

Parental Relationships After Multiple Births

Keeping the “Couple” in a Relationship After Having Multiple-Birth Children

A new baby brings emotional and financial challenges, new routines, loss of sleep, and so much more to a relationship. Twins, triplets or more add even more complex issues to a relationship. Once a diaper has been changed and a baby fed, burped and soothed, we aren't finished – it needs to be done again, and possibly again and again. It is estimated that every time we add a baby to the mix, we are adding a baby and a half's worth of work.¹

Parents try to meet the needs of the babies and the house, make meals, do laundry, grab a shower, visit the bathroom quickly at an opportune moment and fit in some much-needed sleep. As parents juggle work outside the home and the physical, mental, emotional and financial demands of 2, 3 or 4 new little ones, their relationship can be pushed aside and virtually ignored. The marital relationship is often one of the last items parents tend to as it falls victim to the “parenting relationship.” Sleep deprivation is HUGE with multiples and escalates the “cranky” factor. After the children are seen to, it takes effort to remember to look after the spousal relationship as well.

Remembering to take care of your relationship, even as you are working on your parenting techniques, is essential. When parents look after themselves and each other, the children will have the benefit of two happier, healthier adults who are important role models. This may be one of the most important lessons we teach our children: remembering to look after yourself and your partner. Being too busy for your partner and/or leaving the spousal relationship to fend for itself negatively affects the whole family.

Things that help. Advice from parents of multiples:

Contact Multiple Births Canada to find an MBC Chapter in your area to connect with other parents of multiples. Where one may not be available there are many alternatives through social networking sites and forums. Learning from those who have specifically lived the same experience is extremely helpful.

In addition, refer to the MBC website at www.multiplebirthscanada.org for additional prenatal resources written and experienced by other multiple-birth couples that will help both partners as they prepare for the birth of their children.

- Before your babies arrive, look around for some multiple-birth-specific classes in your community and sign up for them as soon as you know you are having multiples. Both parents need to attend. If there are none in your community, be sure to ask for them. When we ask for what we need, there is a greater chance for change, and you may be able to change things for someone else. You may also find some online classes or relevant DVDs to watch together.
- Line up help in a form that will work for you before the babies arrive. One family had each grandmother stay for 3 weeks consecutively after their babies' arrival. The 6 weeks of extra hands and experience made it easier to establish routines and get some much-needed sleep.
- It is important for each parent to be actively involved in the children's care. Don't wait to be asked and don't be afraid to share that you are scared or need help in learning how to provide that care.
- 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 your partner to complete the task in his/her own style.
- If there is an issue between you, communicate. Don't assume the other can read your mind or anticipate exactly what needs to be done. Timely and clear communication is the key, e.g. “Could you please help change the babies?”
- Plan time for each other on a regular basis. It might be weekly or every two weeks. Have a 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 foot/back rubs. It doesn't have to be huge; a trip to the coffee shop or walk

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around the block by yourselves could work, but the important thing is that it is just the two of you.

- Even though you may be out together, expect to talk about the children. That is okay because you are working as a team, discussing what works, what doesn't seem to be working, or concerns you might have about eating, sleeping habits and such. Many parents of multiples have expressed their pleasure at watching their partner redefine him/herself as a parent.
- It can be a challenge to communicate about parenting styles with a number of children needing your attention. Be prepared to deal with the present situation, and talk about parenting styles at another opportunity.
- If you can afford it, get help to complete some tasks around the home, e.g. cutting the grass, shoveling the snow, cleaning the house, grocery shopping. Some of the tasks can be done by older neighbourhood children, or place a notice at your local high school or library. Having someone else--even in the short term--assist with these tasks, allows you to focus on the babies and each other.
- If your relationship is really suffering, consider professional counseling. It is often covered through a partner's extended health benefits, and even if not, it can be worth it in the long run to seek professional help early.
- It is amazing how quickly things can get out of control when one parent doesn't know the expectations of the other parent. Always check with each other and present a unified front to the children.
- As one couple shared: *"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."*

Getting through those initial days and weeks can be a challenge, especially as sleep deprivation builds up and a person's patience lessens. Keeping a supportive eye on each other is essential to ensure the love, trust, respect and companionship that brought you together in the first place is not misplaced. Things will improve as you become more confident as a parent of multiples, the children become more independent, and when everyone can get the full amount of sleep needed.

¹1983 Australian Multiple Births Association study

For more information, check out the results of Multiple Births Canada's Survey Report, "Multiples and Impact on Couple Relationships." Both documents can be found under Research on the MBC website.

Additional Resources

Divorce and the Multiple Birth Family
– Survey by MOST -
http://www.mostonline.org/facts_divorcesurvey.htm

Variety of Multiple Births Canada's publications concerning multiple-birth issues. All available for purchase online

Written by Lynda P. Haddon, Multiple Birth Educator, www.multiplebirthsfamilies.com and reviewed by the MBC Health & Education Committee.

Questions?

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