may find themselves lacking the intuitive conflict-resolution tools developed during childhood. Almost 39% of 'difficult to determine' responses may indicate a deep sense of self-criticism and inner doubt regarding their own perfection, as only children are not accustomed to childhood squabbles within their parents' family. Consequently, building relationships is a conscious, rational process for them.

The eldest child's responses showed an even distribution, and thus a rational self-assessment. Individuals with this sibling status have a unique experience of building relationships: they are most likely to recall a period of absolute closeness with their parents, followed by a period of forced adaptation and the establishment of a relationship with their younger sibling from the position of a leader or mentor. The overall confidence score (60% of 'true' / 'mostly true' responses) reflected their fundamental sense of competence: they know they are capable of managing the dynamics of interaction. However, the 30% who found it 'difficult to say' clearly illustrate a syndrome of hyper-responsibility. Older children often blame themselves if relationships do not go perfectly. For them, the ability to build relationships means taking full responsibility for the emotional atmosphere within the relationship, and if their partner expresses dissatisfaction, the first-born rationally questions their own communication skills.

Those with the *'younger* sibling' status demonstrated the highest overall level of confidence (72.7%) and the lowest level of uncertainty (27.3%). For them, interpersonal interaction is a natural environment. From birth, they have been in a rich social environment where skills in emotional manoeuvring, compromise and affection have been practised daily. They are accustomed to close relatives (parents and older siblings) always being nearby and, by default, inclined to provide care and support. High self-esteem in this area (almost 73%) may indicate that younger children are emotionally uninhibited and optimistic. They believe in their ability to be liked and to maintain close relationships. However, the high percentage of 'somewhat true' responses (54.5%) rather than 'definitely true' suggests that this confidence holds true only as long as loved ones behave in line with the respondent's childhood expectations. If an adult partner demands mature autonomy from the 'youngest child' rather than the familiar emotional fusion experienced in childhood, their confidence may waver. We therefore focus on a vector of understanding in this case, which we shall term 'declarative optimism' and a 'course towards confluence'.

The 'middle child' demonstrated an interesting mathematical distribution: the group was clearly differentiated into three levels of subgroups (33.3% each across the options 'true', 'mostly true' and 'difficult to determine'). Not a single respondent selected 'false'. As they lacked the egocentric immunity of an only child or the authoritative status of a first-born, their functionality depended on their ability to build horizontal relationships both 'upwards' (with older siblings) and 'downwards' (with younger ones). At the same time, the overall confidence level of 66.6% (with a third selecting 'definitely true') demonstrated signs of a high level of emotional intelligence. Middle children know how to get on with people because they have been doing so throughout their lives whilst outside the focus of their parents' attention. The same 33.3% who chose 'difficult to say' reflected a specific 'middle child syndrome' – a sense of emotional 'invisibility'. They may be perfectly capable of building functional relationships, but on a deeper level they doubt the sincerity of this closeness (or whether they have simply, once again, skilfully adapted to another person's needs, losing their own sense of self).

An analysis of responses to a question concerning confidence in one's ability to build relationships revealed a link between this and the type

of socialisation a person experienced during childhood. In particular, younger and older children who had undergone an intensive 'school' of daily sibling interaction demonstrated greater and more stable confidence in their interpersonal skills. By contrast, only children and older siblings, whose childhoods were more focused on vertical relationships with adults or on strict individual control, exhibited higher levels of internal doubt and reflective inhibition, placing heightened rational demands on close relationships.

Below are the results of the analysis of responses to the reverse statement *'I am not very concerned about objects and phenomena in the world around me',* which touches upon a fundamental psychological construct – the level of an individual's social sensitivity, their openness to external experience and their propensity for empathetic interaction with the world – and revealed the following. A unique polarity was observed among *first-born children*: on the one hand, they demonstrated the highest level of absolute concern – 40% answered 'not true' (they are very concerned about the world); whilst, on the other hand, 30% chose the option 'somewhat true', and only 10% selected 'somewhat not true'. The remaining 20% were undecided. No one agreed completely ('true'). We interpret this in the context that such a pronounced divide reflects the internal conflict inherent in the role of the first-born. The 40% who are absolutely not indifferent are a classic example of older children with a highly developed conscience and ideals. From an early age, they have been accustomed to keeping an eye on their surroundings, ensuring order and looking after the safety of their younger siblings. For them, the outside world is an area of potential responsibility, so they cannot remain indifferent to its phenomena and events. However, the 30% who are unconcerned about the world around them illustrate the effects of psychological overload and burnout. Older children, weary from the chronic burden of childhood responsibilities and parental expectations, may develop a defensive emotional response in adulthood. For them, detachment from the world's events is an attempt to narrow the scope of their responsibility in order to preserve what remains of their mental resources.

Younger siblings demonstrated a high level of engagement with external processes: a total of 63.7% disagreed with the statement (27.3% – 'not true', 36.4% – 'rather not true'). The option 'somewhat true' was chosen

by 18.2%, whilst nobody selected the 'true' category. We therefore assume that 'younger children' demonstrated a healthy, open and unburdened attitude towards their surroundings. Since, in childhood, the world around them was largely perceived as a safe space organised by adults, they did not develop a need to protect themselves from it. They view the objects and phenomena of the world with natural curiosity and empathy (almost 64% are not indifferent). Their concern about external events lacks the anxious undertone typical of older people. They allow the world to influence them and respond emotionally to changes, as they subconsciously believe that the world is friendly and that any crises or phenomena it faces will ultimately be resolved by someone stronger.

Only children demonstrated the highest overall level of disagreement with indifference – 61.6% (38.5% – 'rather untrue' and 23.1% – 'untrue'). At the same time, there is a small percentage of radical egocentrism (7.7% – 'true') and moderate detachment (15.4% – 'somewhat true'). We attribute this to the fact that most only children are characterised by high cognitive and aesthetic engagement. Growing up amongst adults and often having access to high-quality intellectual leisure activities without having to share them with siblings, they have developed a deep interest in culture, science, nature and social phenomena. For them, the outside world is a space for self-actualisation in which they are emotionally engaged. However, the presence of polarised responses (totalling around 23% of agreement with indifference) highlighted another aspect of the only child's position – a tendency towards pronounced introverted immersion. If they choose autarky (self-sufficiency), the phenomena of the outside world truly cease to concern them, giving way to a perfectly organised and controlled microcosm of their own personality, with deeply defined personal boundaries.

The 'middle group' was distributed in a unique way according to the responses given: the highest percentage was for 'rather untrue' (33.3%), whilst the remaining four response options ('true', 'false', 'difficult to say', 'somewhat true') each received 16.7%. Such a diffuse and mosaic-like distribution may illustrate the flexibility and, at the same time, the inner personal uncertainty of the middle child. Finding themselves in a precarious intermediate position within the family, the middle child forms an individual trajectory depending on whether they were closer to their older or younger sibling. On the one hand, half the group (50%) demonstrated

a sense of concern for the world, reflecting their well-developed adaptive and empathetic social skills. On the other hand, the highest percentage of absolute indifference (16.7% – 'true') among all groups, combined with 16.7% 'somewhat true', revealed a specific form of escapism characteristic of the middle child. If their childhood was accompanied by a chronic sense of being unwanted, the adult personality may completely devalue the outside world according to the principle: 'If I do not matter to this world (my family), then its phenomena matter little to me either.' Therefore, such a person is doomed from childhood to drift existentially, remaining largely unnoticed in their experiences.

Thus, these results demonstrated that one's attitude towards the surrounding world, as shaped by the nature of childhood interactions, moulds the direction of adult interests. In particular, younger and only children exhibited the most stable, holistic and secure engagement with the outside world, viewing it as a space for learning and experiencing life. Older children view the world through the prism of hyper-control, which is why some of them display pronounced psychological fatigue and a defensive detachment from its problems. Middle children exhibit existential diffuseness: their attitude towards the world fluctuates between deep empathetic engagement and complete defensive alienation ('I don't care'), reflecting the specific nature of their precarious self-identification within the family system.

An analysis of responses to the statement *'I trust my ability to distinguish between "good" and "bad"'* touches upon an important aspect of the inner structure of the personality – the development of an autonomous system of moral and ethical guidelines and trust in one's own evaluative judgements (the so-called locus of control). The ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' forms the core of the individual's 'Superego', which is established in early childhood through the prism of specific relationships with parents and other children within the family. Overall, the responses from the sample showed a predominance of confidence in one's own judgements (75%); however, the internal distribution within the groups revealed significant differences in the level of internal stability.

In this case, *younger children* led the way in terms of unconditional confidence in their assessments: 45.5% chose 'true', and a further 36.4% chose 'mostly true' (a total of 81.9%). Only 9.1% each chose the options

'difficult to determine' and 'rather incorrect'. We believe that such a high level of internal conviction (45.5%) may reflect a distinctive feature of the younger child's socialisation. Constantly being the focus of upbringing, both from parents and older siblings, the youngest child is exposed daily to a large volume of current evaluative judgements and rules (what is and isn't allowed). In adulthood, this transforms into a clearly integrated, almost automatic frame of reference. Their confidence is free from agonising doubts, as they have a stable childhood foundation of family support and approval. For the youngest child, the world remains fairly straightforward in its ethical manifestations, allowing them to rely confidently on their inner resources.

Middle children demonstrated absolute confidence – 100% of their responses fell within the positive spectrum (66.7% 'somewhat true' and 33.3% 'true'). Therefore, the middle child's role as a natural mediator in family conflicts requires them to grasp the situation quickly. In order to strike a balance between the interests of the self-centred eldest and the youngest, the middle child is compelled to develop a high level of social conformity. We therefore assume that such a high level of confidence in their ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' indicates that, for the middle child, clear ethical guidelines serve as a tool for psychological survival and adaptation. They do not hesitate for long, as any ambiguity in their criteria threatens to undermine stability at all levels. They are acutely aware of the limits of what is acceptable, which makes them steadfast in their assessments of society.

Among *first-born children*, a moderate, rational stance prevailed in the responses: 50% answered 'somewhat true', whilst 30% were absolutely certain. The level of uncertainty and doubt in this case proved to be minimal (10% each for 'difficult to say' and 'somewhat untrue'). We assume that the eldest child, upon whom the parents have relied from an early age to uphold moral standards and set an example for their younger siblings, demonstrates a predictably high level of confidence in their own judgement (80% in total). However, the shift in emphasis towards the 'rather true' option (50%) rather than the absolute 'true' most likely indicated their analytical way of thinking. First-borns understand that the real world is more complex than a black-and-white dichotomy, and that the concepts of 'good' and 'bad' sometimes require contextual analysis. Their self-confidence is based not

on exceptional intuition, but on life experience and intellectual control: they trust their ability to assess situations, as they are accustomed to acting prudently and taking responsibility for the consequences of their decisions within the family system.

Among the group of respondents with sibling status, the highest levels of internal disorientation and doubt were found. The responses were distributed almost evenly: 30.8% – 'somewhat true', 23.1% – 'true', 23.1% – 'difficult to say' and 23.1% – 'somewhat untrue'. Consequently, almost half (46.2%) of only children experience serious difficulties or uncertainty when trying to distinguish between right and wrong in adult life. In our view, the reason for this may lie in the uniqueness of their childhood experiences. For instance, whilst growing up in an adult environment, an only child internalised the moral criteria conveyed specifically by their parents (or those acting in their stead). However, in real life, when confronted with ambivalence, selfishness or the hidden motives of peers in peer relationships, the only child finds that their childhood frameworks are ineffective. A large proportion of the responses highlighting insecurity illustrated a crisis of self-reflection: they tend to over-complicate the analysis of people's actions, often engage in self-doubt and lose their bearings due to a lack of childhood experience of real conflict and reflection on daily interactions within a sibling-free environment.

We believe that these findings may support the view that having siblings correlates positively with greater self-confidence in assessing moral and ethical categories. Indeed, children from sibling groups (younger, middle and older siblings) demonstrated quite high levels of confidence in their own criteria, having undergone an intensive 'school of social interaction' within their parental family, where the concepts of 'fair / unfair' and 'good / bad' were honed through daily interactions, including those involving minor conflicts. Only children demonstrated marked vulnerability, a tendency towards reflective paralysis and inner doubt, which we interpret as a lack of practical communicative experience in distinguishing between people's intentions outside the parent-child subsystem.

Let us look at the responses of the sample participants regarding the statement *'The world around me is a source of danger*'. We interpret this as a basic trust in the world (according to E. Erikson). Therefore, how a person perceives society and their surroundings – as a safe and friendly environment

or as hostile and threatening – is a direct reflection of the stability of their early family experiences. The group *of only children* demonstrated a striking level of basic trust in the world: 84.7% of respondents disagreed that the world is dangerous (46.2% – 'not true', 38.5% – 'rather not true'). Not a single only child selected the options 'true' or 'somewhat true', which accordingly did not indicate anxiety. The remaining 15.4% answered 'difficult to say'. Only children exhibited the highest level of security. As they were the sole focus of their parents' care, love and resources during childhood, a world of an ideal cocoon was, to a certain extent, artificially constructed around them. They did not share space with rivals, nor did they experience unexpected aggression or bullying from siblings. In adulthood, this experience translates into an absolute psychological mindset, whereby the world is perceived a priori as safe, and the individual has a right to exist within it. The complete absence of responses regarding danger suggests that, even when faced with life crises, only children perceive them as localised problems rather than as a systemic threat to their very existence.

At the same time, *first-borns* also demonstrated a high level of resilience: 80% rejected the idea that the world is hostile. Only 10% expressed uncertainty (selecting the option 'somewhat true'), and 10% were undecided. The position of the eldest child also highlighted a high level of basic security, but for entirely different reasons than in only children. First-borns had already experienced unconditional parental love before the arrival of their siblings, which laid a solid emotional foundation (although in future studies it will be important to take into account differences in age and gender). At the same time, their 'Ego' has been tempered by a sense of responsibility: the eldest child is accustomed to being the source of stability and rules in the children's room. Generally speaking, they are not afraid of the world, as they believe in their ability to assess risks, organise protection and stand their ground. The world is not dangerous to them because they feel strong enough to navigate it and keep themselves safe on their own.

Younger siblings demonstrated a high level of internal dichotomy. On the one hand, 45.5% do not consider the world to be dangerous, but on the other, this group recorded the highest level of anxiety – 36.4% agree that there is a threat. A further 18.2% were undecided in their responses. The youngest child in the family is most often in the position of being the smallest, weakest and most dependent member of the family unit. During childhood,

they often experienced domination, teasing or criticism from older brothers and sisters, against whom it is difficult to defend oneself physically or intellectually. However, if the older siblings protected the youngest, a sense of trust is formed. However, if sibling rivalry was intense, the youngest child develops a chronic sense of helplessness. The anxiety score illustrated this syndrome: as an adult, the youngest child subconsciously continues to feel vulnerable in the face of the large and powerful figures of the wider world, anticipating an attack or being belittled.

Middle children showed the most pessimistic results. Not a single respondent was able to select the option emphasising absolute safety. Instead, 50% explicitly stated that the world 'is more of a source of danger', whilst 33.3% chose the moderate 'rather not true' (and 16.7% were undecided). The results from middle children may indicate a profound breakdown in basic trust (half the group perceived a threat from the world and a lack of absolute confidence in safety). In family psychology, the middle child lacks stability: just as they are getting used to being the youngest, the next child is born, and they are emotionally displaced from their position of privilege, without retaining the privileges of the eldest. This experience often fosters a sense of chronic instability in their environment: the rules of the game are constantly changing, and their parents' attention wanes. Consequently, the middle child, as an adult, projects this lack of support onto society as a whole. To them, the world is a dangerous, unpredictable environment where one must be constantly on guard, as they have virtually no primary experience of unconditional, guaranteed safety.

Thus, the level of basic trust in the wider world directly reflected specific patterns depending on birth order and the degree of stability of the child's position within the family. The experience gained in the parental family by only children and first-borns, in terms of their exclusive access to parental resources, is capable of forming a stable inner core and a sense of security and control. Younger and middle children, however, are at increased risk of developing chronic anxiety when they perceive the world as a threat. The need for daily survival amidst sibling rivalry and a lack of parental attention undermines their belief in the benevolence of society, making these adults more sensitive to external stressors.

Let us present a comparative analysis of the responses to the question *'I trust my ability to cope in a critical situation'.* To begin with, the ability

to rely on oneself in times of danger or uncertainty depends directly on the extent to which the child's position within the primary family system was characterised by autonomy and control, or, conversely, by a lack of autonomy. Therefore, this question touches upon the phenomena of stress resilience and self-efficacy. Thus, *younger* siblings demonstrated the highest level of absolute confidence – 54.5% answered with an uncompromising 'true'. At the same time, this group was the only one in which the 'false' option was recorded – 9.1%. A further 27.3% chose 'mostly true', whilst 9.1% selected 'mostly false'. The level of uncertainty in this case was zero. Those in the 'youngest child' role demonstrated the most polarised results. As younger children are accustomed to operating in environments dominated by stronger and older figures, they often develop a high degree of behavioural flexibility, quick reactions and the ability to adapt in chaotic situations. At a critical moment, their adaptive coping mechanism kicks in instantly. However, the presence of 'incorrect' and 'somewhat incorrect' responses (totalling 18.2%) illustrates the opposite – the phenomenon of learned helplessness. If, during childhood, all real crises involving the youngest child were resolved by parents or older siblings, an adult in a crisis situation subconsciously regresses to the state of a helpless child who awaits external rescue and does not believe in their own abilities. Consequently, they find themselves in a precarious position: ranging from radical mobilisation to infantile helplessness.

First-borns demonstrated that in 70% of cases they are confident in their own abilities (10% were moderately confident, whilst 20% were unsure of their answers). For the eldest child, a crisis is a familiar and understandable sphere of activity. The role of the first-born in the family has historically been linked to leadership: looking after younger siblings, comforting them, protecting them and restoring order when parents are not around. Their 'Ego' has been tempered by early responsibility. The eldest child has demonstrated rational self-efficacy and a successful track record in crisis management.

The group *of only* children showed the highest overall confidence score – 84.6%. Only 15.4% indicated that they were undecided ('difficult to say'). Only children demonstrated exceptionally high self-efficacy, but with a tendency towards moderation. Growing up in the safe, predictable world of their parents' family, where their personal boundaries were respected,

only children develop a stable and enduring sense of optimism, an inner core unshaken by sibling conflicts. They are used to relying on themselves, as there were no other children nearby onto whom they could shift blame or responsibilities. In adulthood, this inner autonomy transforms into a calm confidence: *'I'll manage, because I always rely on myself*.'

Middle children once again showed the most complex results. Not a single respondent selected the option of absolute certainty, 'true'. The group was split down the middle in their responses: 50% answered 'mostly true', whilst the other 50% indicated 'difficult to say'. This result clearly illustrated the inner state of the 'middle child syndrome'. The complete absence of 'true' responses and the high percentage of hesitation (50% 'difficult to determine' – the highest figure among all groups) indicate a profound lack of self-support and inner confidence. The middle child, existing within the family system entirely in the shadow of the eldest's achievements and the youngest's helplessness, is often deprived of a clear awareness of their own strength. In a critical situation, they tend to doubt the correctness of their actions. They are accustomed to adapting to other people's decisions and strategies; therefore, a situation requiring an independent, immediate and confident response from them causes them to freeze up and experience deep, reflective hesitation.

Consequently, only children and first-borns demonstrated the most mature and stable self-efficacy. They draw on well-developed childhood autonomy and an integrated experience of individual responsibility. Younger children showed a tendency towards polarised reactions: ranging from pronounced leadership under stress to complete infantile capitulation, which is determined by the degree of overprotection in the parental household. Middle-aged children demonstrated the greatest vulnerability to crisis factors, exhibiting a chronic lack of decisiveness, which reflected a lack of experience in having their individual significance and strength recognised within their primary family system.

An analysis of the responses to the statement *'If you let your guard down, people will take advantage of you'* enabled us to examine the phenomenon under study through the lenses of social vigilance, expectations of competition and interpersonal protection (since the belief that other people are ready to exploit vulnerability or inattention is a direct manifestation of a pragmatic or anxious attitude towards society). Thus, those in the

'youngest child' status group demonstrated the highest overall level of agreement – 54.6%. At the same time, only 27.3% disagreed with this statement. The level of uncertainty stood at 18.2%. For the youngest child, this situation is an everyday reality of their childhood. Younger siblings grow up in an environment of constant, overt or covert, competition for resources (parental attention, toys, personal space) with stronger and more resourceful older brothers or sisters; and so, in adulthood, they retain a high level of interpersonal wariness and perceive interaction with people as a game in which one must always be on the defensive to avoid ending up in the position of being manipulated.

Middle children showed a polarised distribution: exactly half of the group (50%) agreed with the statement, with a marked emphasis on maximum certainty – 33.3% chose 'true' (the highest rate of radical agreement among all groups) and 16.7% chose 'somewhat true'. The other half of the group expressed disagreement: 33.3% answered 'rather not true', whilst 16.7% were undecided. A third of the respondents who chose an unequivocally affirmative answer reflect the classic trauma of the middle child, whose interests and preferences in childhood were regularly undermined by both authoritarian older siblings and privileged younger ones. For them, the world is one of total competition, where a lack of attention has taught them to monitor their personal boundaries strictly, and sometimes even aggressively. However, the 33.3% of 'rather untrue' responses revealed another extreme amongst middle children – a strategy of hyper-compromise. Such respondents consciously reject the idea of suspicion, attempting to maintain inner peace through total trust, as the chronic anticipation of being deceived is emotionally unbearable for them.

Among *only* children, a tendency to agree was also observed – a total of 46.2% (30.8% – 'somewhat true' and 15.4% – 'true'). Those who disagreed with the statement accounted for 23.1%. At the same time, a high level of uncertainty was observed – 30.8% answered 'difficult to say'. An only child does not experience direct sibling rivalry in the family home; however, their high level of wariness (almost 46%) is driven by another factor – the fear of losing control over their unique status. Having become accustomed to the fact that all family benefits belong to them by default, in the adult world the only child discovers that other people are not going to respect their exceptional status just like that. The high level of hesitation (30.8%

'difficult to say') indicates that it is hard for an only child to come to terms with the idea of selfishness in those around them: their 'self' longs to see the world as a safe place, but a rational analysis of adult experience forces them to accept the need to keep their distance.

Older children found it hardest to make up their minds (40% answered 'difficult to say' – the highest figure in the sample), whilst the overall level of agreement was the lowest among those in all four status groups studied (30%). We attribute this overwhelming prevalence of doubt in the responses to their depth of analytical thinking and their reluctance to think in stereotypes. First-borns, more than anyone else, understand the ambivalence of human nature. The eldest child in the parental family was often the one who could take advantage of the younger siblings' weaknesses (by bossing them about, for example), but at the same time, it was they who bore moral responsibility for them. The low level of anxious compliance (only 30%) suggests that older children do not see themselves as potential victims whose vulnerability can be easily exploited. They are confident in their ability to protect themselves, control the situation and set firm boundaries; therefore, the very idea that they might lose control seems unlikely to their controlling 'Super-Ego'.

Consequently, younger and middle children showed the highest willingness to agree with the thesis of rivalry, which is a direct consequence of their childhood experience of survival amidst sibling dominance and a lack of parental resources. Only children demonstrated a moderate level of wariness, which acts as a defence mechanism to protect their autonomous, familiar microcosm – familiar from childhood – from external encroachments. Older children demonstrated the greatest ability to draw on an inner sense of strength and control, viewing themselves as agents who manage the security of their relationships themselves, rather than as objects of someone else's exploitation.

Let us examine the results of a comparative analysis of the responses to the question *'I trust my ability to predict other people's actions'.* Thus, *only* children demonstrated a high level of confidence in their predictive abilities – 84.6% in total – whilst at the same time showing a minimal level of hesitation (7.7%) and low levels of scepticism (7.7%). We believe that, as an only child grows up surrounded by adults whose behaviour is usually rational, consistent and logical (where parents clearly communicate their

expectations), this helps them to develop a stable and linear model of how to perceive people. In adulthood, only children carry this confidence over into society (almost 85% of optimistic responses). They trust their own predictions, as they tend to believe that others act just as logically and predictably as their parents did. The minimal percentage of doubts merely emphasised that they rarely expect people to act in a chaotic, impulsive or irrational manner that might undermine their analytical predictions.

At the same time, *younger* siblings also demonstrated a high overall confidence score – 81.8%. The main characteristic of this group is a complete absence of hesitation and a very low rate of radical disagreement across the entire sample – 9.1%, whilst a further 9.1% selected 'Rather not true'. The position of the youngest child requires daily monitoring of the moods of their older siblings. Thus, in order to ask for a toy, avoid punishment or get their older siblings to play, the youngest is forced to quickly pick up on subtle signals of dissatisfaction or joy. This experience fosters a high capacity for social prediction. The absence of hesitation suggests that younger children act automatically – they are convinced they can see right through people. However, the presence of the polar 'not true' option (9.1%) illustrates the phenomenon of egocentric bias. Whilst a younger child's predictions in childhood were often thwarted by the unpredictability of their older siblings' adolescent behaviour, in adulthood such a person may lose all faith in their ability to understand the hidden motives of those around them.

Middle children concentrated the majority of their responses in the moderately positive range – 66.7% chose 'rather true'. No respondent expressed absolute certainty. The remaining responses were split equally – 16.7% each for 'difficult to determine' and 'rather not true'. The middle child plays a diplomatic role within the family hierarchy, as they are forced to anticipate the reactions of both the self-centred eldest and the youngest. They are adept at anticipating people's behaviour, but do so without undue self-assured grandstanding. The dominant response of 'rather true' (66.7%) suggests, we assume, a flexible, practical nature to their forecasting. Middle children realise that people are changeable beings and that human actions depend on many circumstances. Their forecasting is not based on overconfidence in their own correctness, but on the ability to intuitively see a compromise and adapt to a likely change in their partner's behaviour.

First-born children showed the most unexpected and destructive result in this sample. 40% (the highest figure) answered 'difficult to say'. At the same time, the overall level of confidence in their predictions is the lowest – 50% in total – whilst a further 10% chose 'probably not correct'. We hypothesise that older children, who are used to being in control, displayed such total uncertainty (40% hesitation) when predicting others' behaviour, reflecting their specific traumatic experience of the birth of younger siblings. Before the arrival of the second child, the firstborn's world was stable, but the birth of a rival shattered this predictability, creating chaos for which the older child was unprepared. At the same time, the first-born's hyper-responsibility compels their 'Super-Ego' to demand perfect, accurate predictions of their own. They realise that the cost of making a mistake when predicting the actions of subordinates or loved ones is too high. As a result, the older child, as an adult, tends to analyse situations too deeply, run through countless scenarios and, ultimately, fall into a reflective stupor, recognising that human behaviour is too complex to be reduced to a single, definitive conclusion.

It has therefore been observed that only children and younger siblings demonstrate the highest level of subjective confidence in their social intuition. For the former, this is based on the experience of predictable parental relationships; for the latter, on a habit, ingrained from childhood, of automatically scanning the emotions of those around them. Middle children displayed a flexible approach, stemming from their role as natural family mediators. The eldest children experience a significant cognitive deficit in their trust in their own predictions, as an excessive desire for control, a fear of making mistakes, and childhood experiences of the unpredictable undermining of their unique status make them overly cautious and sceptical when assessing other people's personal trajectories.

An analysis of the responses to the question *'You should be very careful when dealing with people'* revealed the following. The group *of only* children showed the highest level of strong agreement – 46.2% chose 'true', and a further 38.5% chose 'somewhat true' (a total of 84.7% expressing caution). No one chose the 'false' option, whilst 'somewhat false' and 'difficult to say' each accounted for just 7.7%. This is perhaps one of the most interesting paradoxes of the study. Previously, only children demonstrated a high level of basic security (they did not view the world as a source of danger), but in

direct contact with people they demand the utmost caution (as evidenced by this nearly 85% agreement). This most likely highlights the fact that an only child idealises the world in general, but is very afraid of people in particular. Lacking childhood experience of sibling conflicts, they perceive real human relationships as something complex and unpredictable. They strive to protect their inner order from external interference. For them, being cautious is a way of preventing disappointment, as any violation of their boundaries by adults is experienced by them as particularly painful due to a lack of the psychological resilience typically found in children when faced with the selfishness of their peers.

Younger children also demonstrated a consistently high need for caution – a total of 81.9% agreement. At the same time, there is a complete absence of hesitation, whilst moderate disagreement is present (18.2%). For the younger sibling, caution in relationships is a fundamental life strategy, ingrained at the level of reflexes. Growing up alongside stronger and older children, the youngest sibling becomes accustomed to the idea that their naivety or weakness might be exploited. And they have no doubts about this rule: for them, people are, a priori, those with whom one must be cautious. Their wariness (almost 82%) is, from their point of view, a healthy form of pragmatism and a behavioural filter that protects them from domination or manipulation by those around them in adult life.

Middle children showed the most diffuse and internally contradictory results. Overall agreement stood at 50%, but at the same time this group recorded the highest level of uncertainty – 33.3% (who answered ‘difficult to determine’). Furthermore, 16.7% chose the option ‘not true’. These results clearly illustrate the ambivalence of the middle child’s position. A third of the group (33.3% ‘true’) is influenced by the trauma of the overlooked child, which is transferred from the family system to society through fear. However, the highest level of indecision (33.3%) indicates that middle children are in a constant internal conflict between their desire to be diplomats (which requires openness and trust) and their fear of being deceived again or pushed to the periphery of relationships. It is incredibly difficult for them to develop a single strategy for interpersonal interaction, which is why they are constantly oscillating between total defence and attempts at rapprochement.

First-borns proved to be the most open and the least anxious of all the groups. The total proportion rejecting the statement about caution stands at 50% (which is an absolute record in the sample), but the level of agreement is also the lowest – 50%. Older children demonstrated a level of interpersonal ease and trust that is unique to this sample (half the group sees no need for excessive caution, whilst the level of radical fear stands at a symbolic 10%). We surmise that this is due to the fact that first-borns have been in a position of strength and as caregivers from an early age. They do not feel the need to defend themselves against others in a panic, as they are confident in their dominant status and their ability to put anyone in their place should their boundaries be breached. The complete absence of 'difficult to determine' responses highlights the psychological maturity and self-assurance of older children. They are fully aware of their capabilities: they are prepared to engage and trust, as they feel strong and competent enough to cope with any difficulties in communication without resorting to radical self-isolation beforehand.

Therefore, the empirical distribution of responses confirmed that the nature of an adult's interpersonal trust is shaped by the child's hierarchical status within the parental family. Only children and younger siblings demonstrated a marked deficit in interpersonal trust and a high level of wariness. In only children, this stems from an infantile fear of the destruction of their relatively conflict-free microcosm, whilst in younger siblings it is an ingrained form of defence against potential pressure from stronger figures. Middle children exhibited a state of reflective disunity and disorientation, reflecting their chronic childhood instability in the search for a balance between autonomy and integration into the family system. The older children (first-borns) emerged as the most psychologically secure and open group. Their status as primary leaders and bearers of parental authority fosters a stable 'Ego' in them, one that requires no artificial barriers to interacting with those around them, approaching such interaction from a position of psychological strength and open cooperation.

Following a comparative analysis of the responses to the question *'Nobody intends to take responsibility for what happens to you, even though they can see where things are heading',* the following patterns emerged for the factor under investigation. *Younger* children showed the highest overall level of moderate agreement – 63.6%, whilst one in three

younger siblings expressed uncertainty – 27.3%, and 9.1% categorically rejected the statement. A younger child becomes accustomed to the fact that, during childhood, adults and older siblings constantly look after them and take responsibility for their actions and behaviour. However, adult life imposes different demands. They develop a sense along the lines of: *'When I was little, everyone rushed to my aid. Now, when I'm struggling, adults just stand by and do nothing*.' As their childhood experiences did not involve overt hostility, they do not express radical agreement, but they do express deep resentment and bewilderment that their former saviours no longer fulfil their roles, leaving them to face adult problems on their own.

The group *of only* children showed the highest overall level of full agreement with the statement – 69.3%. This is a critically high indicator of social alienation (almost 70% agreement, of which over 30% is absolute conviction). An only child grows up without horizontal bonds with brothers or sisters. If, during their childhood, their parents were overly busy, emotionally distant or demanded independence from the child on the basis that 'you're a grown-up now', they develop a deep-seated belief that they can rely solely on themselves. The complete absence of 'false' responses emphasises that only children do not believe in society's altruistic responsibility. For them, the idea of loneliness in a crisis is a fundamental axiom of their life in the adult world.

Middle children demonstrated marked disorientation. The total agreement rate was 66.7%. At the same time, this group showed the highest level of uncertainty in this instance – 33.3%. There were no negative responses whatsoever ('not true', 'rather not true'). Since the middle child is the one who most often feels a lack of parental attention within the family system – because the focus is shifted towards the older sibling's achievements or the younger sibling's needs – they frequently experience their own internal crises and problems being genuinely ignored, even when they are obvious (and they subconsciously accept this emotional neglect). The high level of uncertainty (33.3% 'difficult to determine') most likely points to a deep-seated latent trigger: they would like to believe that society will respond to their difficulties, but their childhood experience of being ignored by the parental subsystem leads them to expect nothing more than passive observation from those around them.

First-born children proved to be the most optimistic and balanced group against the backdrop of a general trend towards pessimism within the sample. Overall, 30% disagreed with the statement, whilst 60% agreed, and the level of uncertainty was the lowest (just 10%). The eldest child is the only category where nearly a third of respondents (30%) expressed a tendency not to feel existentially abandoned by society. However, even the 60% agreement in this group has a completely different psychological connotation than in the groups of only children or middle children. For the eldest child, the statement 'no one will take responsibility for you' is not about the trauma of neglect, but about the norm. Since the eldest child has, from an early age, taken responsibility for their younger siblings and is used to relying on their own resources, adult autonomy is the norm for them. They understand, without taking offence, that everyone is responsible for themselves. The low level of hesitation (10%) highlighted their psychological maturity: they do not expect anyone to come to their rescue, as they themselves are the primary agents in resolving their own life problems.

Thus, the empirical data demonstrated a high overall level of predisposition towards social loneliness in adulthood (responses indicating agreement dominated the sample), however, the nature of this attitude revealed distinct sibling-specific characteristics: only children and middle children exhibited emotional deprivation syndrome and an expectation of passive neglect (which is a direct result of a lack of horizontal support in the former and the trauma of invisibility within the family system in the latter). Younger children exhibited an infantile sense of disappointment with society: having become accustomed to the role of a care recipient in childhood, they find the absence of automatic external protection in adult life deeply distressing. The older children (first-borns) demonstrated the most integrated and realistic outlook on life (their agreement with the statement reflected a well-established sense of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control: they do not view the world as hostile or indifferent; they simply recognise that adulthood requires taking independent responsibility for one's own life).

A comparative analysis of responses to the question *'I trust my ability to compromise when necessary'* revealed the following. Broadly speaking, this concerns the ability to compromise and an indicator of the maturity

of one's 'self-concept', where compromise is not a sign of weakness or capitulation, but a conscious choice made to preserve a relationship or achieve a meaningful goal. In family psychology, a willingness to compromise correlates with a child's experience of having to share resources, attention and space with other family members, whether forced or voluntary. It was found that *only* children demonstrated 100% confidence in this regard. This finding challenges the classic stereotype of only children being selfish and stubborn. Having grown up in a secure parental environment where there was no need to fight daily with siblings over toys or territory, an only child does not perceive compromise as a threat to their sense of self. For them, compromise is essentially an intellectual, instrumental step: if the situation requires them to give in (where necessary), they do so easily, as they have no childhood trauma. The predominance of the 'somewhat true' response (76.9%) underlined the rationality of this strategy.

First-borns showed a high willingness to compromise – a total of 80% agreement. For the eldest child, the ability to compromise is a logical extension of their role as a wise and responsible sibling. From an early age, parents instilled in the eldest child the attitude: 'You're the eldest, so give way to your younger sibling; be more sensible.' Over time, this external pressure became integrated into their personality structure as a sign of strength and protection. As an adult, the eldest child trusts in their ability to make concessions, because in their worldview, giving in means showing generosity, maintaining control over the situation and affirming their mature personal status. They do this thoughtfully, with a clear understanding of the benefits of compromise.

Younger siblings demonstrated the highest level of internal resistance to compromise – 18.2% (the highest rate of rejection in the sample). However, the overall rate of agreement remained high – 72.8%. Those who were undecided accounted for 9.1%. The youngest child in the family spends the longest time in the position of having to adapt to the decisions of their parents and older siblings. They were often forced to give in simply because of their age (one must obey one's elders). In adulthood, this gives rise to ambivalence. On the one hand, they are highly skilled at doing this in practice (in 27.3% of cases, they have been trained to give in since childhood). On the other hand, almost a fifth of the group (18.2%) feels a strong subconscious resistance to this process. For an adult who was the

youngest child, yielding is often associated with childish humiliation and weakness; therefore, a situation requiring compromise may be perceived by them as yet another attempt by society to bend them to its will.

Middle children showed the lowest level of absolute certainty – 0%. The majority of the group (66.7%) leaned towards the response 'somewhat true'. The middle child's position is that of a natural diplomat and buffer, who has spent their entire childhood balancing the interests of their siblings. And so the results revealed a phenomenon of a kind of burnout: middle children no longer wish to see compliance as their unconditional virtue. They agreed that they know how to compromise because it is their automatic coping strategy from childhood. However, the high levels of hesitation (16.7%) and covert protest (16.7%) likely indicate an inner weariness with the perpetual role of peacemaker. As an adult, the middle child begins to realise that their habit of constantly giving in to others has often led to their own interests being ignored, which has significantly eroded their trust in this mechanism.

It has been established that attitudes towards compromise and the capacity for adaptive concessions are strongly influenced by sibling position. Only children and first-borns demonstrated the healthiest, most stable and crisis-free willingness to compromise. For the former, this is a consequence of a conflict-free childhood; for the latter, it is a manifestation of integrated responsibility and a position of psychological strength. Younger children showed a tendency to perceive the need to make concessions as a threat to their own autonomy, reflecting their emotional protest against childhood experiences of forced subordination. Middle-aged children showed symptoms of emotional burnout from their role as family mediators. Despite maintaining the behavioural habit of compromising, they revealed an inner lack of satisfaction with this strategy, as they seek a way out of the chronic role of the compliant third party.

Let us consider the results of the analysis of responses to the question *'I trust my ability to admit my mistakes*'. Such an ability requires letting go of psychological defences (such as denial or projection) and reflects the inner maturity of the individual, where a mistake is perceived not as a catastrophic undermining of authority, but as a natural part of experience and development. In the context of sibling positions, the willingness to admit being wrong is closely linked to the severity of punishment for mistakes

in childhood, as well as whether the child's family role required them to be perfect. The group of *only* children demonstrated absolute leadership in terms of radical self-confidence – a total of 92.3% self-confidence. The options 'not true' or 'difficult to determine' were completely absent (0%), whilst only 7.7% expressed slight doubt ('rather not true'). This is the highest indicator of psychological openness in the sample. This is because an only child grows up without the chronic experience of sibling rivalry, where any mistake could be used by a brother or sister as a weapon to discredit them in the eyes of their parents. As their parents' love and attention were entirely theirs, admitting a mistake in childhood did not threaten an only child with a loss of status. In adulthood, this has transformed into an inner core: they are not afraid to admit to mistakes (over 61% answered 'true'), as their self-esteem is stable and is not undermined by the realisation of their own imperfection. The absence of a need to defend themselves indicates a fairly high level of emotional security.

First-borns showed a high willingness to admit mistakes – a total of 70% agreed. However, this group displayed the highest level of hidden defences – 20% answered 'rather not true' (0% 'not true'). Those who were undecided accounted for 10%. As we have repeatedly emphasised, the eldest child, by their very nature, embodies parental standards, rules and authority for their younger siblings. Parents often demanded perfection from the eldest child, expecting them to set an example for their younger siblings. Therefore, admitting a mistake is always a difficult psychological compromise for the eldest child. On the one hand, a well-developed and responsible 'Super-Ego' compels them to be honest and admit their mistakes (70%). On the other hand, a fifth of the group showed signs of subconscious resistance: for them, admitting a mistake means losing face, undermining their status as a leader or disappointing their parent or carer. This creates an internal tension between the ethical duty to admit fault and the need to maintain authority.

Middle children's responses revealed a harmonious and confident trend – a total of 83.3% of positive responses. Doubts accounted for 16.7%, whilst there were no responses indicating disagreement whatsoever. The role of the middle child as a natural mediator of family conflicts requires flexibility and well-developed emotional intelligence. To get on well with older and younger siblings, the middle child has learnt from an early age to listen to others and adjust their behaviour in a timely manner. They are free from the

egocentric desire to always be right. For them, a mistake is simply another part of the process of social adaptation and communication. As they have never been expected to live up to the firstborn's ideal, they view their own missteps realistically, thoughtfully integrating them into their experience to maintain harmony in their relationships with society.

The *youngest* siblings proved to be the most reserved and insecure on this issue. They showed the lowest level of absolute agreement – just 18.2%, although the majority leaned towards moderate agreement. At the same time, this group demonstrated the highest level of resistance – a total of 18.2% – with a further 9.1% expressing hesitation. The youngest child in the family is usually the one who remains the subject of upbringing, criticism and lecturing from parents and older siblings for the longest time. Their mistakes were often ridiculed or exaggerated by older family members, which led the youngest children to develop a persistent defence mechanism: *'If I admit to a mistake, I'll end up back in the position of the weak little one whom everyone lectures*'. A low level of complete trust and the presence of fierce resistance illustrate the operation of this psychological defence mechanism. An adult who was the youngest child tends to delay admitting they were wrong, perceiving this as a defeat within the adult hierarchy of relationships, or to justify themselves to the very end, defending their right to be heard on an equal footing with their elders.

Thus, only children demonstrated the highest level of inner security and self-acceptance, which is due to the absence of the childhood trauma of sibling rivalry for parental approval. First-borns and middle children demonstrated a high level of reflective maturity; however, for older children, this process is complicated by an internal conflict stemming from a subconscious fear of losing their leadership status and authority. Younger children proved to be the most vulnerable and prone to psychological defence mechanisms. The need to conceal or deny one's mistakes acts as a compensatory mechanism that protects the adult younger child from regressing to an infantile status as the object of lectures and devaluation.

Finally, in response to the projective question *'Other people say that one should not expect anything good from the world around us',* participants with different sibling statuses gave the following answers. Among *only*

children, agreement was found in 53.9% of cases, indicating a likely high sensitivity to social signals of threat and society's underlying anxious attitudes, highlighting the need to activate the compensatory function. As they lacked a sibling subsystem during their childhood, they became more sensitive to adults' judgements and warnings. This is most likely not merely a matter of internalising the opinions of those around them, but rather a subconscious internalisation of these as a real model of safety. Thus, if one does not adopt an optimistic mindset in advance, subjective vulnerability decreases (which allows one to manage one's own expectations so as not to suffer emotional trauma). However, 30.7% of respondents rejected this pessimistic outlook, expressing optimism about the world in general, whilst 15.4% of responses showed signs of cognitive dissonance.

At the same time, 63.4% of *younger* children agreed with a pessimistic, cautious assessment of the world, which was the highest figure compared with all the groups surveyed (of these, over a third (36.4%) chose the most unequivocal option, 'true')). 27.3% expressed an uncertain stance in their responses (they were doubtful or lacked a firmly established view on the safety of the world). By contrast, 9.1% of this group demonstrated an optimistic outlook. The younger child grows up surrounded by many older people (parents and older siblings) who tend to convey excessive care and anxiety about the dangerous world around them. Therefore, agreement with a negative assessment of the world is the result of internalising the anxiety of older people. This leads to forced hyperautonomy. Consequently, by exhibiting high levels of external anxiety and a threat-oriented mindset, the youngest children proved to be the least optimistic regarding the safety of the world around them.

Middle children recorded the highest overall level of agreement regarding the danger posed by the world (83.3%) amongst all four sibling groups (63.6% for the youngest, 53.9% for only children, and 20% for the eldest). Middle children often face what is known as the 'middle child syndrome' – the forced need to compete for their parents' attention between the older (first-born) and younger (youngest) children – and are consequently more sceptical. This often leads them to feel less secure and to believe that the world around them is not, by default, supportive or generous.

Half (50%) of the *eldest* children in the family rejected a pessimistic outlook on the world around them. This is the highest level of optimism

and trust in the world among all sibling groups (by comparison: 30.8% for only children, 9.1% for the youngest, and 0% for the middle children). As they received their parents' undivided attention and care for a long time during their early years, this laid a solid foundation for a basic trust in the world. At the same time, they found themselves in the role of mentors or protectors for their younger siblings at an early age. This likely contributed to the development of an active, agency-based outlook: the world was perceived not as a source of threats or dangers, but as a space for action where outcomes depended on one's own efforts and responsibility. At the same time, 40% of the older children also reported feeling weary of such responsibility and the excessive demands placed on them by adults. However, overall, they are the least likely of all the comparison groups to view the world as a source of danger (which is probably why they are more emotionally mature).

Taking into account the test norms for the total scales of the 'Methodology of Trust / Distrust in the World, Other People and Oneself' [3], the following findings were recorded (Fig. 2).

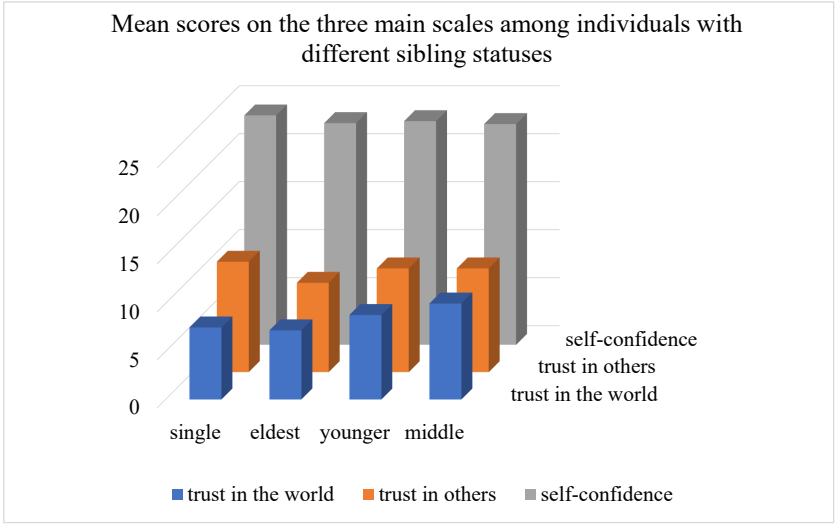


Figure 2. Mean scores on the three main scales for individuals with different sibling statuses

Thus, according to the overall indicator of self-confidence, taking into account the test norms [11], participants in all four sibling statuses under study showed an average level, whilst their confidence in others was high; however, for the third summary vector of trust – trust in the world – only children and first-borns showed a low level, whilst middle and younger siblings showed an average level. Therefore, based on the overall trust indicators, it was established that, regardless of sibling status, all participants demonstrated a moderate level of self-trust, which indicates a sufficiently developed, albeit not maximally expressed, sense of personal competence and the ability to rely on their own decisions and internal resources. The absence of statistically significant differences between the groups suggests that sibling position is not a determining factor in the development of self-confidence.

At the same time, the high level of trust in others among participants across all four sibling statuses may indicate a general tendency amongst the participants towards a positive perception of their social environment, a willingness to interact and provide interpersonal support.

The most pronounced differences were found in terms of trust in the world. Thus, only children and first-borns demonstrated a low level, whilst younger and middle children showed a moderate level. This may suggest that members of the first two groups are more inclined to perceive the world around them as less predictable, less safe and less friendly. In contrast, younger and middle children, who from an early age have gained experience of constant interaction with siblings, joint conflict resolution, resource sharing and mutual support, may develop more positive underlying perceptions of their environment and its predictability.

The low level of trust in the world among only children and first-borns may be linked to greater responsibility, increased parental control, higher expectations and less experience of peer relationships during childhood. In contrast, younger and middle children, who adapt from an early age to living alongside brothers or sisters, are more likely to gain experience of cooperation, compromise and mutual support, which may contribute to the development of a more positive basic trust in the world.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that even with a high level of trust in others and a moderate level of self-trust, it is trust in the world that remains the least developed. This may indicate the influence of

contemporary security challenges, where the surrounding reality is perceived as unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Under such conditions, positive experiences of interaction with siblings can serve a compensatory function, supporting the development of a more stable sense of the world's safety in younger and middle-aged children compared with only children and first-borns.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed a pattern: an individual's microsocial status within the primary parental family – more specifically, within the sibling and parent-child subsystems – is a determining factor in the formation of their adult coping strategies, defence mechanisms and integral characteristics of the 'self'. Thus, only children demonstrated autonomous stability, particularly with regard to self-esteem. They have a confident trust in the world, a trait established as far back as childhood.

Adult first-borns are guided by a well-developed, structured normative pressure from authority (which relates to conscience and duty), which manifests itself in a high level of responsibility, but at the same time creates internal tension within them. They often rationalise threats from the outside world and are not prone to succumbing to the panic-inducing influences of those around them.

Middle children are the most sensitive in a social context, as their position reflects their long-standing childhood experience of acting as a buffer between the interests of older and younger siblings. They calmly and realistically acknowledge their mistakes, as they are free from an egocentric desire to dominate or meet inflated expectations, viewing slip-ups as a natural part of social interaction. Their ability to compromise is an automatic habit which, however, often fails to bring them inner satisfaction and is perceived as a threat to their own interests. They display ambivalence and hesitation when influenced by external judgements, yet they are constantly searching for their own sense of self.

The youngest siblings proved to be the most vulnerable group, whose adult strategies are aimed at overcoming their childhood status as 'the weakest' or the one who is constantly being brought up. They defend their personal autonomy by displaying a high level of emotional resistance and even fear, as well as conformism stemming from collective anxiety.

They demonstrated the lowest unconditional willingness to admit their mistakes or guilt (and this serves as a compensatory defence mechanism). The youngest siblings are most likely to accept the notion of a hostile world, thereby shifting their locus of control externally and justifying their personal fears or passivity by citing a generally unfavourable life context.

Thus, birth order shapes specific patterns of psychological adaptation. Whilst only children and first-borns tend to operate from a position of inner security and rational control, middle and younger children carry into adulthood the experience of chronic hierarchical pressure, which manifests as emotional burnout from compromises (in middle children) or the activation of rigid psychological defences and social anxiety (in youngest children).

A comprehensive analysis of the research findings has shown that an individual's primary sibling status functions as a fundamental matrix framework upon which the entire architecture of their trust unfolds in adulthood. The phenomenon of trust is not a universal constant; it exhibits profound differentiation depending on the conditions – whether of hierarchy, competition or isolation – under which the child's 'self' was formed.

The main pattern emerged in the existence of a clear dichotomy between the autonomous-rational and the deficient-defensive models of trust:

The axis of autonomy and control (only children and older siblings): respondents who held unique or dominant positions within their parental family are characterised by active, subject-centred trust; only children operate from a position *of 'self-trust'* (absolute inner security), which allows them to trust the communication process openly and maintain a stable optimism regarding the outside world, as their core 'Self' has never been subjected to destructive devaluation by peers; Older children transform trust into *a normative tool* (they trust the world and people through the prism of control, rules and their own competence, where compromise is an act of strength rather than weakness).

The vertical axis of adaptation and defence (middle and younger children): respondents whose childhood was spent under constant hierarchical pressure demonstrated reactive, deficient trust, burdened by psychological defences. In particular, middle-aged children highlighted the phenomenon of *'diplomatic exhaustion of trust*': they trust their ability to manoeuvre, but lose a deep-seated belief that interacting with others can

be safe for their own interests. Younger children tend to develop *the* least stable, *wary and defensive model*. A lack of adult autonomy in childhood forces them to block trust in themselves (due to a rigid refusal to accept their own mistakes) and to succumb easily to social pessimism, interpreting the world as an a priori hostile environment in order to justify their own vulnerability.

Therefore, the greater the degree of personal space and security a child enjoyed within their parental family (and this primarily refers to the sole, older sibling), the greater the 'credit of trust' that the adult is able to extend to themselves and the world around them. Conversely, prolonged exposure to intense sibling pressure (as the middle or youngest child) shifts the focus of trust towards defensive coping strategies, where trust is either eroded by exhaustion or blocked by the fear of yet another capitulation.

The findings demonstrated that sibling status is a significant prognostic factor in assessing a person's basic trust and requires a differentiated approach within the context of psychological intervention and family counselling. At the same time, it is important in future to pay particular attention to gender, age differences within the sibling group, as well as the parents' own attitudes (and other family factors).

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