

***Disclaimer: The information contained herein is based on collective wisdom received from parents of multiples surveyed at an MBC conference and may or may not be reflective of or limited to your personal home situation.***

It is normal to worry about singleton children when multiples are expected. In spite of the parents' best preparation efforts, the new arrivals can be a challenge for singleton siblings, especially if they have been the King/Queen of the Castle for some time.

Initially the babies' arrival may not impact any sibling(s) too much but give it a few weeks and the realization sets in that Mommy and Daddy are not as available and behaviours may change. One 3-year-old singleton said to his parents, "OK, that's enough. Take them [his twin siblings] back to the hospital now." Another 3-year-old yelled, "I only want one!" Reactions aren't limited to the younger set: A 15-year-old girl put herself in foster care when her twin sisters arrived, and a 17-year-old young man, didn't speak to his parents for weeks and stayed in his room as much as possible when his twin siblings arrived.

Not all siblings react negatively to the arrival of their siblings and some, especially if they are a little older, may be enthralled and delighted with the new arrivals. They can be a big support but don't fall into the trap of constantly using them as "go-phers."

Following are some examples of, but not limited to, possible behaviour which may be exhibited by singleton siblings:

- refuses to give up the bottle/reverts back to the bottle;
- wishes to breastfeed again;
- seeks your attention when you are less able to provide it and rejects you when you are available;
- there could be problems with toilet training, i.e. a set back or refusal to use the potty;
- speech regression or refusal to speak;
- clingy and/or excessively whiny;
- plays rough with the babies;
- may pinch, hit or bite them when alone with them; or
- unresponsive to direction, refuses to co-operate.

Some ways to support the singleton child(ren) cope with the new arrivals:

- avoid calling the babies, ‘the twins’ or ‘the triplets’. This label automatically leaves out any singleton children and gives the impression that those with this label are more special. Correct others each and every time they use the label. As the parents, others will take their cue from you;
- presenting the multiples as a package ensures they are perceived as a package. Continually dressing them alike and giving them rhyming names reinforces the “package” mentality and the singleton child(ren) is left out;
- arrange special play dates or preschool for an older child providing his/her own special time, activities and things to talk about;
- include him/her in the decoration of the babies’ room—“Should we use yellow or green paint?”;
- allow him/her to help put the babies’ clothes in the dresser drawers;
- don’t use your older child(ren) as “gophers.” They can quickly resent being sent on an excessive number of fetches. This doesn’t mean they can’t help—“Could you please get Daddy a diaper for your sister?”—but don’t get caught in the habit of using them on a continual basis;
- provide lots of positive feedback. “You were SO helpful today!” “You are so special to me and have been such a good boy/girl today.” “Thank you for being so patient;”
- if there is bottle or toilet training regression, just go with the flow. Don’t make an issue of it. Handing him/her a bottle plays down the issue rather than having it escalate out of control and become a temper tantrum. It won’t take long for him/her to realize that he/she is not a baby and a bottle can be hard work. Leave the potty out in plain view, but don’t focus on it;
- set aside some time each day for him/her. It can be bath time, bed time and story, grocery shopping, play time but the important thing is for him/her to be the full focus;
- if you can’t be available when he/she requests attention, buy a little timer and give it to him/her. Set it for 15 minutes (or what works for you) and say, “When the bell rings, we will read (play) together” and then keep your promise;
- if you can’t keep your promise, and there will be times when you can’t, let your child(ren) know that you are sorry and realize you have broken your promise but will make it up to them as soon as you can. Two things are important here: 1) you have taken responsibility for your behaviour, and 2) you have taught your child it is OK to take responsibility for one’s behaviour. Such an acknowledgement helps a child learn that others have limits and it isn’t their fault you weren’t available. Children tend to internalize things when they don’t work out as planned and see themselves as being “bad” as a result. Clearing the air is most important. But do try to make it up to them as soon as you can;

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- you can give your child(ren) some feelings of control in life by giving them simple choices: “What would you like to wear today, the red outfit or the blue?” “What would you like for breakfast, cereal or toast?”.

Multiples in public cause a stir and attract a lot of attention. It will be important to include your other child(ren) in the conversation when necessary. A simple, “This is their older sister and she is such a help.” goes a long way. After some strangers had made a fuss about her triplet siblings and not even spoken to her, one 4-year-old asked her Mom, “Didn’t they see me standing there?” It is important that parents advocate for all of their children.

Splitting up the kids for an outing changes the group dynamics. Take an older child and one baby to do groceries. It offers everyone a change of pace.

Give your singleton child(ren) time to make the adjustment to the arrivals. Be as patient as you can. Just as it will take parents time to get into a proper routine, it will take a child(ren) time to adjust to the changes in his/her own routine.

### Younger Singleton Siblings

Some parents go on to have singleton children after the birth of their multiples. These singleton children may have less adjustment to make as a result but there are no guarantees. When two or three siblings are all having a birthday party at the same time, feelings can be hurt and the tears flow. Patience and understanding works wonders. While purchasing that child a gift too may be tempting, cuddling and words of explanation may be a better approach.

Sometimes older multiples will gang together and boss/bully a younger sibling. If so, appropriate guidelines will need to be put in place. Explaining to everyone that “Mom and Dad set the rules, not the kids” and “two (or three) against one amounts to bullying” can be helpful. Be prepared to go over these rules on at least a semi-regular basis and perhaps to have consequences in place when necessary, eg. no TV/internet tonight, put 25 cents into the jar for each offence.

### Additional Resources

- *The Singleton Siblings of Multiples*, Multiple Births Canada booklet, in depth information, hints and tips to help singleton siblings make the transition to Big Sister/Brother.
- *Multiple Blessings*, by Betty Rothbart, Hearst Books
- *The Joy of Twins and Other Multiple Births*, by Pamela Novotny, Crown Paperbacks, Inc.

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