

Multiples and Impact on Couple Relationships

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Background:

In early 2008, in response to concerns by health care professionals and private members about the impact of multiples on marriage, Multiple Births Canada conducted an online survey to begin collecting data on how twins, triplets and more can affect the marital relationship.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to analyze how the multiple-birth experience impacts the spousal relationship.

Method:

The survey consisted of 10 questions, both quantitative and qualitative. 158 mothers and fathers of twins, triplets and quadruplets from across Canada participated in an on-line survey administered through survey-monkey.

Key Findings:

- The majority of the 158 respondents were parents of dizygotic twins (about 9% had triplets or higher-order multiples).
- Roughly one third of respondents also had another child: 29% had an older child, while 6% reported having a younger child in addition to the multiples.
- About 12% of respondents had been together fewer than five years; most had been together 4-7 years, many even longer.
- Seventy-eight percent reported a strong relationship during the pregnancy; 34% said that their relationship got worse or much worse by the end of the first year with multiples. Nearly half experienced some improvement in their relationship *after* the first year and dramatic improvement after 3-5 years.
- Qualitative responses included in this report are indicated by quotations and italics.

Factors to Consider:

The survey focus was traditional marriages.

The survey was promoted via the Multiple Births Canada website and email list; therefore many respondents were involved with a support group. The researchers believe that parents of multiples who have not connected with a local or national multiples-specific support organization, likely face greater challenges.

Prenatal Classes

One of the greatest challenges in general with multiple births seems to be an availability of high quality, early-onset, relevant prenatal instruction. Almost half took some kind of prenatal course together, but only 23% of them were multiples specific.

“Not everyone understands the dynamics of twins - they are often misunderstood by other family members and staff at their school. The attention we attract in public is not always welcomed - generally not a problem but on some days when you are in a hurry - it can get frustrating.”

“I read several books, but I was still not quite prepared of the TOTAL EXHAUSTION after giving birth. People tended to talk a lot about pre-birth and then later (not the immediate few weeks after birth), which is tough when you have twins. Lack of sleep killed me and my husband (figuratively speaking, of course)”.

It was reported that classes did not address the impact of multiples on marriage, or did so only vaguely. Over three quarters of respondents did not feel as though there was enough information prior to birth regarding the impact of multiples on marriage. One of the difficulties—apart from the availability of multiples-specific classes in some areas—seems to be that expectant parents of twins, triplets or more wait too long before enrolling in classes, leaving little time for adequate preparation. Some parents felt that because they already had one or more singleton children, that having twins was “no different” and therefore chose not to sign up for any prenatal classes even when multiples-specific classes were offered in their community.

Positive Impacts of Multiples on Marriage

Many parents reported that having twins, triplets or more, has made them more efficient people. Since raising multiples is a two-person job, it forces team work and joint problem solving. This phenomenon usually begins even before the babies arrive because multiple pregnancy complications often initiates soul-searching and as a result brings partners closer together as a couple.

Once the babies arrive, there is a discovery of “family”; it is generally easier to do things as a family rather than alone, so couples with multiples tend to develop strong family bonds. Couples also commented on how fascinating it is to redefine themselves as parents; and it is neat to see your spouse become a mom or dad. Many families made new friends through local twin and triplet support chapters.

Another advantage of parenting multiples is that parents are able to really focus on ONE developmental stage at a time, as opposed to two differently aged singletons. It is important to note, however, that this can also prove to be a challenge.

“The first three months weren't that bad - while we were sleep deprived, everything was new and we got through it as a team. As the year passed, the fact that this wasn't just a temporary change in our lives set in and we started sniping at each other more. Also, as the kids get older, there is more to disagree on in terms of how you handle the kids.”

Negative Impacts of Multiples on Marriage

Survey respondents told us that the most difficult challenges related to parenting multiples are the resulting financial strain and lack of TIME (alone, for each other and in general) and SLEEP.

“Operating on the huge sleep deficit that comes with twins, our fuses are much shorter: Stressful situations tend to elevate quickly and we tend to take things out on each other.”

The stress of increased financial strain with twins or more (suddenly amplified diaper and feeding bills, no hand-me-downs, expense of hiring much-needed help) can cripple a marital relationship. Compounded with prolonged lack of sleep, which almost always results in a reduced sex drive, and a general inability to make good decisions, parents of multiples are at greater risk for separation or divorce in the early years. As one couple commented on the survey:

“Since we have had the boys, this is the first time that the “divorce” word has ever come up. The combination of sleep deprivation, stress, and not having enough “twin” support is extremely stressful. Friends with singletons do not understand.”

Many parents reported that with two or more babies at home, the necessary “parenting” relationship takes over (and in some cases, marginalizes) the “marital” relationship.

Things do not always improve dramatically when the babies become toddlers: Communicating about parenting styles while three toddlers head in different directions is very challenging.

“Our heads are always spinning and we don't have a chance to come up with a game plan most days.”

And if the parents manage to spend time alone as a couple, the intensity of caring for multiples makes it difficult to talk about anything else.

“Things have not improved and have in fact gotten worse because we have made no effort to rekindle our relationship and to be honest, I don't even want to try anymore. We are not separated or divorced but are now in separate bedrooms. As far as I am concerned, we are still together because I do not believe the environment would be better for our children if we separated or divorced--I feel it would be much worse. I feel like I live with a friend rather than a husband but this works for us right now as we are so busy and rely on each other to pick up where the other cannot, ie. sports schedules, school activities, etc.”

Qualitative comments in the survey indicated couples who already have one or more singletons when the multiples arrived, or who have preemies or special needs multiples face even greater challenges.

The commitment and fragility of the partners before the birth of the babies also factor into the effect of the multiple-birth on the relationship.

“In the end, we are in a very committed marriage relation which is the minority in Canada. Yes, children and twins do stress a marriage but anything can break a marriage if the relationship itself is not solid, developed or happened for the right reason. Too many people today marry for the wrong reasons, to fix their lives, expect complete bliss and happiness and because they want a wedding. When in reality marriage doesn't "fix" anything, you are faced with a challenge that is big, keeping your relationship alive. It is happy but it takes A LOT of work, commitment, unconditional love, and it's not "all about you". It's not 50/50, it's 110/110. That is where the importance of teamwork comes in and friendship.”

The work-stay-at-home balance adds a layer of complexity as well.

“When I returned to work fulltime when the twins were 15 months old, I was CRANKY because I was trying to keep up the "stay-at-home-Mom role" trying to do everything, run the house, and look after everyone with very little time to do it all.”

Things that Help

Many couples shared advice or practices that helped them in making it through those first few difficult years with multiples.

- Being prepared
- Getting help for baby care, housecleaning, shopping, meal preparation.
- Involving both partners with the care of the infants
- Using parental leave

Generally the relationship improved dramatically once babies start sleeping through the night. Setting a routine helped; as did connecting with other parents of multiples (POMs) and/or “mentors” with older multiples to see the survival model helps to facilitate successful routines.

Typically, the passage of time – and with it the decreased physical workload and increased sleep – is a huge factor in improving the marital relationship.

In the meantime, though, setting aside regularly scheduled couples time is vital. This “away-from the kids” time assists in talking together without the children as an audience, and coming to agreement on various parenting scenarios.

Checking with each other and acting as a unified front strengthens the marital relationship as it unifies parents in front of their children.

Regularly scheduled couples time also helps to define the boundaries of the marital relationship versus the parenting relationship.

Professional help can also be a wise investment. Relationship counselling before things get out of hand were reported to be helpful, as was family counselling if/when a separation occurs.

Lynda P. Haddon is the mother of three grown children; dizygotic twin daughters, and another daughter 22 months their elder. Lynda is the co-facilitator of pre-natal classes in the Ottawa area and is the Chair of the MBC Loss Support Network and the MBC Breastfeeding Support Network. www.multiplebirthsfamilies.com

Vera C. Teschow is the mother of monozygotic twin boys. Vera volunteers on MBC's Health and Education Committee and as a certified teacher runs “Get it Together” an in-home prenatal counselling service for families expecting twins, triplets and more. www.verateschow.com/Twins/

Multiple Births Canada has created a Fact Sheet entitled **Parental Relationships After Multiple Births**. It can be found in the Publications area of the MBC website for purchase or free download by members.