

New Scientist gift subscriptions  
**SAVE 40%**  
 +  
**FREE**  
 New Scientist  
 2010 calendar  
 CLICK HERE

**NewScientist**






[Home](#) [News](#) [In-Depth Articles](#) [Blogs](#) [Opinion](#) [Video](#) [Galleries](#) [Topic Guides](#) [Last Word](#) [E-Newsletter](#) [Subscribe](#) [Look for Science Jobs](#)

**SPACE** **TECH** **ENVIRONMENT** **HEALTH** **LIFE** **PHYSICS&MATH** **SCIENCE IN SOCIETY**

[Home](#) | [News](#)

## Trust firstborns to show their selfish side

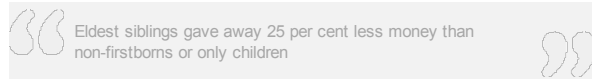
› 09 December 2009 by [Shaoni Bhattacharya](#)  
 › Magazine issue [2738](#). [Subscribe](#) and get 4 free issues.

FIRSTBORN children are more likely to achieve greatness, but this may come at the cost of a less trusting, uncooperative disposition.

We know that firstborns are generally smarter than their younger siblings and more likely to become leaders, while younger brood-members tend to be more rebellious. To see if trust in adults might also be affected by birth order, Alexandre Courtiol at the Institute of Evolutionary Sciences in Montpellier, France, paired 510 students with anonymous partners to play a finance-based game. Both players were given 30 monetary units and told that whatever they had left at the end of the game would be converted into real cash. Player A was told to give any sum of money to player B, with the knowledge that this would be tripled for player B's pot. Player B then had the option of giving any sum of money back to player A.

The selfish decision would have been for neither player to give any money away, but less than 1 in 10 participants played this way. The more money player A gave away, the more trusting they were judged to be and the more money player B tended to return, showing reciprocity.

On average, eldest siblings gave 25 per cent less "money" than non-firstborns or only children, whether they were in role A or B. Courtiol interprets this as meaning firstborns were 25 per cent less trusting and reciprocating (*Animal Behaviour*, DOI: [10.1016/j.anbehav.2009.09.016](#)).



He suggests there may be a limited amount of energy that people can invest in cooperative alliances, "so it may be that the firstborn cooperates less outside the family because they cooperate more within it".

A conflicting explanation is that within their families, firstborns actually cooperate less in an attempt to maintain their initial monopoly on parental care, and interact with others in the same way as adults. The study confirms that birth order can have significant and lasting effects on personality and behaviour outside the family, says Frank Suloway, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley.



**Subscribe to New Scientist** and you'll get:

- › New Scientist magazine delivered to your door
- › Unlimited access to all New Scientist online content - a benefit only available to subscribers
- › Great savings from the normal price

**Subscribe now!**

If you would like to **reuse any content** from New Scientist, either in print or online, please [contact the syndication](#) department first for permission. New Scientist does not own rights to photos, but there are a [variety of licensing options](#) available for use of articles and

PRINT SEND SHARE

ADVERTISEMENT

VISIT THE NEW  
[www.NewScientistJobs.com](http://www.NewScientistJobs.com) TODAY!

**NewScientist Jobs**  
 incorporating ScienceJobs.com

This week's issue

Subscribe



12 December 2009

ADVERTISEMENT

### Latest news

#### › Cave 'breathing' regulates growth of stalactites



10:00 13 December 2009  
 The way caves "breathe" from season to season is the true controller of stalactite growth – so estimates of ancient rainfall may be wrong

#### › Wind farms don't affect property prices



10:00 12 December 2009  
 US government study of thousands of house sales across the country concludes that wind turbines take no toll on property values

#### › NASA to get budget boost for exploration, says analyst

20:25 11 December 2009

The agency is sure to get an injection of cash to rescue its faltering space programme, says a Washington insider – but probably not the \$3 billion recommended

#### › Today on New Scientist: 11 December 2009

18:00 11 December 2009

Today's stories on newscientist.com, at a glance, including: how plastic bags are being recycled into nanotubes, why the BMJ's criticisms of Tamiflu are themselves being questioned, and how to slice a pizza perfectly

graphics we own the copyright to.

Have your say

Comment title

Your name

Email

Website

Comment

cancel preview submit

see all latest news

Most read Most commented

- The perfect way to slice a pizza
- Marijuana might cause new cell growth in the brain
- Google demonstrates quantum computer image search
- Clever folds in a globe give new perspectives on Earth
- Dogs vs cats: The great pet showdown

TWITTER

New Scientist is on Twitter



Get the latest from New Scientist: sign up to our Twitter feed

Related Jobs

- Materials Engineer for Life Sciences Reagents M/F
- Business Unit Manager - Contract
- Software Applications Engineer - Multimedia Video

Partners

We are partnered with Approved Index. Visit the site to get free quotes from website designers and a range of web, IT and marketing services in the UK.

Don't Misinterpret

Thu Dec 10 20:04:49 GMT 2009 by Eric Kvaalen

I'm afraid people who read this are going to think that first-borns are almost always less trusting than their younger siblings. But I'm sure that in fact there was much overlap between the groups and many first-borns may be more trusting than their siblings.

reply report this comment

More Detailed Information Required

Fri Dec 11 03:07:41 GMT 2009 by LT

I would be curious to know what the age gaps are for the first-born participants and their siblings, and if there was an evenly distributed range of age differences in the study. Could selfish behavior manifest more so, or perhaps less so, in first-born children with greater age gaps from their younger siblings?

reply report this comment

All comments should respect the New Scientist House Rules. If you think a particular comment breaks these rules then please use the "Report" link in that comment to report it to us.

If you are having a technical problem posting a comment, please contact technical support.

search New Scientist Go

Login for full access Login

- About us: New Scientist, Syndication, Recruitment, Advertising, Who's who, Advertise, RBI Jobs
- User Help: Contact Us, FAQ / Help, Disclaimer, Ts & Cs, Cookies, Privacy Policy
- Subscriptions: Subscribe, Renew, Gift subscription, My account, Back issues, Customer Service
- Links: Site Map, Browse all articles, Magazine archive, NewScientistJobs, The LastWord, E-Newsletter, RSS Feeds, Online Store

© Copyright Reed Business Information Ltd.