

Multiple births, multiple choices

Annie Facchinetti explores the preferences of parents and their options at school



Read almost any newspaper at the start of the school year and invariably you will be greeted with the smiling faces of students embarking on their educational journeys. Increasingly, these rite of passage stories focus on twins, triplets or higher order multiples as the embodiment of the joys and trials of starting school. One Queensland local paper even ran a story of eight sets of twins starting at the same primary school in 2011! The beginning of school – primary or secondary – can be both daunting and exciting for parents and children alike. When students from multiple births are involved, there is a whole set of additional considerations. To make the transition easier for all concerned, it is important that schools are aware of the unique challenges facing multiples.

Since the advancement of fertility techniques

in the 1970s, the birth rate of multiples has climbed steadily. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2009), from 1989 to 2009 there was a 27 per cent increase in confinements resulting in twins, triplets or more. The higher incidence of multiple births has in some cases forced policy and even legislative changes to ensure that students are being adequately catered for. In the US for example, a law was passed in the state of Minnesota in 2005 allowing parents “to request the same or separate classroom placement for their children in the same grade at a school.” The law also allows principals to intervene and request the school board “to determine the placement of disruptive multiple birth children after the initial grading period.”

In Australia, schools are generally free to

make their own choices about how they will place multiple birth siblings. Some schools have written policies about the issue. Holy Family Primary School in the ACT, for instance, proclaims on its website (<http://holyfamily.act.edu.au/enrolments/>) that: “We do not have a strict policy of placement for twins, and are guided by parents’ requests in this area,” while Sydney Boys’ High School (<http://www.sydneyboyshigh.com/curriculum/grouping-policy>) suggests: “Sometimes twins are placed together or separated according to family preference.” Both these policies reflect an issue that appears to be of prime importance to the parents of multiples – the element of choice.

Casey Patton is a mother of identical twin girls aged five, and a one-year-old daughter. The twins, Lilly and Cody, started at a government primary



school in Melbourne's north eastern suburbs earlier this year. Patton says that she chose the school, "based on class sizes and how the school prepares children for high school," characteristics about which most interested parents would be concerned. In addition to traditional factors, Patton also had the conversation about class placement for the girls up front. "I discussed with the principal if they separate twins and it was completely my decision to choose whether they are in the same class. I chose for them to be together as they are only five."

Patton's decision seems to be a popular choice, and one that is backed up by research. Although little research has been completed in Australia, the Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA) in the UK published the results of a comprehensive survey of its members in 2009 in a paper entitled *Multiple Choice: The Educational Needs And Experiences Of Multiple Birth Children* (Fraser, 2009). The paper incorporates findings from a Twins Early Development Study (TEDs) which found that twins separated in the early years of primary school suffered a greater level of emotional difficulties such as shyness, withdrawal and anxiety than non-separated twins, not just in the early years, but even when a follow-up study was carried out at age 12. This runs contrary to the inherent beliefs of some teachers who feel that separation will develop greater independence and identity.

The first year of primary school represents a big change for any child and the sudden reduction of time spent with parents or caregivers can be quite traumatic. When twins or higher order multiples are separated at this stage, the effect of separation anxiety can be exaggerated. Placement in the same class may not, however, suit all multiples, and flexibility

and common sense should guide the decision.

Lynette has 12-year-old girl/boy twins who have just started secondary school. When the children started primary school, Lynette* says, "We looked for a primary school that we were comfortable with regarding whether the twins were going to be in the same class together or separated. This would be our decision, not the school's and we needed to know the school was going to support us with this, not just in Prep, but all the way through primary school. I wasn't going somewhere where they thought they knew what was best for my twins." The school they chose was very accommodating and even indicated a willingness to separate the twins if it turned out that keeping them together wasn't working out.

In a Curtin University guide for schools titled *School Policy for Twins and Higher Multiples*, Professor Pat Preedy outlines reasons both for and against separation of siblings in the early years of school. Some indicators for separation include a significant disparity in the academic or social abilities of siblings, intense competition between multiples, and a situation where multiples band together to become disruptive or uncooperative. Rather than a blanket policy, Preedy advocates considering each set of multiples on a case-by-case basis to decide on placement, and also suggests the arrangement should be reviewed each year, something that Casey Patton intends to do. "I have thought about next year, but will wait till the end of the year to decide. Most likely I will keep them together till they are a little bit older," she explains.

In Lynette's case, she requested that her twins be kept together in the first year of primary school, but after that, she actively involved the twins in the decision. They chose to separate

in Year 1 and to be together in Year 2. After that, they didn't have a strong preference, so Lynette left the decision up to the school. She appreciated the fact that teachers made the effort to discuss placement with them each year, which was made easier by the strong ties her family has built with the school. "I believe us being involved in the school was a great asset with having great relationships with the teachers and their understanding of our needs."

Where multiples are placed in the same classroom, the TAMBA study identified a number of strategies to help the students to feel confident while still developing their own personalities. The method that surveyed parents reported as being used most often was placing the multiples in different groups or on different tables for specific activities. This allows students to explore situations by themselves with the reassurance of their siblings nearby, an approach that has been used successfully with Patton's twins. "Their teacher separates them into different groups for activities so they get lots of chances to do different things on their own. They also choose to do different things on their own."

The TAMBA study also highlighted the importance of treating multiples as separate entities by, for example, ensuring that their reading is listened to separately, a practice that many respondents also extended to home. Prof Preedy's research yielded similar results, suggesting simple strategies such as referring to each multiple by name and focusing on differences rather than 'sameness' to clearly differentiate each child.

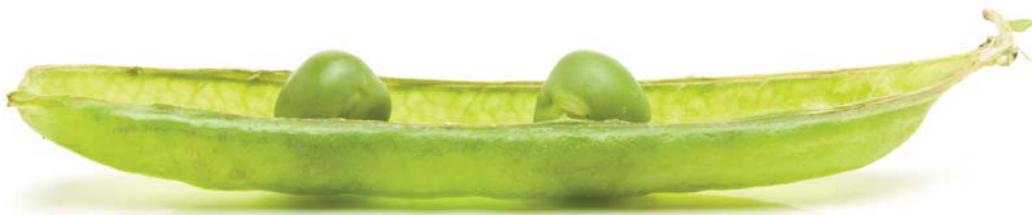
A common disadvantage of placing multiples in the same class is the tendency to make comparisons between them. This is something that can naturally occur between any siblings, but the impact is often magnified when twins are involved. For Patton, the issue has been avoided by the school's awareness of the situation. "Lilly and Cody's teacher is wonderful and doesn't compare them. She praises them for choosing to do different activities from each other and also helps explain to them that sometimes only one of them will get to do something or win an award. I think that is very important." Lynette's twins had the advantage of having a prep teacher with her own boy/girl twins. "I believe it was a benefit as she understood the mechanics of twins in probably their most important year of school."

As the primary years draw to a close, parents of multiples are faced with selecting an appropriate high school that suits each sibling. According to Lynette, "Looking for a secondary school was quite different as now they have their own personality and strengths that need to be catered for. We wanted them to be at the same school as we felt this was still important but we didn't put any stipulation on them being in the same classes as we did in primary school."

Lynette's twins, who are now in Year 7 at a state school in Victoria's west, have faced the usual challenges of starting at secondary

school such as becoming more responsible for managing their time and learning to cope without friends who went to different schools. There have also been some minor issues that are unique to their situation as twins. For instance, there have been occasional communication lapses that have led to anxiety for the children. "What we needed to get staff to understand was that when one was sent home early due to illness or injury, we needed to get the message passed onto the other one so they didn't worry or wait for them after school and wonder where they are when they haven't turned up to walk home together," Lynette reports. "I know that doesn't sound much different to siblings but there certainly is a bit more of a concern involved when they are twins."

Many of the issues associated with educating multiples diminish in secondary school, especially if the school is larger and there is therefore more scope for separation. So far, Lynette's children have not had any problems with comparisons being made between them, even to the point that, "It took a few of the teachers a couple of months to realise they were twins." The fact that the twins are girl/boy means that their interests are very different. "I don't see them choosing the same career path at all. My daughter loves animals and he just wants



to play sport," Lynette explains. Conceivably in the future subject choices will override other considerations in terms of class placements.

Same-sex multiples, and particularly identical twins or triplets, may find it more difficult to establish an individual identity, even in high school. Of the respondents in the TAMBA study with children at secondary school, 29 per cent identified social and emotional development as a concern. For some, high school represents the first time that siblings will be separated, while for others, if they do have similar abilities and are streamed together, there may be issues with them never having time apart. This underscores the need to continue to give careful consideration to the best interests of multiple birth children at each stage of their academic lives.

There are so many areas in which teachers are increasingly expected to become experts, from identifying learning disorders to effectively

using technology. As more multiples enter the school system, catering to their unique needs adds another element to classroom dynamics. A little forethought and parental collaboration can help to make this extra dimension one that is rewarding for both teachers and students.

* Parent requested that the family's surname not be used in this article **ET**

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