

Part 1 – Strengthening Your Couple Relationship

In families with children, the couple relationship is the key to a strong family. Couples who work together can overcome struggles they face. For couples who are parents of twins, triplets or more, this is not a simple task. Couples who are parents of multiples face unique challenges in their relationship. This fact sheet will:

- Identify the unique challenges you may face as a couple
- Recommend some ways to prepare for parenting multiples and deal with the challenges
- Suggest resources and articles to help you nurture your relationship

For more information on the challenges associated with parenting multiples please see the fact sheet series titled *The Challenges of Parenting Multiples: Twins and Higher Order Multiples*.

The content of this document is for information purposes only and does not reflect each person's individual situation. If you have any concerns, consult your health care providers immediately.

Introduction

All parents can face challenges in their relationship when they become new parents. A new baby involves making adjustments that are not always easy – new routines, added expenses and so much more. When two, three or more infants are suddenly added to a family, there are even more complex issues that can challenge the parents' relationships: sleepless nights, around-the-clock care of the children, housework, financial commitments, and unrelenting demands that can make parents stressed and irritable. It is very easy to take out these overwhelming daily frustrations out on the people we love and need for support, especially those closest to us.

Even if the parents have adequate practical support and a solid relationship, the workload involved in caring for a suddenly large family can leave little time and energy for the couple to maintain their relationship.

What are the issues that may impact the couple relationship?

- Parents of multiples usually need additional hands-on help. In the first few months the baby care demands are nearly round-the-clock. They often struggle to find the time to meet the needs of the babies, attend to household chores, prepare meals, do laundry, and take care of their personal needs including a shower and sleep.
- As both parents juggle care within the home plus the physical, emotional and financial demands of two, three or more new little ones, their relationship may be pushed aside or ignored. If one or both parents work outside the home, there can be even more stress added to the relationship. Without meaning to, the couple relationship is often one of the last items parents attend to. The relationship can very easily shift from a "couple relationship" to only a "parenting relationship."
- Sleep deprivation is a significant challenge for parents with multiples in the first few months and can escalate frustrations and irritability, while diminishing problem solving skills. It takes more effort to remember the needs of the other parent and to spend time relaxing together. It is easy for difficulties to trigger a bigger conflict when both partners are exhausted and stressed.

How can parents prepare for the challenges?

It is essential to take care of the couple relationship, even as parents work on their parenting techniques. It is important to make the couple relationship a priority. When parents look after each other and are happy, they will have more happiness to share with their children. As a result, the children will have the benefit of more joy and love, and healthier adults who are important role models. This may be one of the most important lessons on unconditional love that we teach our children: take care of yourself and your partner.

Tips from Parents of Multiples

Before the Babies Arrive

1. **Prepare for the birth and parenting.** Both parents need to be prepared for what to expect during the prenatal period, after the birth and as parents of multiples. Informed parents will be more organized and at ease with the challenges, less overwhelmed, more likely to enjoy their special parenting experience, and happier as a couple. Multiple Births Canada recommends that both expectant parents consider the following:

- Sign up for some multiple-birth-specific classes in your community as soon as you know you are having multiples.
- If classes are not available, you may also find some online classes or relevant DVDs to watch together.
- Read some of the many excellent books and information products (including videos and online sites) on multiple pregnancy, birth, and parenting multiple-birth children, and other siblings if any. Multiple Births Canada has a list of resources available online at www.multiplebirthscanada.org.
- Talk with other parents of multiples about their experiences and what they recommend. Realize that there isn't one right way, but several ways, and that knowing the options will help the two of you make the best decisions.

2. **Consider using your parental leave benefits.** Parents may be eligible for a maximum of 65 weeks of combined sickness, maternity, and parental benefits instead of the normal combined maximum of 50 weeks of EI. If one or more of the babies is hospitalized, benefits can be extended further. This can help the parents to be better equipped to handle physical and emotional stress. Having more time for bonding with your babies and for each other can help to enhance your couple and family relationships. Discuss how much time each of you might take from work, and when.

3. **Build a support network.** Develop a strong support system which can provide both you and your partner with strength and peace of mind to face the challenges. Support can be from family, trusted friends and/or professionals, and other parents of multiples who have already been there.

"We have learned to make time for us. Ever since they were born we have made sure we had our time. Grandparents have also been a big part of that. It is very important to do this, no matter if it is even just a date night. Time away is good."
Parent of twins, 2008

4. **Discuss and plan family matters.** Many parents of multiples face extraordinary emotional, financial and physical strains. Addressing these issues before the babies arrive can help. These issues may include finances, parenting strategies, housing and transportation needs, employment leave options and willingness to seek help with caregiving or household tasks. Working together as a team can alleviate the worries, build individual confidence and strengthen the couple relationship. Talk to a financial planner if the financial commitments are a concern for your family. Consult with social services if you are low income parents with few resources.
5. **Organize help before the babies arrive in a way that will work for you.** Extra hands-on-help will make it easier to establish routines, get some much-needed sleep and have time for the couple relationship.
6. **Connect with other parents of multiples.** Learning from those who have faced and met the challenges related to parenting multiples can be extremely helpful.

After the Babies Come Home

1. **Find time to be alone together on a regular basis.** For a healthy relationship, couples need time alone to be intimate and time to have fun together. Schedule a regular Date Night when grandparents or a local teen come to sit for a couple of hours; or it could be that you stay home to watch a movie, cuddle, talk, or go out for a drink or a walk. It does not have to be an expensive outing, the important thing is that it is just the two of you alone enjoying each other's company. The sleep deprivation issue will improve after the first few months, and then you can start planning some couple time together when the children are asleep, or when a family member or sitter can watch them for a short time.
2. **Treat each other with respect and kindness.** Even though the stress and fatigue can make us impatient and irritable, try not to take out your frustrations on your partner. Recognize that it is normal to have challenges along life's journey. Communicating respectfully and effectively is the most successful way to solve problems and remain united. For example, discuss issues one at a time and focus on the problem at hand without personal insults or blame.
3. **Support each other.** It is important for each parent to be actively involved in the children's care and the household responsibilities. Develop common goals and support each other in household chores and dealing with the children.
4. **Go with the flow** and recognize that each of you may have a different way of doing a task. Appreciate the different skills that you each bring to the role of parenting and baby care, and allow each other to complete the task in his or her own style. Give positive feedback to one another.
5. **Communicate clearly and directly.** Share your needs, feelings and frustrations with your partner. Even though you may be out together alone, it is okay to talk about the kids because you are working as a team. Discuss what works, what doesn't, or concerns you might have about parenting styles (e.g. eating and sleeping schedule).

Be aware that in the short term the expression of sexual intimacy for each person may differ and previous practices may require some alteration. The constant exhaustion, unrelenting caregiving, and loss of libido can put a damper on one's sex life. Try to talk openly about each other's needs and come up with ways of sharing intimacy that satisfy both.

6. **Find time alone to discuss parenting challenges.** It is not constructive to talk about disagreements in parenting styles with several toddlers running in different directions. Be prepared to only focus on the present moment and talk about parenting styles calmly at another opportune time. Small issues can easily be blown out of proportion when parents do not share common goals. It is important to present a unified and consistent front to the children.
7. **Get help to complete some tasks around the home.** If you can afford it and/or find volunteer help, get assistance with cutting the grass, shovelling the snow, cleaning the house, and grocery shopping. Place a notice at your local high school or library as some tasks can be done by students or older neighbourhood children. Having help, even in the short term, will allow you to focus on the babies, your personal needs and each other.
8. **Monitor each other's mood.** Postpartum depression and anxiety affects approximately 20-30% of mothers and a lower percentage of fathers of multiples. As well, it can have consequences for the children. Seek professional help early to lessen the impact on everyone.
9. **Share your joys.** Tell your partner when you are feeling happy and satisfied. This will help to encourage positive communication and enhance the relationship. Constant negative feedback can be counterproductive. Offer praise and compliments generously to each other. Celebrate the babies' milestones, and take lots of photos and videos to remember the fun times.
10. **Remember to Laugh.** Laughter can be the best medicine in difficult situations. When parenting multiples, it helps to have a sense of humour and not sweat the small stuff. Laughter and joy comes easily for parents when watching their babies laugh and grow.
11. **Nurture Self.** It is common, especially for mothers of multiples, to lose sight of their personal needs and to experience a loss of identity, especially in the first years of parenting. Although some parents report that they found their identity on becoming a parent, many others describe a loss of personal self. Some strategies that may be effective are:
 - Set aside time on a regular basis for a personal activity which is realistically manageable such as a short walk or jog, a relaxing bath, a massage, a coffee/tea date with a friend, or a meal at a restaurant or a movie with your partner.
 - Take stock of your accomplishments as an expectant and new parent. It is all too easy to focus on difficulties and perceived personal shortcomings.
 - Associate with people who are supportive and who help you recognize your abilities as a parent and as an individual. This person could be another parent of multiples, a trusted relative or friend, spiritual advisor and/or a sensitive caregiver. Make time to visit and talk with these supportive friends – invite them to your home or phone them if you do not have time to go out and see them.
 - Take care of your physical health with good nutrition, exercise, and as regular a sleep schedule as you can manage. Remember to book your own medical and dental checkups, and have any small problems attended to before

"Yes multiples can stress a marriage especially if the relationship is not solid in the first place. A relationship takes a lot of work, commitment, unconditional love and each parent giving 110%. Teamwork is essential."
Parent of twins, 2008

they become bigger issues. Take care of your mental health as well, and watch out for your partner.

12. Consider professional counselling if your relationship is really suffering. The cost is often covered through one partner's extended health benefits, and even if not, it can be worth it in the long run to seek professional help early.

Getting through those initial days and weeks can be a challenge, especially as the sleep deprivation builds up and fuses shorten. Believe in yourself and your potential to be an effective parent and loving partner. It is essential to ensure that the love, trust, respect and companionship that brought you together in the first place are not misplaced. Things will get better as the kids become more independent and sleep through the night.

Recommended Sources of Information:

Multiple Births Canada

www.multiplebirthscanada.org/english/higherorder.php

Toll-Free (in Canada): 1-866-228-8824

Telephone: 613-834-TWIN(8946)

Email: office@multiplebirthscanada.org

The Multiple Births Foundation

www.multiplebirths.org.uk/

Telephone: 0208 383 3519 Fax: 0208 383 3041

E-mail: info@multiplebirths.org.uk

One At A Time - www.oneatatime.org.uk

Multiple Births: Prenatal Education & Bereavement Support- www.multiplebirthsfamilies.com

Mothers of Supertwins (MOST) - www.mostonline.org

The Triplet Connection - www.tripletconnection.org

Documents and Articles:

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International Council of Multiple Birth Organizations (2010). Declaration of Rights and Statement of Needs of Twins and Higher Order Multiples www.multiplebirthscanada.org/english/declarerightsmb.php

Twins, Triplets or More: Resource Guide for Multiple Pregnancy and Parenthood (Updated every six months) by Linda G. Leonard, RN MSN www.nursing.ubc.ca/pdfs/twinstripletsandmore.pdf

Multiple Births Canada Fact Sheets on various topics related to multiple pregnancy, births and parenting www.multiplebirthscanada.org/english/booklets.php#factsheets including:

- *The Challenges of Parenting Twins and Higher Order Multiples*
- *Postpartum Depression and Mothers of Multiples*

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