

Expert Tips on Parenting Multiples



Double (or more) the Joy

They're unique, attention-drawing, and a lot of work— here's an inside look at the challenges and rewards of parenting twins and higher-order multiples.

By Trisha McBride Ferguson

Bringing Home Babies

A new baby brings change to any family routine, and multiples add their own unique requirements. "It's amazing how you adapt — you just do it and it becomes your new family routine," says pediatrician Shelly Vaziri Flais, M.D., FAAP, and author of a forthcoming book on twins from the American Academy of Pediatrics. "You get really good at holding two babies at once."

Establishing a routine is crucial to managing multiples, advises Flais, a mother of four — including twin four-year old boys. "Newborns primarily eat and sleep, so it's best if you can coordinate both of those activities."

Synchronizing babies' sleeping and eating routine is ideal, agrees Robert W. Steele, M.D., FAAP, on staff at the department of pediatrics at St. John's Children's Hospital in Springfield, Mo. "You won't survive if you don't put them on the same schedule. If one wakes up to eat, you need to feed the other one. Otherwise, you won't get any sleep," says Dr. Steele, also the father of twin boys.

The same SIDS-prevention rules apply to multiples as well — most importantly, babies should be put to sleep on their back. "In many instances, putting both babies together to sleep is fine, and even preferable," says Steele. "In our case, it wasn't... since one would often wake the other."

Recruiting Help

The first six to eight weeks at home are often the most challenging for parents as babies develop a routine. Parents of multiples often need additional help, even if one parent stays at home.

Seeing More Multiples?

It's true, multiple births are on the rise. According to the most recent data from the National Center for Health Statistics, from 1980 to 1997 the number of twin births in the United States rose 52 percent (from 68,339 to 104,137), and triplet and higher-order multiples rose 404 percent (from 1,377 to 6,737 births).

Help from family and friends in the early weeks makes things more manageable, advises Steele. "If you can get help — even for part of the day or part of the night — it makes things a whole lot easier."

If you don't have immediate family in the area, try reaching out to friends and neighbors, suggests Flais. "You might be surprised at who will volunteer to help you with specific tasks, like holding the babies or feeding them. Reaching out and asking for help is important, especially in the first three months."

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Managing Individuality

Multiples can be hard to tell apart, even if they are not identical. Finding a way to identify each child early on will help you tell them apart until their individual characteristics and personalities emerge.

“Our twin boys are identical, so when they were young we dressed them in distinct color themes of blues and reds,” says Flais. “This helped family and friends when they came over and made it easier for everyone to call them by their names, instead of referring to them as ‘the twins.’ It also helped me later when I was trying to label photographs.”

Encouraging individuality in twins and other multiples is important at every age. “In our home we make sure that each child gets some one-on-one time each week,” says Flais. “It may be as simple as just taking one of them to the store alone. They get a parent all to themselves, and feel like they’re being listened to, and you can better appreciate them as individuals.”

Setting the Example

Multiples are naturally fascinating and attract a lot of attention from family, friends, and the public — creating a unique set of concerns. Try to plan ahead and prepare for how you will respond to such attention.

“You get a lot of strange comments, and you just can’t let it faze you,” says Flais. “When I hear ‘Oh, you’ve got your hands full,’ I reply, ‘They’re good kids, I’m very lucky.’ I don’t want them to hear negative comments and think they’re a burden to me. How you respond in front of your kids is important.”

Using each child’s name and encouraging others to do so instead of saying “the twins” or “the triplets” is another essential way to respect children’s individuality and help others recognize their differences.

When multiples become school age, the issue of one or separate classrooms emerges. Most families get to choose whether multiple siblings

will share a classroom, and some states have legislation supporting this choice. “Personally, I think our boys spend so much time together they appreciate the time apart, but I know other parents are really adamant that their kids stay together,” says Flais.

Finding Support

Raising twins or multiples is easier with the right support. Meeting other parents of multiples in your area is an invaluable way to share knowledge and experience, says Steele. “Find out if there’s a multiples group in your town, look for clothing sales, and take advantage of opportunities to pick up things in duplicate.” ●

Get Connected

From clothing sales to expert advice, there’s a variety of online resources dedicated to the unique needs of families with multiples. Here are a few to check out:

- **MOST (Mothers of Supertwins):** www.mostonline.org
- **Mothers of Multiples Society:** www.mothersofmultiples.com
- **National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs:** www.nomotc.org
- **Twins Magazine:** www.twinsmagazine.com

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