

Parents of twins, triplets or more face a challenge as their children begin school: should their children be together in the same classroom, or be separated? Some schools have a policy based on separation, but a "one size fits all" policy does not allow for input from the parents, nor the children themselves. Not all multiples want to be together, and others benefit from catching an occasional glimpse of their co-multiple across the room in order to settle down. The critical thing is for the children is to develop "mature dependence" where they enjoy being a multiple but also function as confident individuals.

In order to assist Educators, the following offers a brief outline of both points of view, i.e. together or separate, and provides additional research material at the end of the article.

Reasons for Separation

While there is no substantial evidence to support the policy of separation in order for each child to grow and develop as individuals, sometimes circumstances exist which would indicate that separation is advisable. It is helpful to recognize that some behaviours may be an issue one year and not the next.

- Their constant "togetherness" is hindering the development of social skills in one, both or all;
- A "division of labour" exists;
- Insensitive comparisons by others have led to feelings of inadequacy in at least one multiple;
- A child's problems are attributed to the fact that s/he is a multiple;
- The multiples form a "power unit" causing disruptive behaviour;
- Multiples exploit their multipleship to cheat or play tricks;
- One multiple appears to resent the lack of privacy resulting from sharing a classroom;
- One multiple proves to be a constant distraction to the other(s);
- In opposite-sex multiples, the female is overprotective of her male co-multiple(s);
- In skill-grouped classroom activities where the abilities of one multiple are above that of his co-multiple(s);
- The multiples WANT to be separated.

Reasons for Not Separating

- Major emotional upheavals have occurred within the family – i.e. death, divorce, move, new siblings, etc.;
- Only one classroom is available;
- Unequal education due to different teaching styles of the educators;
- Multiples are at or near the same skill levels in a skill-based classroom;
- The multiples do NOT want to be separated. Forced separation, with all of the other "firsts" children face, especially in their first year of school, can add undue stress, regression and affect self-esteem;
- Separation in the first year of school should not be an automatic decision. The added stress might actually reinforce their need to be together;
- Allow multiples as much independence as they are ready to handle. They flourish when allowed to separate on their own timetable;
- Encourage them to choose separate classes as they gain confidence in the school situation.

Tips for Teachers of Multiples

- Encourage multiples to sit apart for different class activities. This assists you in identifying who's who and discourages them from completing each other's work;
- Look for differences in the multiples, not sameness, eg. voice differences, left/right handed, birthmarks, hair growth. Being able to address each multiple by his or her individual name assists them in recognizing that they are individuals;
- Some parents dress their children alike. If this is a difficulty in your classroom, ask that the children be dressed differently for easier identification both for yourself and their peers;
- Refer to each child by his or her own name. This helps you to identify each child and sets a good example for their peers to address them individually as well;
- Expect differences in test scores, neatness, and behaviour but don't be surprised if they are very similar;
- Avoid insensitive comparisons, eg. "You are smarter than your twin." This sets up both multiples to have poor self-esteem;

- For parent/teacher interviews, compare each child to their peer group and not to each other;
- Make different interview times for each child rather than having one interview time to talk about all the kids at once. One mother of quadruplets noted it was assumed by the teacher that they would be discussing all four children at one interview;
- If one multiple (especially monozygotic [identical] multiples) is markedly behind his co-multiple, investigate the cause:
 - Check to make sure that each multiple is doing his own work;
 - Plan a conference with the parents to explore the situation;
 - Don't rule out the possibility of a learning disability in one of the multiples.

Recommendations Regarding Classroom Placement

Multiple Births Canada recommends that classroom placement for each set of multiples be evaluated each school year in order to ascertain which is the best situation for them, i.e. together or separated. The final decision of having the children together or separated should be made by the parents, the teacher(s), the principal, and at some ages, the children themselves jointly.

Compiled and adapted by Lynda P. Haddon, 2002, 2009, from "Placement of Multiple Birth Children in School, A Guide for Educators" a publication of National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc., 1991

Reviewed by Pat Preedy Ph.D., M.Ed., B.Ed. (UK), John Mascazine Ph.D. (US) and Donna Launslager, MBC Health & Education Chair.

Additional Resources

Multiples in School, booklet by Multiple Births Canada.
Parenting School-Age Twins and Multiples, Christina Baglivi Tinglof, 2007.
Twin and Triplet Psychology: A Professional Guide to Working with Multiples, Audrey C. Sandbank, (SAME) 1999.
Understanding Multiple Birth Children and How They Learn, John Mascazine Ph.D. (US), Pat Preedy Ph.D., M.Ed., B.Ed. (UK) and Professor David Hay (Australia)
The Joy of Twins, Pamela Patrick Novotny, 1988
Twins, Triplets and More, Elizabeth M. Bryan, 1992
The Art of Parenting Twins, Patricia Maxwell Malmstrom and Janet Poland, 1999
 twinsandmultiples.org, Educational Website for Multiples in School
 twinservices.org article, "School Placement: Apart or Together?", Pat Malmstrom

Questions?

Call: (705)429-0901 or (866)228-8824 (toll free)
 To order copies, call or write:
 Multiple Births Canada
 Box 432 Wasaga Beach, Ontario, Canada L9Z 1A4
 office@multiplebirthscanada.org

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