

A Teacher's Guide to Twins, Triplets or More in School

Why a teacher's guide?

Although twins, triplets and more share a special bond, it is now recognised that each child develops best when treated as an individual. This is of crucial importance both at home and at school. Around one in every 35 children entering primary education next year will be a twin or higher multiple. Twins Trust aims to raise teachers' awareness of the special educational needs of twins, triplets and more. This is a large group which, although it may attract a lot of attention, often finds its specific needs ignored.

Some basic facts about multiples: types of twins

About a third of twins are identical. Although they have the same genes they are different people with their different personalities, strengths and weaknesses. They should never be regarded as interchangeable.

The rest are either non-identical boys, girls or boy/girl twins. They are no more alike than two brothers, two sisters or a sister and brother, but they still have a special relationship.

Pre-school/nursery/foundation

Calling young twins "the twins," or "twinnies" may sound cute but it is unacceptable. Each child has their own name which should be used at all times. Joining a pre-school group enables multiple birth children to play and relate to youngsters outside their multiple birth relationship. Multiples should not be expected to always play with each other and should be encouraged to make other friends. Pre-school can also mean sharing - multiples will be used to this. Often multiple birth children will have shared belongings and toys since birth - sometimes out of financial necessity.

However, they remain individual children - and should never be viewed as two halves of one unit. No matter how similar, each will have individual emotional needs, interests and rates of development. They should not be compared or judged against each other.

With triplets, quads and more, their birth is often very premature so in the early years it is important that teachers' expectations allow for this. Some may want to stay together while many may welcome the opportunity to play with other children.

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Separating twins, for however long, needs careful discussion with their parents and the children themselves.

Identification

It is important to work together as a school to consider the needs of twins, triplets and more. Everyone who comes into contact with them should be able to recognise them easily and call them by their names.

Multiple birth children and their families will welcome the teacher's understanding of their particular needs and the teacher's contribution to the crucial early years in helping them to establish their individual identity. Different hairstyles, different coloured skirts, pinafores or shirts can all be used to make this easier. Name badges should be avoided in case they are worn outside school and are a lure for strangers

Twins Trust can advise on ensuring children from a multiple birth family are recognised for who they are (see enhancing individuality information sheet).

Language and reading

It must not be assumed that there will be problems and that the language development of multiples will be behind singletons. Research has shown there may be:

- Slowness in developing imagination
- Inadequate verbal expression
- Immature social behaviour
- Attention seeking behaviour

These problems may be a reflection of the children re-inforcing each other's immature speech as well as the reduced amount of individual parental attention multiples inevitably experience during their early years. However, it is important not to make assumptions about an individual child. Children need to be assessed individually and both parents and teachers would be ill-advised to lower their expectations of how much multiples can achieve. Meeting the family before the children enter school will give an opportunity to discuss each situation. Some twins, particularly boys, may be below average in reading accuracy and comprehension. Teachers and parents need to work together to overcome such difficulties when they occur and should be particularly aware of differences in abilities and temperament between multiples.

Together or apart - separation at school

Separation into different schools at the primary stage would be exceptional. Once at school, research has shown there are no set rules. Children's needs will differ from individual to individual. Schools are therefore advised to be flexible and consider each family as a separate case. Careful consideration is needed when it comes to separating triplets - which child, if any, should go into a different class when there's just two-form entry?

When starting school, multiples have the advantage of mutual support, even if they are in different classes.

The following are signs which would indicate that separation is a good idea:

- Lack of concentration and motivation
- Marked differences in ability between siblings
- Over-demanding of teacher's attention
- Inability to relate to peers except as a unit
- Over-competitiveness or "opting out"
- Constant comparisons undermining the self confidence of one child
- Behaviour problems
- Dependency or dominance (likely to fluctuate)
- Previous stereotyping, resulting in polarised behaviour - for example, the children may already have been dubbed the sensible or silly one, the neat or untidy one, the artist or the scientist
- When there is only a single form entry it's usually best for the children to be in different groups
- All changes should be carefully discussed with the children and their parents - separation may be construed as an unjust punishment unless carefully handled

Joining the class

Teachers should do everything possible to treat the children as individuals and to be able to identify each of them, calling them by their own names.

Other guidelines include:

- Encourage the class to refer to the children by name
- Give each child copies of letters and notes to go home if they affect both or all of them.
- Discuss each child separately - ideally at different times - at parents' evening.
- Compare children with their peer group not their siblings

If the children are separated for the first time, remember this may be even more traumatic than leaving mum. It is also important to be aware of potential differences within the families of twins, triplets and more. It is usual, for example for the father to be very much involved in looking after the children, by force of circumstances. Single parents may look for extra support and advice from teachers.

Higher multiples

- Parents welcome early reassurance that there will be enough places at their chosen school for all their children.
- Discuss with the parents whether or not to separate the children at the outset into different classes.
- Ideally the arrangement will be flexible and regularly reviewed.
- Problems of behaviour or unequal progress may cause parents to become anxious. Be prepared to discuss the situation sensitively.
- Try to appreciate the sheer impact for parents of attending to, caring for and stimulating triplets, quadruplets or more, especially if any of them have special needs or require sustained extra help with speech therapy exercises, reading or numeracy.
- Even without special needs, parents often have great difficulty finding individual time for help with reading and homework.

What support does *Twins Trust* offer?

Twins Trust aims to provide high quality information and mutual support networks for families of twins, triplets and more, highlighting their unique needs to all involved in their care. Its services include **Twinline** a confidential helpline for parent to parent support (see details at the bottom of page one). There are also parent to parent support groups for higher multiples, special needs, lone parents, bereavement and infertility and specialist support to parents through Honorary consultants

Twins Trust offers **Professional Membership** for those supporting families of twins, triplets or more. Benefits include a twice yearly copy of *Twins Trust* Bulletin with current research and parenting support information, priority booking for *Twins Trust's* training sessions and conferences as well as access to *Twins Trust's* Honorary educational consultants. *Twins Trust's* 'Parenting with *multiples* in mind' seven week course is for parents and carers of multiples aged one to five year olds and includes sessions on individuality, managing behaviour and play and development. In addition *Twins Trust's* 'Parenting with *multiples* in mind' video can be used as a resource for both parents and professionals.

Further publications about twins and more in school, including a questionnaire for teachers and parents to use when multiples start school and a guide to school policy for twins and higher multiples, are available from the *Twins Trust* office or online shop.

There is also an excellent website on the education of multiples - www.twinsandmultiples.org