



The Impact of Birth Order on Parental Expectations: A Focus on The Middle Child Perspective

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Abstract

Research on birth order, especially concerning middle children, remains limited, leaving a gap in understanding their unique roles and experiences within family dynamics. This study investigates how parental expectations influence middle children's interpersonal relationships, emotional well-being, decision-making, and future aspirations. Employing a qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with four participants aged 18 to 21. A descriptive phenomenological method was used for data analysis, involving transcription and identification of key quotations relevant to the research questions. The findings reveal diverse parental expectations and their varying impacts on both parent-child and sibling relationships. Middle children express a range of emotional responses and coping strategies, including avoidance, negotiation, and seeking support from parents. The way parental expectations are communicated is shaped by parenting styles, social background, and the extent to which parents understand their children. Moreover, cultural context significantly influences these family dynamics. This study enhances the understanding of middle children's distinct experiences and emphasizes the need to consider birth order and cultural factors when examining parental expectations and family relationships. By shedding light on how expectations are perceived and managed by middle children, the research provides valuable insights for families, educators, and mental health practitioners aiming to support balanced family development.

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INTRODUCTION

Birth order, as conceptualized by Sulloway (1999), refers to the chronological position of a child within the family, and it has become a widely explored construct in developmental and family psychology. A growing body of research suggests that birth order significantly influences personality development, parental treatment, academic outcomes, and even public health metrics such as stunting and fertility patterns (Rohrer et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2014; Alsaleh et al., 2021; Dhingra & Pingali, 2021; Lin et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings underscore that birth order is not just a demographic label but a crucial variable influencing individual development within familial and sociocultural systems.

Crucially, non-shared environmental factors, such as differential parental treatment, are often more influential than genetic similarities in shaping these sibling differences (Ng et al., 2014). Within the family unit, which Biruny and Latipun (2021) identify as a child's primary developmental context, parental expectations play a significant role. While moderate aspirations may enhance motivation, excessive expectations can generate psychological stress (Ambarwati et al., 2019), with intensity often varying based on birth order.

Parental expectations frequently reflect stereotypical roles. First-borns are commonly steered toward high-status, structured careers and tasked with caregiving responsibilities, while later-borns are encouraged to explore creative or less conventional paths (Herrera et al., 2003; Collins, 2006; Baskett, 1985; Combs-Draughn, 2016). The youngest siblings tend to be perceived as more indulged, further highlighting the varied familial experiences influenced by birth order. Such dynamics can impact children's identity formation, self-worth, and perceived roles within the family system.

The differentiation in parental expectations across siblings contributes significantly to personality development and self-perception. Middle children, in particular, often report feeling "invisible" between the attention given to the eldest and the indulgence toward the youngest (Collins, 2006). These experiences are closely linked to the child's sense of value and their ability to define personal goals and self-identity (Adler, 1928; Potts, 1929).

Various theoretical models provide insight into these dynamics. Adlerian theory and Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) frame the family as an interconnected system where roles and expectations evolve through relational and sociocultural influences. Parents' experiences with older children often shape their expectations of younger ones (Minuchin, 1985; Whiteman & Buchanan, 2002), which may lead to inconsistent standards across siblings.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) further explains how siblings evaluate themselves relative to one another. Because first-borns typically reach developmental milestones first, they may become benchmarks for younger siblings, influencing both parental judgment and intra-sibling comparisons (Jensen et al.,

2018). Children actively participate in this dynamic, affecting parental perceptions and future interactions (McHale et al., 2012).

Another relevant framework is the Differential Parental Investment Theory, which suggests that parents allocate resources unevenly among children (Trivers, 2023). For example, first-borns often receive more one-on-one time from parents (Price, 2008), potentially leading to better academic performance and emotional outcomes (Jensen et al., 2017; Sakata et al., 2022). Parental expectations are often shaped by this uneven investment, creating feedback loops that reinforce achievement patterns (Pinquart & Ebeling, 2020).

Cultural values and socioeconomic context also play a pivotal role in how birth order expectations are formed and enacted (Whiteman et al., 2011; Chiang & Ellis, 2019). In collectivist cultures, for instance, first-borns may be expected to uphold family traditions and assume leadership roles, while academic achievement often becomes a non-negotiable expectation (Samura, 2015). Cultural norms thus shape the nature and expression of parental expectations, influencing how children perceive and respond to them.

Given these theoretical perspectives, the current study situates itself within the developmental stage of Emerging Adulthood (EA), defined by Arnett (2002) as a period of identity exploration and instability spanning the late teens to mid-twenties. This phase is particularly relevant for investigating how individuals process and respond to parental expectations, as it often involves re-evaluating familial roles and cultural norms while striving for autonomy (Fredricks & Eccles, 2015).

Importantly, this research takes place within the sociocultural context of Indonesia, where strong familial ties and collectivist values remain influential. In such settings, emerging adults face unique challenges in negotiating independence while fulfilling family obligations. As highlighted by Kureishi and Wakabayashi (2022), culturally responsive research can yield more effective interventions and support systems.

Despite significant scholarly attention to first- and last-born children, middle-born individuals remain underrepresented in empirical studies. This oversight reflects a broader cultural tendency to overlook their lived experiences, which are often characterized by perceptions of diminished parental attention (Collins, 2006). Some middle children internalize this lack of visibility as emotional neglect, while others develop strong social skills as compensatory mechanisms. These contrasting outcomes suggest a need for deeper examination.

To fill this gap, the present study focuses specifically on middle children's perceptions of parental expectations. It explores how these expectations shape their emotional responses, identity development, and sense of belonging within the family. This focus is especially timely, as middle children navigating Emerging

Adulthood face the dual challenge of meeting parental standards while striving for independence.

By centering the voices of middle-born individuals, the study not only contributes to a more nuanced understanding of birth order dynamics but also provides practical insights for parents, educators, and mental health professionals. Understanding how expectations are perceived and internalized can guide more equitable and psychologically attuned parenting strategies across all sibling positions. Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following research questions: 1) How do middle children perceive their parents expectations of them?; 2) In what ways do these perceptions influence their emotional responses, aspirations, and identity formation?; 3) How do middle children interpret and compare parental expectations directed toward their siblings?.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative methodology for both data collection and analysis, aiming to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' subjective experiences. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to interpret the meanings embedded in participants' narratives by engaging directly with their lived realities. It seeks to uncover behaviours, perceptions, motivations, and actions within a natural and contextually grounded setting, drawing from diverse data sources (Moleong, 2018; Biruny & Latipun, 2021). Unlike structured surveys, this approach encourages participants to respond openly and extensively, free from the constraints of fixed-response formats.

Design

In addition, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, which centres on the exploration of meaning as it emerges from human consciousness and lived experience (Biruny & Latipun, 2021). Rooted in various philosophical traditions, phenomenology seeks to understand the nature and structure of human experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach is particularly well-suited for research that aims to examine how individuals or groups interpret and make sense of significant life experiences (Grossoehme, 2014). As such, phenomenology aligns closely with the present study's objective of understanding parental expectations from the perspective of middle children.

Participants

Primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Recruitment was conducted using a convenience sampling method, facilitated by disseminating a digital poster via social media platforms, specifically Instagram stories and group messaging channels. Participants were eligible if they met the following criteria: (1) they were the middle child among three biological siblings (having one older and one younger sibling); (2)

they were between 18 and 21 years old; and (3) they were Indonesian citizens currently residing in Indonesia.

The specified age range was intentionally chosen to reflect the study's focus on Emerging Adulthood (EA), a developmental stage typically spanning the late teens to early twenties. As Arnett (2002) defined, this period is marked by identity exploration across domains such as relationships, career paths, and personal values. It also represents a transitional phase during which individuals begin to cultivate independence, form mature relationships, assume adult responsibilities, and complete education or vocational training necessary for adult roles (Wood et al., 2018).

Focusing solely on Indonesian emerging adults allows the study to account for the culturally specific nature of this developmental stage. Given that the experience of emerging adulthood varies widely across sociocultural contexts, this focus offers insight into the distinctive expectations, challenges, and family dynamics faced by Indonesian youth. In this study, the term "parents" refers specifically to the participants' biological parents.

Instruments

Explain the instruments used in the research. Describe the instrument, theoretical basis, scoring method, and reliability value of the measuring instrument. The author can also present a table of examples of items contained in the instrument used. A description of the logical reasons for determining the instrument is also required.

Procedure

The author explains the research procedures that have been carried out, both in the preparation and implementation stages. Please also clarify if researchers give rewards to participants in research. Explain informed consent and ethical clearance, if any.

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in accommodating the depth and variability of participants' lived experiences. This method allowed the researcher to pose follow-up questions in response to participants' answers, thereby facilitating a more nuanced and participant-led exploration. The open-ended nature of the interviews enabled participants to articulate their perspectives freely, unbound by rigid response formats.

Interview questions were structured to maintain thematic coherence while allowing participants to respond in as much detail as they felt comfortable. The interview began with questions concerning family dynamics, particularly the participants' relationships with their parents and siblings. To foster a safe and open dialogue, rapport was established early in the session. Participants were assured

they could control the level of disclosure in their responses and were free to decline answering any questions that caused discomfort.

Subsequent questions explored participants' perceptions of parental expectations, whether they believed such expectations existed and the underlying reasons for these beliefs. The conversation then shifted to how these expectations (or their absence) affected the participants, including their coping mechanisms, daily decision-making, and future aspirations. The interview concluded with a focus on birth order, inviting reflections on how parental expectations may differ among siblings.

Each interview was conducted once, lasting between 30 and 75 minutes. To accommodate participant preferences, both online and in-person interview formats were offered. Online interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet, while in-person sessions were held in cafés with private seating to ensure confidentiality. For online interviews, participants received an informed consent form in Microsoft Word format 30 minutes before the session and were asked to provide a digital signature. In-person participants signed the consent form on-site before the interview began. In both formats, verbal informed consent was also reiterated at the beginning of each interview to confirm participants' understanding and voluntary participation.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a descriptive phenomenological approach, which entailed several key stages. The process began with the transcription of interview recordings for each participant, forming the foundation for subsequent analysis. These transcripts underwent a 'winnowing' process, whereby the researcher identified and retained data segments most relevant to the research questions while setting aside content considered less pertinent (Guest et al., 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This stage enabled the extraction of quotations that were particularly meaningful and valuable for addressing the study's objectives.

Following transcription and the initial organisation of the data, including the arrangement of visual materials and the categorisation of information sources, the researcher conducted a holistic reading to develop a general understanding of the participants' experiences. This step aimed to capture the overall essence of the narratives before delving into more granular analysis.

The subsequent phase involved a systematic coding process, focused on the previously winnowed data. Codes were assigned to significant excerpts, which were then clustered into emerging sub-themes and broader themes that reflected the core dimensions of participants' lived experiences. These thematic groupings served as the analytical scaffolding for interpreting the data.

In the final stage, the findings were presented through narrative passages that elaborated on the themes and sub-themes. This involved crafting detailed

descriptions that conveyed the sequence and depth of participants' experiences. The analysis was enriched by the inclusion of direct quotations, multiple participant viewpoints, and, where relevant, cross-thematic insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This comprehensive, narrative-based approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, consistent with the principles of descriptive phenomenology.

RESULT

Following the completion of the interview sessions, a substantial body of qualitative data was collected. As a preliminary note, all participants met the inclusion criteria of being middle children, each having one older and one younger biological sibling. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Demographic Data

Number of Participant	Age (Year)	Gender	Domicile	Age Gap Sibling	
				Older Sibling	Older Sibling
1	20	Female	Yogyakarta	3 Year	3 Year
2	21	Male	Tangerang	2 Year	6Year
3	21	Female	Bandung	3 Year	3 Year
4	18	Male	Yogyakarta	2 Year	3 Year

Table 2. Participants' Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Types of Expectations	Different Domains of Expectation Implicit vs Explicit Expectations Different Factors Influencing Expectation Expectations and Individual Priority
The Effect of Parent-Child Relationship with Parental Expectation	Parental Knowledge of Children Parental Behavior Shift Emotional Conflict and Trust Dynamic
The Effect of Sibling Relationships with Parental Expectation	The Role and Responsibilities of Siblings Absence vs Limited vs Existence of Birth Order Influence Siblings Sympathy
Impact of Parental Expectations	The Level of Expectation Perception of Diversity on Expectation Coping Mechanisms Conditional Realization Influence on Day-to-Day Decision Implications on Future Aspirations

Themes from Data

After analysing the data, the results have been organised into four main themes to better understand the complex information. These themes, shown in Table 2, reflect key patterns found in the interviews. They include: the types of expectations experienced by middle children, how parent-child relationships influence those

expectations, the role of sibling dynamics in shaping them, and the overall impact of parental expectations on the participants' psychological and social experiences.

Types of Parental Expectations

Parental expectations appear in different areas of a child's life, such as school performance, career paths, romantic relationships, personal values, and plans. These expectations can be expressed directly through words or indirectly through everyday behaviour and unspoken rules. Their form and intensity are often influenced by factors like social status, religion, culture, and the parents' upbringing. These expectations usually reflect what parents see as most important for their children, and they can strongly shape the children's behaviour, choices, and goals.

Different Domains of Expectation

Parental expectations are reflected in different domains of participants' lives. P1 and P2 expressed that they experience parental expectations regarding their careers. "There was a time when she mentioned that she wants her children to be doctors." (P1_L56-57), "Such as how they want at least one of their kids to be a doctor, Etc." (P2_L176-177).

Parental expectation for another domain was also mentioned by P2 and P3, who shared about how their parents expect them regarding their romantic partners. "And they have to have the same religion or beliefs..." (P2_L190), "...they also have to already be established so that they could provide for their family." (P3_L470-471).

Furthermore, P3 also mentioned the presence of educational expectations. "...in terms of education, for example, my dad would say something like getting into this university would be good." (P3_L467-468).

There were also character expectations from P2 and P3's parents. "I'm always expected to be someone that is at least a problem solver, the smartest, the most logical, etc." (P2_L197-198), "Maybe I'm expected to interact more with people, so I cannot be like this." (P3_L541).

Lastly, general life expectations by P2's parents were also mentioned. "I would have to work, get married, and have kids shortly future, if it is by my parents' expectations." (P2_L284-285).

Implicit vs Explicit Expectations

Some participants described parental expectations as clearly stated, while others experienced them as implied. Participants P2, P3, and P4 acknowledged that expectations—whether spoken or unspoken existed among their siblings. P4 highlighted that their parents communicated expectations for each child both explicitly and implicitly, noting that in P3's case, the expectations were delivered more implicitly. "...career expectations, they have verbalized it since we were little" (P2_L175-176), "They keep telling those things (the expectations)." (P4_L638), "It

was said verbally to him by my parents"(P2_L277), "They usually said it implicitly." (P3_L548).

Different Factors Influencing Expectations

Participants noted that parental expectations are shaped by factors such as social background, religion, culture, and how the parents themselves were raised. For example, P2 explained that his family's cultural background and his parents' social upbringing played a significant role in shaping the expectations within his household. "I don't know, maybe it was because of their social background and how they view being a doctor means they're smart, make good money, and everything." (P2_L177-179), "...especially my parents are quite religious..."(P2_L190-191), "We're also an Eastern family and the Eastern family is close-knit."(P2_L303-304).

Similarly, P3 believes that her parents' upbringing, along with the social values emphasized in their household, strongly influence the expectations her parents have for their children "I guess it has something to do with their upbringing as well." (P3_L458), "So, I think it's that kind of awareness of that privilege that makes them have these kinds of Expectations."(P3_L461-462).

However, P1 feels that her parents have no specific expectations for her or her siblings. She believes this is because both she and her sibling have consistently performed well academically. "I think it's because all three of us had a pretty good academic history growing up."(P1_L73-74).

Expectation and Individual Priority

This finding is only present in P3's answer when asked about what the expectations are that participants' parents have. P3 then explains how her parents prioritize different domains of expectations and proceed to rank them. "If I have to rank it, it would be academic, social, and then relationship-wise."(P3_L474).

The Effect of Parent-Child Relationship with Parental Expectation

The parent-child relationship influences how expectations are formed and understood, especially for middle children. This dynamic depends on how well parents know their children, how their behaviour changes over time, and the emotional bond and trust within the family. Together, these factors shape how expectations are created, expressed, and taken in by the children.

Parental Knowledge of Children

Participants like P4 emphasized that parental expectations are shaped by how well parents understand their children. Their awareness of their children's strengths, weaknesses, and potential influences the goals they set for their future. "She (mom) expects me to dedicate myself to helping her and also... mostly working just to support her."(P4_L636-637), "... my dad expects to be on top. To be the highest."(P4_L637-638).

Parental Behavior Shift

Evidence shows that there are changes in parental behavior regarding exhibiting expectations over time. It was shown from P1 responds that there is a change in the way her mom delivered expectations compared to her childhood. "There was a time when she mentioned that she wants her children to be doctors." (P1_L56-57). This shows that with changing environments and circumstances, parental expectations can fluctuate.

Emotional Conflict and Trust Dynamic

P2 expressed mixed feelings about expectations and birth order in his family. He noted that his parents seemed more focused on his siblings, but this was because they trusted him the most. As a result, he was given specific expectations based on that trust. "Because at one point, I'm the one being trusted the most by my parents," (P2_L247-248), "But also, maybe because of that reason, they are more focused on my brothers." (P2_L249).

The Effect of Sibling Relationships on Parental Expectations

Sibling relationships influence how parental expectations are formed and experienced. The way siblings interact can shape roles, responsibilities, and how birth order is perceived. In some families, sympathy and support among siblings also play a role. These dynamics lead to different experiences and understandings of what parents expect from each child.

The Role and Responsibilities of Siblings

P2 expressed his concerns regarding the burden put upon him and the level of fairness of said burden caused by expectations. "There are times when I do think that I shouldn't be the one having all these expectations on me (it should be my older brother)." (P2_L291-292). P4 also acknowledges the different expectations between him and his siblings by mentioning how his younger sibling is given a higher expectation academically. "For my younger brother, I think he's given the highest expectations from my mom and dad." (P4_L662-663). Moreover, P4's parents emphasized how his oldest sibling has to be the one who takes on the leadership role. "Both my parents also keep on reminding my older brother that he's the oldest, so he needs to lead the siblings." (P4_L661-662). This is contradictory to how it is for P1, where she is the one taking the role of being a leader, not her oldest sibling. "In our relationship, I think the leadership role is more on me" (P1_L104).

Absence VS Limited VS Existence of Birth Order Influence

Before exploring the types of expectations, it's important to know if participants believe parental expectations exist. P3 acknowledges that birth order plays a role in shaping expectations in her family. She noticed the pressure placed on both her older and younger siblings, showing how birth order influences her parents'

expectations. "I think birth order does have an impact." (P3_L526). In contrast, P1 emphasized the absence of expectations based on birth order by her parents. "I don't think birth order plays too big of a part in my family." (P1_L101). Similar to P1, P4 acknowledges birth order influence on parental expectation, but only to a certain extent and for specific aspects of expectations. "I don't think it plays too big of a part." (P4_L657).

Siblings Sympathy

Concerned for the expectations being placed upon their siblings, P2 and P3 show the complex concept of family dynamics and their desire for equal treatment for themselves and their siblings. "If we're talking about my younger brother, I do feel bad about the expectations towards him." (P2_L291-292), "Because I feel like it puts extra expectations on them and I just don't want that for them." (P3_L579-580).

Impact of Parental Expectations

Parental expectations affect many parts of a person's life, including their emotions, how they cope, daily choices, and future goals. These expectations can be motivating or stressful, depending on their nature and intensity. How individuals view these expectations influences their relationship with their parents and their growth. To manage these expectations, people use different strategies like avoiding, negotiating, or choosing when to engage. Overall, parental expectations shape both immediate actions and long-term plans, affecting motivation, comfort, and worries about meeting family and personal standards.

The Level of Expectation

Emphasizing the magnitude of the extent of expectation put upon children, P1 and P3 noted that an immoderate level of expectation can turn into a burden and cause stress in children. "But again, when I see what happens to other people outside, a lot of firstborns are pressured because of their parents' expectations and stuff like that. And because of that, I just feel happy, grateful, and how my older sister was never treated that way." (P1_L114-116), "Expectations still have to be there so that we would not be lost." (P1_L123). Furthermore, P4 stated that expectation is needed for a sense of purpose. However, not to a point where it could cause stress or pressure. "To an extent, it still has to exist, but not to a point where it could bring pressure and stress." (P4_L669-670).

Perception of Diversity on Expectation

P1 shared that having no parental expectations brings her happiness and gratitude. Similarly, P4 said that expectations motivate him. In contrast, P2 and P3 expressed mixed feelings, sometimes feeling indifferent and other times pressured, depending on the situation and type of expectation.

Gratitude vs Burden

As stated before, the absence of parental expectations in P1's family resulted in her expressing gratitude, along with seeking comfort and freedom in their absence. "I just feel grateful"(P1_L79), "I just feel happier to be given the freedom" (P1_L82). Contradicting P1, feelings of burden and tiredness of expectations were shown by P2, leading to indifference and pressure. "I'm already THAT sick of expectations."(P2_L288) "I'm more pressured about social expectations and how I carry myself. "(P2_L195-196).

Guidance and Motivation

P4 perceived parental expectation as motivation. And rather than seeing it as a burden, P4 considers them a reminder. Regarding his future choices, P4 actively looks for advice from his dad. "I just think of it as motivation."(P4_L648), "I think some of my options I would like/often ask my dad."(P4_L653). This shows that there are several different perceptions of parental expectations.

Coping Mechanisms

Participants use different coping strategies. P1 uses positive coping, benefiting from the lack of parental expectations (as noted in point 1a). In contrast, P2 copes by being selective in engaging with parents and showing indifference. "If it's not the right time for that conversation, such as when I'm feeling tired at the time, I would just not be interested and answer okay or sure."(P2_L212-214), "If I'm in the mood to respond/engage (in conversations with parents about expectations) then I would."(P2_L211-212). Similar to P2, P3 also has different coping mechanisms according to what state of mind they are currently in. At times, P3 would be avoidant, while at other times, she would negotiate regarding the expectations. "I guess my coping mechanism would be avoiding things."(P3_L501-502), "There are times when I do try to confront it, but most of the time I don't." (P3_L502-503), P3 then gave an example of when she negotiated with a parental expectation. "For example, my parents want me to get into university, okay, then I'll do it but then my concern would be less about being the best student and more about just getting through it."(P3_L506-508).

Conditional Realization

As mentioned earlier, P3 becomes aware of expectations in certain situations and copes by either avoiding or negotiating them. She recognizes how these expectations affect her daily choices and worries about disappointing others if she doesn't meet them. "At the same time, it's also like, oh man, what happens if I don't get these expectations?"(P3_L520-521).

Influence on Day-to-Day Decision

Parental expectations have a significant impact on participants' day-to-day decisions and actions. P1 states that there is a sense of comfort through the freedom from expectations in her day-to-day decisions. "It's just more comfortable in my everyday life."(P1_L85), "More comfortable to do whatever because nothing is haunting me"(P1_L87). While P2 shares about the pressure of parental expectations lingering in his mind, "Expectations would always be in the back of my mind." (P2_L227). P3 acknowledges the guidance and motivation driven by parental expectations. "Sometimes I might ruminate a lot about it, and then it could furthermore impact my Actions."(P3_L511-512).

Implications for Future Aspirations

There are different perceptions by the participants regarding the levels of parental expectation influence on their future. P1 feels comfortable in planning her future with parental support. "I feel very comfortable planning my future."(P1_L94-95). Other than comfort in her everyday life, P1 also felt assured with the constant support from her parents. "My parents will always support me in every step that I take, so it is quite an assurance for me."(P1_L95-96). P1 then emphasized how she respects and greatly considers her parents' opinions in her day-to-day decisions. "My parents' opinion matters and I will always try to include them in my future journey,"(P1_L97-98). Different from P1's attitude towards the absence of expectation, P2 accepts the influence of expectations on his future. "I think those expectations influence me, but again, at this point, it is what it is."(P2_L242-243), "But maybe in the back of my mind, in my subconscious, it is still there."(P2_L243-244). P1 also stated how he felt tired of all of the expectations weighing on him. "At this point, I'm already tired and I just want to rest."(P2_L240-241). Furthermore, P3 experiences concerns about meeting parental expectations and potential disappointment from failing to achieve them. "At the same time, it's also like, oh man, what happens if I don't get these expectations."(P3_L520-521) "My parents are relatively more forgiving than other parents...But I do want to be able to reach certain milestones in my life at certain points"(P3_L521-522). However, P3 also mentioned that parental expectations can serve as a guide for her. Similarly, P4 views his parents as guides, seeing their expectations as a positive influence on his future aspirations. "Having certain expectations does guide me"(P3_L518), "I think some of my options I would like/often ask my dad."(P4_L653), "I use him as a guide, too."(P4_L655).

DISCUSSION

This research aims to explore how middle children perceive parental expectations and how they respond to them. Additionally, it investigates how these individuals navigate their aspirations and goals in light of such expectations, as well as their perceptions of expectations directed at their siblings.

To begin addressing these questions, it is important to first establish whether participants perceived the existence of parental expectations. All participants affirmed that they did, although the form and intensity of these expectations varied. Key domains in which expectations were commonly identified included academic performance, career choices, romantic relationships, and social behaviour. These expectations were frequently shaped by the quality of the participants' relationships with their parents and were deeply rooted in familial religious values, cultural traditions, and the parents' upbringing.

For example, Participant 2 (P2) noted that his parents' cultural background and personal histories significantly influenced the expectations placed upon him, particularly regarding career success. He indicated that these factors directly shaped both his own life choices and the aspirations his parents held for him. Several participants also observed that firstborn siblings often received more parental attention and bore higher expectations in areas such as academic and professional achievement. By contrast, middle children sometimes encountered more ambiguous or flexible expectations, which did not necessarily equate to reduced pressure.

Participant 1 (P1), for instance, described how the absence of explicit academic expectations was attributed to the consistently strong academic performance of herself and her siblings. Interestingly, this observation appears to challenge prior research suggesting that positive academic outcomes tend to result in heightened parental expectations, especially in educational domains (Pinquart & Ebeling, 2020). In P1's case, prior academic success seemed to reassure her parents, thereby diminishing the perceived need to enforce further expectations.

Conversely, Participant 4 (P4) shared an experience more consistent with the findings of Pinquart and Ebeling (2020). He observed that his youngest sibling—the last-born—was perceived to bear the highest parental expectations in the academic domain, specifically due to their superior academic performance relative to their two older siblings. This suggests that while some parents may lower expectations following positive outcomes, others may interpret academic success as a reason to increase their expectations further.

Beyond the types and domains of expectations, participants also described differences in how these expectations were communicated by their parents. The extent to which parental expectations were conveyed often depended on whether they were delivered explicitly or implicitly. Some participants reported that their parents articulated expectations clearly and verbally, whereas others indicated that

such expectations were implied through everyday family interactions and gradually internalised over time.

Parents play a crucial role in shaping children's competence beliefs and value systems, not only through general messages about the world but also via specific communications regarding children's perceived abilities across various domains, including academic and social spheres (Simpkins et al., 2015). Supporting this, Cheung and Pomerantz (2012, 2015) found that when children perceive their parents as valuing education and investing resources in their learning, they are more likely to prioritise achievement and strive to meet parental expectations. These findings highlight how parental communication of values can significantly influence children's perceptions of what is important to achieve, whether for personal fulfilment or parental approval.

According to Social Comparison Theory, comparisons among siblings within a family influence parental expectations (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; McHale et al., 2012). This theory suggests that how expectations are communicated, implicitly or explicitly, may affect children's self-perceptions and self-esteem. For example, Participant 3 (P3) explained that her parents never explicitly stated their expectations. Instead, she inferred them from indirect cues and subtle messages embedded in family interactions. This absence of verbalisation shaped how she understood and responded to expectations, which often manifested through tone, behaviour, or non-verbal parental attitudes.

Moreover, the findings indicate that cultural and contextual factors play a significant role in shaping parental expectations. As noted by Whiteman et al. (2011) and Chiang and Ellis (2019), the values and beliefs parents instill in their children are heavily influenced by cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and broader societal contexts. These factors critically shape the nature of expectations placed on middle children. For instance, in collectivist societies, individuals are more likely to pursue life goals aligned with family expectations, such as choosing a career path or partner that meets familial standards, rather than prioritising personal autonomy or individual preferences (Schwartz et al., 2012).

To address the research questions with greater nuance, it is crucial to consider the unique dynamics within each participant's family. The variation across different domains of parental expectations highlights the multidimensional nature of familial influence. The findings reveal that middle children's perceptions of parental expectations differ substantially. While some participants described these expectations as burdensome or emotionally taxing, others, such as P1 and P4, expressed gratitude and viewed them as sources of motivation.

According to Adler's theory (Adler, 1937), a child's motivation and self-perceived abilities are largely shaped by parental expectations. Adler posited that low expectations may lead to feelings of inferiority and diminished ambition, whereas high expectations can foster motivation and drive. However, the present

findings present a more complex picture that challenges this linear assumption. For example, Participant 2 (P2) identified himself as the sibling with the highest parental expectations, yet rather than feeling motivated, he described experiencing exhaustion due to persistent pressure. He reported that these expectations lingered in his thoughts, creating a sustained sense of burden—a sentiment echoed by P1.

This divergence in emotional response can also be interpreted through the lens of Social Comparison Theory, which posits that parental expectations are often shaped by comparisons among siblings (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; McHale et al., 2012). The theory suggests that individuals engage in selective comparisons to protect their self-esteem and maintain a positive self-image. In P2's case, he compared himself to his older sibling and perceived himself as more trusted and competent in certain domains, such as financial matters. However, rather than fostering confidence, this perceived superiority intensified the pressure he felt, ultimately undermining his motivation.

Moreover, the evolution of parental behaviour over time significantly shapes how middle children perceive expectations. This dynamic highlights the fluid and adaptive nature of family relationships, particularly as they respond to changing life circumstances. One participant noted that parental expectations fluctuated in response to shifts within the family environment and broader life context. Such variations suggest that parental expectations are not fixed but rather influenced by ongoing experiences, social norms, and family system interactions (Whiteman & Buchanan, 2002).

Previous studies have documented a consistent trend of increasing parental expectations, particularly correlating with greater parental involvement in children's achievement-related activities such as education. Over time, parents are found to prioritise values associated with academic and personal success, such as diligence and ambition, more strongly (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Ramey & Ramey, 2010; Curran & Hill, 2022). This growing emphasis on achievement-oriented qualities reflects an evolving framework of expectations that children internalise, especially in families where success is closely tied to parental validation and societal standards.

The trust dynamic between parents and children may also influence parental attitudes, affecting both the treatment of children and the expectations imposed upon them. For instance, a study of college students found that children who more consistently met parental expectations were reciprocally granted greater parental trust (Ishak et al., 2010). This suggests a bidirectional relationship, in which high expectations may be a consequence of, rather than solely a cause for, elevated parental trust.

Participants' narratives further complicate this dynamic. In some cases, being perceived as the most trustworthy sibling led middle children to become primary points of reliance for their parents, and sometimes for their siblings as well. This

phenomenon aligns with Family Systems Theory, which emphasises the interdependence of family member roles and interactions. Within this system, middle children may experience heightened parental expectations due to their perceived dependability and central family role.

Such expectations, however, can produce both positive and negative emotional outcomes. On one hand, middle children may feel validated and appreciated, deriving a sense of privilege from the trust placed in them by their parents. On the other hand, this increased trust and responsibility can become a source of internal pressure and emotional burden, especially when expectations become challenging to fulfil. Recognising this emotional ambivalence is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of middle children's well-being and for fostering more empathetic approaches within both familial and educational settings.

The dynamics of the parent-child relationship significantly influence how children perceive and respond to parental expectations in daily life. The pervasive influence of the family environment is evident in how such expectations shape middle children's everyday decision-making. Some participants reported experiencing a greater sense of freedom in the absence of explicit expectations, while others described the constant pressure to meet perceived or stated expectations as a persistent source of stress.

For example, Participant 1 (P1), who experienced minimal or absent parental expectations, conveyed a sense of empowerment in making day-to-day decisions. Freed from the weight of predetermined expectations, P1 felt able to act according to personal preferences, adopting a more relaxed and self-directed approach to daily challenges. This illustrates the potential motivational benefits of lower parental pressure and aligns with Adler's theory, which asserts that motivation and behaviour are significantly shaped by the expectations children internalise (Adler, 1937; Potts, 1929).

Supporting this view, recent research highlights that parental autonomy support, characterised by granting children freedom to make choices, is positively correlated with satisfaction of psychological needs and enhanced self-regulation (Çelik, 2024). Adolescents nurtured in autonomy-supportive environments tend to develop greater independence, competence, and relatedness, thereby fulfilling essential psychological needs (Wang, 2017; Çelik, 2024). These findings reinforce the idea that an absence of rigid parental expectations may foster autonomy, confidence, and intrinsic motivation among middle children as they navigate their everyday lives.

Parental expectations also exert considerable influence on middle children's future aspirations. The findings reveal a complex interplay between familial influence and the formation of long-term goals. Participants' experiences suggest that parental expectations can function either as support or as obstacles hindering the pursuit of aspirations. Expectations, whether explicitly stated or implicitly

communicated, shape not only children's current decision-making but also how they envision their futures. Many children feel compelled to incorporate their parents' hopes into their plans, often adjusting or compromising their own goals in response.

This aligns with findings from Jungen (2008) and Lee et al. (2019), who emphasise that parental values, expectations, and parent-child relational dynamics, alongside gender socialisation, exert a significant and often unconscious influence on children's career decision-making. The present study corroborates these insights, showing how parental expectations—delivered through everyday conversations or subtle behaviours—leave a lasting impact on children's internal aspirations. Participants frequently described these expectations as a mental burden, shaping their choices consciously and unconsciously.

Further, research by Chiang and Ellis (2019) underlines the significant role of cultural and socioeconomic factors in shaping parental expectations. This study's participants, drawn from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, reflected this diversity. Cultural background plays a pivotal role in prioritising different life domains and shaping the perceived roles of children within families. Consequently, parents from particular cultural contexts may emphasise specific areas, such as academic achievement or career success, by community values.

For instance, in cultures that highly value academic excellence, parents are more likely to articulate explicit expectations related to education and professional achievement. Similarly, families with higher socioeconomic status tend to hold different expectations than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, influenced by variations in access to educational resources, social capital, and opportunity structures. These disparities shape parental perceptions of what is achievable or desirable for their children's futures.

Although birth order was a key focus of this study, some participants perceived it as having little or no influence on parental expectations within their families. While several participants acknowledged birth order as significant, others downplayed its importance, illustrating diverse experiences and subjective interpretations among middle children. This variation underscores how the influence of birth order depends heavily on individual family dynamics and contextual factors.

Family Systems Theory, while not explicitly addressing birth order in shaping expectations for middle children, provides a useful framework for understanding expectation formation. The theory suggests that family dynamics are influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including birth order (Adler, 1928; Bowen, 1978). However, birth order is not the sole determinant; it interacts with cultural values, parental experiences, and sibling relationships to influence how expectations are distributed.

Therefore, attributing family dynamics or parental expectations solely to birth order oversimplifies the complex interplay of factors involved. Instead, birth order

should be viewed as one element within a broader system of family influences that collectively shape parental attitudes and behaviours.

As noted earlier, Family Systems Theory emphasises the family as an interconnected system where dynamics among members influence parental expectations (Adler, 1928; Bowen, 1978). This study's findings illustrate how family relationships and sibling interactions shape these expectations. Conversely, differing parental expectations can reciprocally affect sibling relationships and the overall family dynamic.

Participants expressed concerns about receiving different expectations from their parents, a situation that affected not only themselves but also their siblings. Their desire for equal treatment highlights how unequal parental expectations can ripple through the family system, influencing interpersonal relationships and perceptions within the family.

For example, some participants expressed sympathy for the expectations placed on their younger siblings. This empathy sometimes motivated middle children to advocate for their siblings' well-being, potentially creating tension within the family. Such tension may arise from middle children's efforts to balance their parental expectations with a desire for fairness among siblings. Beyond their pressures, middle children may experience an increased sense of responsibility related to protecting or supporting their siblings.

Moreover, if middle children feel their advocacy for fairness and equal expectations goes unrecognised by parents, this may lead to frustration and strain the parent-child relationship, exacerbating family tension (McHale et al., 2012).

Responses to unequal parental treatment and expectations vary depending on sibling dynamics within each family. In some cases, disparities foster competition and resentment rather than empathy or calls for equity. Jensen et al. (2013) found that unequal parental treatment, including differences in time, affection, resources, and support, can fuel hostility and conflict among siblings.

In summary, the findings and discussion underscore the complex interplay of factors shaping parental expectations. While birth order, cultural context, socioeconomic background, and family dynamics all influence expectations, some participants' experiences diverge from traditional theoretical frameworks, highlighting the nuanced nature of familial relationships. Furthermore, unequal parental treatment and expectations generate varied responses, from responsibility and advocacy to competition and resentment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal the varied perceptions of parental expectations among middle children in Indonesia, highlighting the complexity inherent within the family system. These expectations, as experienced by middle children, range from feelings of motivation and gratitude to experiences of pressure and emotional

burden. Such variations are influenced by multiple factors, including birth order, how expectations are communicated, cultural beliefs, and parental values.

A central factor shaping parental expectations is family dynamics. This research demonstrates that relationships among middle children, their parents, and siblings play a pivotal role in forming these expectations. Inconsistencies in parental treatment and investment contribute to the differential expectations assigned to each sibling, which, in turn, shape middle children's and their siblings' emotional responses to these disparities. Conversely, such disparities may also evoke sympathy, with middle children feeling a heightened sense of responsibility to advocate for equality and fairness within the sibling group.

Moreover, the study highlights that parental expectations manifest across diverse domains, including academic achievement, career aspirations, and cultural and social values. These expectations influence middle children's coping strategies, daily decision-making, and long-term aspirations, ultimately shaping their sense of purpose and life direction.

The importance of cultural context is particularly pronounced in understanding parental expectations within Indonesian families. Cultural beliefs and societal norms profoundly influence parental behaviour and the expectations imposed on middle children. Recognising these cultural dynamics is essential for designing interventions that respect and align with the values and lived realities of Indonesian families.

In conclusion, understanding these complex dynamics is crucial for advocating the well-being and positive development of middle children within the familial context. This study contributes to the broader discourse by illuminating the multifaceted factors that shape parental expectations of middle children in Indonesia. Acknowledging the diverse and nuanced nature of these expectations can foster family environments that support middle children's growth, enabling them to realise their full potential.

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