

Multiples Starting School

IMBA Guide for Teachers

Primary School (Background info)

Before completing the application process for primary school, it is important for some parents to look carefully at the possibility of deferring or delaying their children's school start. There are certain circumstances in which this might be the right thing to do -- for example if the children:

- were born prematurely / with low birth weight
- have significant health problems
- were born late in the school year e.g. July or August (particularly if they were due in September or October – or even later) have experienced significant delay in walking, talking, toileting, acquiring fine motor skills, etc.
- demonstrate any other signs or behaviours which suggest they are not yet ready for full time education.

If parents are worried about this they should seek advice from crèche staff / G.P./ teacher or other professionals about the suitability of deferring or delaying starting school.

Delaying School Start

This involves delaying school start until the year following the chronological year group into which the children would fall by birth (e.g.) twins born in July 2006, due to start school in September 2010, but considered too young to cope, could delay start until September 2011.

Where multiple birth children display the common signs of delayed development, bearing in mind that they have had to share resources and attention from conception and are likely to take a little longer than a single birth child to reach the point of 'school readiness.'

Separation in School

Putting multiple birth children into separate classes at the age of four requires careful consideration and consultation with parents. Most multiple birth children have little experience of separation prior to starting school and may be upset if they have to cope with a dual separation from parents and their co-multiple(s).

Every multiple relationship is unique and should be treated on a case by case basis. However, on the basis of TAMBA's (Twins and Multiple Births Association UK) recent survey and the latest research

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from Kings College, many multiples appear to benefit from being kept together when they start school. Nevertheless, there are a number of exceptions to this advice.

Many schools have policies (written and unwritten), declaring that multiples should be separated in order to help them to develop as individuals, or should be kept together as multiples are a natural unit. Some schools have rigid organisational policies that fail to take into account the needs of multiples (e.g.) classes are arranged in alphabetical order or birth date so multiples have to be kept together. There is no right or wrong answer with regard to separation in school; each decision should be related to the needs, experience and type of relationship siblings share.

The twin relationship is a complex one. Twins understand the world from a twin perspective. Early separation can severely affect their well-being and should only be undertaken in specific circumstances, where the progress of one or both children is being adversely affected by the presence of their twin sibling.

Before deciding whether to separate multiple birth children, parents and professionals should meet to discuss the pre-school development and experiences of the children. (A questionnaire is available from IMBA which provides a useful framework for assessing the children both as individuals and as multiples, prompting discussion about how best to support the learning of the children). The needs of each child must be considered both as an individual and as a multiple. No decision should be irreversible – flexibility is the key word both for parents and teachers.

Reasons to Keep Multiples Together in School

- Only one classroom is available. Multiple birth children may need the support of each other particularly if they have not experienced separation prior to school or are experiencing a major upheaval such as death, divorce, new sibling, etc. Even if the children are comfortable when separated, they may need to be able to check up on what the other is doing.
- Very different teaching styles by teachers in the same year group. Even if the teaching styles are similar the children may be compared more at home particularly if one appears to be making more progress (e.g.) gets a reading book first.
- The multiples do NOT want to be separated. Forced separation in the first year of school along with all the other firsts can actually reinforce dependence on each other. Opportunities to work independently in the same classroom may be a much better option.
- The siblings have shown no problems in previous pre-school settings where they shared a classroom and had a positive and productive school experience with peers.

Reasons to Separate Multiples in School

- The multiples want to be separated.
- One child is markedly more able academically and/or socially than the other.
- One is a constant distraction to the other.
- One child perceives himself or herself as failing.
- One 'mothers' or over protects the other (more often with boy/girl pairs).
- There is markedly similar progress with one child levelling up or down so that they can keep together.
- There is disruptive behaviour where multiples form a "fatal combination"; the multiples use their identity to cheat or play tricks.
- One or both children are dependent: unable to mix or relate with other children;
- Their constant 'togetherness' is hindering the development of their social skills.
- There is intense competitiveness so that the child's main goal is to keep up with or beat their co-multiple(s).
- One or both children polarise (go to opposite extremes).
- There is lack of privacy where one multiple birth child constantly reports to parents about the activities and progress of the other.
- A division of labour exists that interferes with their learning and socialization.

Reviews

The placement of multiples should be reviewed annually. Parents and teachers need to discuss how they will support the children before reversing a decision too quickly. The outcome may not be what is expected (e.g.) when a twin pair is separated because one child is very dominant. In such a case, the dominant child often loses confidence as s/he has lost her main purpose whilst the other child flourishes.

Together

Multiple birth children share experiences and resources from conception onwards. Everything in their lives is shared and so a strong bond is forged between them and can be a positive influence in their early years. Transition to full-time education is a big step for any child. For multiple birth children separation from each other can be more traumatic than separation from a mother or father, and can have a severely negative effect on their wellbeing.

Schools with at least 2 parallel classes in each year

In cases where multiple birth children become too 'closely coupled' or 'extreme individuals' it can be advantageous to separate them into different classes at the same school. This gives them the space they need to develop at their own rate, without constant comparison with their multiple sibling(s).

Boy/Girl Twin Dominance

It is common in boy/girl twins for one to dominate the other. Very often, in their early years, the girl will dominate the boy, overwhelming him with attention and allowing him to use her as main friend, interpreter and 'servant'. Once at school, the negative effects of such an unbalanced relationship can become exaggerated, as the girl settles to school routines and development of social skills and organisation, so that she has a tendency to progress more quickly than her brother. He can fall behind and cease to try. In such circumstances a trial separation may be the only answer – beginning by separating the twins into different activity groups. In extreme cases they may need to be in separate classes.

There is a natural imbalance between male and female progress in school. However, in boy/girl twins, the effects of this can be profound as one holds back in order to allow the other to catch up or, conversely, the less successful twin ceases to engage with learning. A careful watch should be made of such pairings, to ensure that each child is able to work to their full potential.

Behaviour

Multiple birth children compete for attention from the cradle onwards. In school this can cause them to be dominant in group discussions and slow to allow other children a chance to speak. Through force of habit they are likely to relate to multiple birth siblings and measure themselves against that standard, paying less heed to outside influences. Properly understood, this manifestation of multiple birth rivalry can be channelled positively and children can be encouraged to develop appropriate skills.

It may take time for multiple birth children to overcome deeply embedded behaviours, but careful management and small targets can be effective.

Individuality

It is important for multiple birth children to develop as individuals and to discover their own strengths and interests. Separation at school does not necessarily foster individuality. In fact, it can have the opposite effect, forcing the children together at playtime and out of school hours and creating a too 'closely coupled' group.

Addressing multiple birth children by name (rather than ‘twins’ or ‘triplets’ etc.) talking to parents about one at a time at parents’ evenings and encouraging each child as an individual are all strategies that teachers can use successfully in this regard.

Multiple birth children need to forge individual friendships and to work and play outside the ‘multiple birth group’, but their multiple birth status also needs to be acknowledged and, at times, celebrated, rather than ignored.

Helpful tips for the classroom

- Encourage multiples to sit apart for different class activities. This assists in identifying who’s who and discourages them from completing each other’s work or over-relying on each other.
- Look for differences in the multiples, not sameness, e.g. voice differences, left/right handed, birthmarks, hair growth. Being able to address each multiple by his or her individual name, assists teachers, peers and friends in recognising that they are individuals.
- Refer to each child by his or her own name. This helps to identify each child, develops individuality and sets a good example for their peers to also address them individually.
- Expect differences in test scores, neatness, behaviour but don’t be surprised if they are very similar especially if the children are identical; if one is markedly behind the other investigate the reasons (don’t rule out a learning disability in one of the multiples).
- Avoid insensitive comparisons, e.g. “You are smarter than your twin.” This sets up both multiples to have poor self-esteem. Instead, get to know each child’s preferences, interests, or hobbies. This may be as simple as knowing each child’s favourite colours, types of books, games, or subjects...etc.

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For more information, please contact IMBA at www.imba.ie or info@imba.ie or phone 01 8479056
IMBA is an Irish charity dedicated to providing support for multiples families. It is a voluntary organisation run entirely by parents of multiples.