



The Challenges of Parenting Multiples: Twins and HOMs

Part 2 – The Challenges of Parenting Twins and Higher Order Multiples

If you are pregnant with two, three or more babies or if you are planning to undergo fertility treatments, you need to know that many parents of multiple-birth children (especially triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets or more) face unique physical, financial and emotional challenges. While babies are a special gift and bring much joy to a family, raising two, three or more children of the same age can be very difficult. This fact sheet will:

- Identify the physical, financial and emotional challenges you may experience
- Recommend some ways to prepare for parenting multiples and deal with the challenges
- Suggest resources and articles to help you make informed choices and decisions

For more information on the challenges associated with parenting multiples please see the fact sheet series titled *The Challenges of Parenting Multiples: The Couple Relationship*.

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Introduction

Over 12,000 multiple-birth babies are born each year in Canada. The arrival of multiples brings a wide range of questions, emotions, expectations, demands and changes to the families they are born into and the world they live in. Raising twins, triplets or more can be a joy-filled parenting experience. However, many parents also experience overwhelming challenges in caring for, feeding and transporting two, three or more babies. As multiples grow there can be ongoing concerns for their families because multiples are more likely than single born children to experience slower language development, behaviour issues, problems in school, and relationship difficulties.

Multiple-birth families need to be prepared for the potential difficulties, make informed decisions and choices, and enjoy the unique parenting experience. To accomplish this, families need specialized multiple-birth focused health care, social services, information and support that recognize the differences from parenting a single born child.

What are the possible physical challenges?

- Parents of multiples usually need additional hands-on help. In the first few months the baby care demands are nearly round-the-clock. An Australian study found that a parent of six month old triplets spends an average of 197 hours per week – out of a possible 168 – on the care of the children and household chores between the parent and volunteer or paid assistance. This means that for a single parent/caregiver, there are more hours required for care than there are available hours in a week.
- It is possible, and parents need to be encouraged, to breastfeed twins, triplets or more (exclusively or supplementally). Parents need to know that breastfeeding requires the mother's full time commitment during the first few months. Additional household help will be needed during this time.

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- If the babies are born prematurely (before 37 weeks), they may need to remain in the hospital for an extended period of time. Their parents try to spend as many hours as possible visiting them at the hospital.
- Premature babies usually require more frequent feedings and diaper changes than full term babies in the first few weeks or months.
- If unprepared, many new parents of multiples feel overwhelmed, sleep deprived and fatigued from the unrelenting demands of caring for the babies. This can lead to feelings of depression and sadness.
- Physical recovery from pregnancy, bedrest and/or cesarean delivery (C-Section surgery) can be problematic. Mothers often need extra time to heal and recover physical strength, muscle tone, nutritional health and energy after a multiple birth. This is a particular concern for mothers who have had prolonged bed rest and/or complications during the pregnancy or birth. Some mothers may also experience back problems and difficulties with lifting and carrying two or more babies many times a day. After a C-Section, mothers will not be able to drive for the first few weeks and will therefore require additional help with errands and trips to the hospital.

What are the possible financial challenges?

- Women expecting multiples can be admitted to hospital as early as 24 weeks gestation if complications develop. If preschool children are at home, childcare arrangements must be made. If the family lives outside of the hospital region where the babies are to be born, they typically experience extra travel and accommodation expenses.
- Baby clothing, diapers and equipment such as car seats and cribs are needed in twos, threes, or more thus making it difficult to have adequate hand-me-downs from older siblings.
- Adding two or more babies to the family may require the parents to:
 - move to a larger home or to expand existing living space
 - purchase a larger vehicle to safely accommodate two, three, or more infant car seats as well as equipment such as twin or triplet stroller and baby supplies.
- Hands-on-help for parents of multiples is most important, especially if there are other siblings to care for. Without help, it is very difficult for a parent to safely carry, feed and care for two, three or more babies at the same time. If volunteers or community homecare services are not available, there may be a need to pay for additional home help which can be expensive.
- Staying home to care for the children may require one of the parents to temporarily give up their employment and the security of a second family income. If both parents decide to work full time, childcare for multiples can be very costly and difficult to find.
- Most families with multiples do not qualify for subsidized childcare or financial support. Assistance is usually limited to very low-income families.

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- Parents continue to face on-going additional costs for multiple-birth children up to and including post secondary education.
- If any of the children have special needs, there are costs related to caring for children with short term or lifelong disabilities.

What are the emotional challenges?

- Research findings suggest that parents of multiples experience more difficulties with parenting and greater mental health concerns than parents of singletons, regardless of the method of conception. Furthermore, a few experts suggest that parents who have multiples following fertility treatments may experience added difficulties. According to Jane Denton, an expert in AHR, these parents have wanted children so much, they often feel that they are less entitled to verbalize their feelings of frustration and disappointment, despite feeling so exhausted and overwhelmed.
- Attachment and bonding to more than one baby can be complicated. Compared to a single baby, the maternal and paternal attachment process takes longer and is more complex with two, three or more babies. Parents attach to their babies on two levels – as a unit (e.g. twins, triplets or quads) *and* via an individual relationship with each baby. When infants are born prematurely, have serious health issues and/or are not able to be discharged home at the same time as their mother, emotional attachment can take even longer.
- Parents of multiples, especially first-time parents, are more likely to experience feelings of isolation, marital stress, financial difficulties and illness. This stress, in combination with lack of access to special information and support, puts multiple-birth families at an increased risk of family problems. However, there is no conclusive research that shows an increased occurrence of divorce for couples with multiple-birth children. Some couples report that the challenges of parenting multiple-birth children have made their relationship stronger and closer.
- Compared to parents of single born babies, parents of multiples are more likely to experience depression and anxiety during and beyond the first year following the babies' births.
- Fathers of multiples can experience stress and feelings of depression as they try to balance the sudden emotional, practical and financial needs of a larger family.
- The birth of multiples can have an impact on other children in the family (e.g. behavioural changes). It can be an exciting time for older children but can also cause them to worry about sharing family life with two, three or more new babies or to feel left out of all the attention and fuss over the babies.
- Without sufficient extra help, parents of multiples become absorbed in round-the-clock care of the children. This situation can place extraordinary strains on time and relationships for the "couple" and other children, as well as limit social time with other adults or the pursuit of personal interests during the early years.
- Parents of multiples can become socially isolated. Without adequate help and transportation, it is very difficult for them to get out of the house for errands and/or to participate in community programs for parents and children (e.g. parents and tots programs, multiple-birth support groups).

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- Multiples can attract a lot of public attention, interest from the media and negative comments from strangers. This can be overwhelming and frustrating for the parents and result in negative consequences.

What can parents do to meet these challenges?

Fortunately, many of these challenges can be lessened or avoided with early and multiple-birth focused care, information, and support from other parents of multiples. By keeping a positive attitude and a sense of humour, the positives can outweigh the negatives of this unique parenting experience. The following are tips from other parents of multiples on how to survive the first year and beyond:

Top Ten Tips

Tip #1 – Prepare for the Birth and Parenting

- Become informed about multiple pregnancy, birth and parenting. For example:
 - If possible, participate in multiple-birth-specific education classes for families expecting or parenting multiples. Many of these classes can start early in the pregnancy at about 24 weeks gestation. If you wait, bedrest or premature birth may prevent you from taking classes later on. Contact Multiple Births Canada for more information.
 - Read some of the many excellent books and information products (including videos and reputable online resources) that focus on multiple pregnancy, birth, and the first year and beyond. Multiple Births Canada has a list of resources available on their website www.multiplebirthscanada.org.
- Request an early referral to health and social service providers who have experience with multiple births and parenting. Some larger communities have a specialized multiple pregnancy care team (obstetrics, neonatology, nutrition, education and peer support).
- Take good care of yourself. Contact a nutritionist or dietician during pregnancy to ensure you are meeting your special nutritional needs.
- Prepare for the possibility of a cesarean section delivery (C-section). About 50% of twins and nearly all higher order multiples are born by C-Section. Recovering from this surgical procedure may take a little time and have a short term impact on the mother's ability to care for her babies, other children and household tasks. Try to arrange for help in advance.
- If the delivery is being planned for a hospital far from your home community, investigate accommodations in case you need to stay close by prior to the births or while the babies are in the hospital. If the babies are born prematurely, they will likely stay in hospital until close to their original due date.

Tip #2 – Build a Support Network

- Develop a strong support system that can provide you with strength and peace of mind to face the challenges. Support can be from family, trusted friends and/or professionals, and other parents of multiples who have already been there.

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- Connect with a support group. Parents of multiples who connect with a support group are more likely to reduce the risk factors and tend to feel less anxious, more optimistic and relaxed. A network of knowledgeable parents, children and experts is available through Multiple Births Canada, which provides the connections that multiple-birth families require to get the most out of this challenging, exhilarating and unique experience. Connecting by email, internet or phone with a friend can be very helpful, even if you live far apart.
- Contact your local parents of multiples group for information, support and friendship with other parents of multiples in your local area.

Tip #3 – Organize Help

- Plan the division and sharing of household tasks and care of the children. This will help you to prepare for additional support and make arrangements for extra help if needed.
- Stock the freezer with pre-cooked meals that can be reheated.
- Try to recruit practical hands-on-help:
 - Family, friends, church, and community organizations involved with helping families with young children are often eager to assist expectant and new parents with multiples.
 - Accept volunteer help if offered. Volunteers can assist by helping with preparing meals, housework, grocery shopping, walking the dog, caring for the babies and/or other siblings, and watching the children while you sleep, run errands or attend an appointment.
 - Schedule and coordinate volunteer support. Ask a friend or relative to help screen and coordinate volunteers.
 - Make sure volunteers provide you with a firm commitment to avoid disappointment if they do not show up.
- Research where you can hire full or part time help for during the day and/or night in case it is needed:
 - Contact school program instructors to help you recruit a student. Some parents hire or find volunteer assistance through university, colleges or high school students involved in nursing, doula or early childhood education programs.
 - Look into agencies that can help you to hire an overseas nanny.
 - Make contact with childcare agencies and homecare or nursing agencies that offer assistance to families with babies.
 - Get in touch with your local parents of multiples organization for tips on where to find help in your particular community, how to screen potential caregivers and how to obtain a criminal record check.

Tip #4 – Prepare for How You Will Feed Your Babies

- Learn about the benefits of breastmilk for premature babies, and all infants. Mothers of twins, triplets or more can successfully breastfeed two, three or more babies. Many mothers with multiples breastfeed

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exclusively or partially bottle feed with expressed milk or formula. This can help to reduce the cost of formula. Breastfeeding also helps the mother to build a closer relationship with each baby.

- Take a breastfeeding class during pregnancy. If possible, a class for parents expecting multiples.
- Learn about pumping breastmilk for babies in the hospital NICU.
- Consult with a lactation specialist and other breastfeeding experts, including other parents of multiples who have breastfed.
- Read Multiple Births Canada's fact sheet series on feeding including breastfeeding.

Tip #5 – Establish a Routine

- The most important thing in coping with the demands of caring for two or more babies is to develop a routine and stick to it until such time as the babies' needs change.
- Encourage relatives, friends and volunteers to adhere to your routine and schedule for household tasks. Post the schedule so that when someone arrives they will know how they can be of assistance to you.
- Set up a sleep and feeding routine for the babies that fits with your babies' and families' individual circumstances and preferences. If possible, put the babies on a somewhat fixed feeding and sleeping schedule. Otherwise it may be non-stop, around-the-clock feeding and diapering which can lead to burn out and sleep deprivation for the caregivers. However, some babies simply have different needs and won't easily go on the same schedule. In this circumstance, parents may need a more on-demand feeding plan. Some families follow a "modified demand" plan: when one baby is hungry, all are fed at the same time or in quick succession, and then the babies may sleep and wake at similar times for the next feeding. Expect your routine to change every few weeks as the babies grow.
- Try to sleep when the babies are sleeping. It is easy to become overwhelmed if you are sleep-deprived.
- Make notes and keep track of the babies' eating, bowel movements and sleeping habits, and medications (if any) given out. Otherwise it is easy to lose track of which baby did or had what (i.e. miss feeding or changing one or more of the babies). As well, your health care providers may ask for this information during the babies' routine follow-up appointments.

Tip #6 – Organize Your Home and Priorities

- Get organized and set up your home for convenience. For example, have a comfortable feeding and changing area close to the babies' room and near the kitchen if possible.
- Getting enough sleep should be a top priority. Consider asking friends and family to help with light housework while you sleep or consider hiring someone to do *housework* or yard work while you focus on taking care of the children.
- Consider housework to be a lower priority. Keep chores to a minimum.
- Post instructions and lists for helpers: a computer shopping list to check off what you need, labels on cupboards, drawers and shelves so helpers can put away laundry, empty the dishwasher or prepare a

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meal while you are napping, and instructions on how to operate appliances such as the washing machine or dishwasher.

- Use a telephone or computer message system. You might ask a family member or friend to serve as a contact to update family and friends on how the babies and your family are doing and to take and upload photos of your family over time.

Tip #7 – Plan for the Financial Strains

- Look for discounts: many national retailers offer discounts for parents with multiples. Contact them to ask for discounts, coupons or promotions on products. Multiple Births Canada offers discounts for members. Corporate sponsorships for big-ticket items are rare except for parents with quintuplets or more.
- Shop second hand:
 - Many community parents of multiples groups have annual clothing and equipment sales of gently used items such as clothing items, double or triple strollers, car seats, cribs and high chairs.
 - Look for consignment shops which sell new and used clothing and equipment at discounted prices.
 - Check online community classified advertisements.
 - Ensure that second-hand items meet current safety standards and have not been recalled because of defects. Visit Health Canada's Consumer Product Safety website <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/cps-spc/child-enfant/index-eng.php>
- Stock up on sales. Most companies are not willing to donate diapers and baby food. Look for specials and buy in bulk.
- Investigate material support resources in your community. Contact parents of multiples support groups for information and advice about affordable supplies and equipment that you will need (i.e. types of strollers, car seats).
- Don't buy too much. You do not need to buy 2, 3, or more of everything. Some furniture, clothing and equipment can be shared among the babies. Multiple Births Canada has a list of recommended clothing and equipment for multiples.
- Talk to a financial planner to help plan for your present and future financial needs. Consider a short-term loan to spread the initial expenses over several years. Start RESPs for your children's futures.
- Be aware of provincial/territorial employment maternity and parent leave standards as well as child tax and child care benefits offered by the federal and provincial governments.

Tip #8 – Nurture Relationships

- Expectant parents need to try to foster a bond with each of their babies. This can be done early in the pregnancy by sharing information from ultrasound tests and fetal monitoring. Try to remain positive about the babies and to keep a pregnancy journal.

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- Seek professional advice on how parents can attach emotionally to each baby and recognize differences of each baby. Some strategies include:
 - breastfeed or bottle feed one at a time
 - hold a baby on your chest with skin-to-skin contact
 - have outings with one baby at a time
 - make eye contact and talk to each baby while you nurse or change
 - wear a baby or babies in a sling or infant carrier
 - infant massage
- Each baby should be referred to by their name rather than as a group (i.e. “the triplets” or “the girls”) and be easily distinguishable such as wearing different colours or outfits.
- One or more of the babies may be ready to go home from the hospital before the other(s). Ask the hospital whether it is possible to keep all of the babies together until they are all ready to be discharged. Otherwise, it can be easy for a parent to bond more with one (or more) of the babies at home than with the others left behind in the hospital. Both parents should make efforts to spend time each day with those remaining in hospital.
- Fathers/partners may have questions and concerns about their role. They can prepare for their parenting experiences by attending special prenatal sessions for spouses or a family oriented support group. Partners can participate in every caregiving activity.
- Communication between parents is key to a successful parenting and partnership experience. Discuss your expectations and the expectations you have of each other.
- Prepare siblings for the birth. See MBC fact sheet *Singleton Siblings of Multiples* for tips on how to prepare older children for the arrival of multiple siblings.
- Balance your time. Try to find one-on-one time for each child, special couple time, and time with other adults. It is most important to make time for your relationship with your partner. For more information on this topic see Multiple Births Canada’s fact sheet ***Parental Relationships After Multiple Births.***
- When both parents work as a team in the care of the children and family, it can strengthen their relationship.
- Promote individuality between the babies by choosing different, non-rhyming names and different clothing items. Try to keep separate baby books and pictures. Help family members and friends to distinguish between the babies and to respond to their individual differences and preferences.

Tip #9 – Nurture Self

- It is common, especially for mothers of multiples, to lose sight of their personal needs and to experience a loss of identity, especially in the first years of parenting. Although some parents report that they found

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their identity on becoming a parent, many others describe a loss of personal self. Some strategies that may be effective are:

- Set aside time on a regular basis for a personal activity which is realistically manageable such as a short walk or jog, a relaxing bath, a massage, a coffee/tea date with a friend, or a meal at a restaurant or a movie with your partner.
- Take stock of your accomplishments as an expectant and new parent. It is all too easy to focus on difficulties and perceived personal shortcomings.
- Associate with people who are supportive and who help you recognize your abilities as a parent and as an individual. This person could be another parent of multiples, a trusted relative or friend, spiritual advisor and/or a sensitive caregiver.

Tip #10 – Make a Plan Regarding Public Attention

- Higher order multiples and monozygotic multiples (often referred to as identical) that look similar attract a lot of public attention. Dealing with the media and the public attention can be challenging. Try to have a sense of humour and plan responses to comments from the public and/or the media.
- Set limits and make a plan regarding whether or not to have any media exposure for your family. Some parents believe that media exposure may lead to free donations or products. Significant donations from companies seldom materialize. Whatever you decide, always advocate for the babies and be prepared for possible negative comments or experiences.

Recommended Sources of Information:

The Multiple Births Foundation
www.multiplebirths.org.uk/
 Telephone: 0208 383 3519 Fax: 0208 383 3041
 E-mail: info@multiplebirths.org.uk

Multiple Births: Prenatal Education & Bereavement Support- www.multiplebirthsfamilies.com

Mothers of Supertwins (MOST)
www.mostonline.org

The Triplet Connection - www.tripletconnection.org

Documents and Articles:

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Feeding Twins Triplets and More: A booklet for parents with advice and information (2011) Multiple Births Foundation
www.multiplebirths.org.uk/MBFParentsFeedingGuideFINALVERSION.pdf

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Most Statement on Media Exposure and Multiple Births www.mostonline.org/Media_and_Multiples.pdf

Twins, Triplets or More: Resource Guide for Multiple Pregnancy and Parenthood (Updated every six months) by Linda G. Leonard, RN MSN www.nursing.ubc.ca/pdfs/twinstriplesandmore.pdf

Multiple Births Canada Fact Sheets on various topics.

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