

## ***CLUB TIPS*** for HANDLING SCHOOL ISSUES

Parents of multiple birth children face a unique set of challenges as the school years approach. Decisions regarding enrollment and placement are best made well in advance of the anticipated date when the children will enter school. For this reason, parents should begin early to research and those explore options that will most directly benefit their children over the entire course of their education. Insights may be gained from speaking with other parents of multiple birth children who are members of a local Parents of Multiples Club or on one of the Multiples of America Facebook pages. Additional information is available from Multiples of America through our booklet, *Placement of Multiple Birth Children in School*, our position paper concerning education of multiple birth children, and other items in the Education of Multiples toolkit.

### **School Readiness**

When Kindergarten-age children are enrolled at the local school, parents are often given a list detailing the benchmarks for incoming students. These may include assessments before or during the first week of school, on-going reports, and teacher observation.

Children enter Kindergarten at different skill levels, and multiple birth children are no exception. Some initial skills that are helpful are: Recognize and print their first name correctly, identify some letters of the alphabet, know basic colors, recognize and produce rhyming words, count to 10, and draw a reasonable facsimile of the human body, naming all the basic visible parts. Social interaction with other children is also often observed for skills present for each incoming student. Multiples have had the opportunity to engage with peers before school which is a unique opportunity to demonstrate this skill.

Children who are unable to carry out these tasks may be considered candidates for later enrollment or may need special intervention programs prior to beginning Kindergarten. Generally, school districts provide some type of “readiness” testing which provides broad indicators for success at this early level of schooling. Lack of readiness to take part in a structured classroom situation, or lack of reading readiness skills often indicates the need to postpone kindergarten enrollment for an additional year. This may factor in a decision for one or all of your multiple birth children.

Many factors can contribute to a lack of readiness for Kindergarten. These may include early birth age compared to the average age for children entering this grade, premature birth, sex of the child(ren), factors relating to home environment, and, in the case of multiples, lack of stimulation from outside of the multiple group (i.e., parents, older siblings, neighbors, etc.). Physical, emotional and academic maturity may vary greatly among children at this age, and the absence of any of these factors should also be considered before a decision is made to enroll children into kindergarten. Discuss your observations with teachers, doctors,

those your trust, which can include contacts from your local parents of multiples group and Multiples of America.

## **Handling School Issues**

When a child(ren) demonstrate areas of difficulty during this period, additional testing from the local school district may be suggested and will further define each of the children's readiness levels and provide objective facts upon which an informed decision can be made.

School officials should be made aware of any mitigating circumstances, such as prematurity and resultant health complications during the preschool years, medications which the child(ren) are currently taking, and recent emotional disturbances in the home which may have resulted in changes in the children's behavior.

Delayed language development and problems with motor control, for instance, may be lingering complications of premature birth. While they may be viewed as factors, which would delay school enrollment, there is a strong argument in favor of their improvement due to the stimulation of the classroom, and the special services (speech therapy, occupational therapy, special education services, guidance counseling) that the school can provide.

Parents of multiples often face the difficult decision of starting one multiple in Kindergarten while the other(s) remain in a preschool program for an additional year. Many important considerations need to be examined when faced with this choice:

1. **The multiples' relationship:** How close is the multiple bond between the children? How will they be affected by a separation? How will a continued difference in grade levels affect their perception of each other over the course of their school years?
2. **The sex and type of multiples:** Are the children same-sex or different sex? (Remember: girls normally mature earlier than boys.) Are the multiples identical or fraternal? Does this factor into development or different needs for each?
3. **Health Factors:** Is there a specific medical condition that puts one of the multiples at greater risk for school failure? Are there medical, rehabilitative, or psychological treatments available to improve the condition and allow the child to succeed in school along with peers of the same age?
4. **Enrollment options:** The decision is basically whether to enroll the multiples at the same time or at separate dates. That is, should the children be enrolled together in Kindergarten at age five, even though one is clearly too immature to succeed? Or should both be held back for another year, even though one child is clearly ready to perform successfully at this grade level? Or, should one be enrolled at age five while the other multiple(s) waits another year before beginning kindergarten?

Given the complicated issues facing parents of multiple birth children, the decision regarding *when* to enroll multiples in Kindergarten can be quite daunting. No one decision is right for everyone. Each situation must be examined carefully with each of the factors listed above taken into account.

### **School Placement**

When parents of multiples are ready to enroll their children in school, a decision must be made regarding their placement in the same or separate classrooms. Regardless of the decision made, the most important fact to remember is that *placement is always the parents' decision*. It is important to note that each state has its own rules regarding multiple birth placement and parents should know state regulations when making the case to administrators which may go against the guidelines.

The individual circumstances affecting the multiple's growth and development will help parents make the best decision for their children's success and happiness in school.

**There are several factors that might suggest a need for separate classrooms.** These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Constant “togetherness” is hindering the development of social skills in one or all of the multiples.
- Insensitive comparisons have led to feelings of inadequacy in one multiple.
- A child's problems are attributed to that fact that he/she is a twin/triplet.
- The multiples form a “power unit” causing disruptive behavior.
- The multiples exploit their relationship to cheat or play tricks.
- One multiple appears to resent the lack of privacy resulting from sharing a classroom.
- One multiple is a constant distraction to the others.
- One multiple is overprotective of the other(s).
- The multiples WANT to separate.

**There are equally valid reasons for parents to insist that their children remain in the same classroom in the early grades.** Some of these are:

- Major emotional upheavals have occurred in the family (death, divorce, a move, etc.).
- Only one classroom is available.

- Unequal education due to two different teachers employing different methods of teaching.
- Multiples at or near the same skill level in a skill-based classroom.
- The multiples WANT to be together.

Above all, parents need to observe and listen to their children. In the early grades, forced separation is unwise if the children express a strong need to remain together. At the Kindergarten level, young children may feel more secure about separation from the parent if they are allowed to remain with their sibling(s) in the classroom. Most multiples will indicate a willingness to separate in school when they are emotionally ready.

At the time of enrollment, parents should discuss their placement preference and the supporting reasons with appropriate school personnel (principal and guidance counselor). Providing the principal with Multiples of America's booklet, *Placement of Multiple Birth Children in School*, or our position paper will further enable the school staff to meet the needs of multiple birth children in their classrooms and help teachers avoid making comparisons between the children or treating them as a "unit" with little attention given to their individual attributes.

### **School Problems**

Kindergarten and primary school children often exhibit anxiety about leaving home and their parents during the first weeks of the school year. They may engage in behaviors that have not been typical such as refusing to get dressed, eat, or put on shoes. Tears and complaints of stomach aches are not infrequent. Parents should be aware that their children may experience a sense of loss due to their increased separation from the parent or caregiver, and, in the case of multiple birth children, from the other sibling(s). Reassuring conversations which let the children express their concerns and also establish a plan for when and how they will return home are essential in the early days of the school year.

Sometimes children will exhibit extreme reactions when the parent takes them into the school building. They may cling to the parent, cry, scream, throw tantrums, or cling to the door handle in an effort to prevent the parent from taking them into the classroom. Most often this behavior ends as soon as the parent leaves the building, so it is best to leave promptly with a firm promise to return when the school day ends.

Some children complain of morning stomach aches or other physical ailments. If there are no symptoms of fever, diarrhea or vomiting, it is probably safe to take the child to school. When these complaints are repeated daily over a long period of time without fever or other accompanying signs of illness and the pediatrician has given the child a clean bill of health, parents should consult the teacher and/or school guidance counselor for assistance. It's always best to deal with school phobias quickly and firmly in the early years of school before they become an ingrained habit leading to chronic absenteeism.

Parents can prepare their young children to enjoy the school experience by recounting their own school days in a positive, happy manner. Multiple birth children can assist each other in overcoming fears by

spending homework time together and sharing in telling the news of their day at the dinner table.

For many children homework becomes an obstacle to success in school. If good habits are established in the early school years, children will develop the skills and attitudes needed to handle homework successfully. It's important to establish a daily routine as soon as the children's school system begins to require homework. Parents should decide on a time and place for doing homework and then be faithful to this routine.

In the early years parents need to be involved in the homework process, making sure that all the children are participating equally. With multiples there is the danger that one child will exert too much control, not allowing the other sibling to have a turn answering questions or ridiculing a wrong answer. During homework sessions, parents and multiples may become aware of different learning styles. It's important to recognize each child's style as a valid means of learning.

If the child(ren) seems to be progressing satisfactorily in each classroom and are happy with their school experience, this can provide parents with an opportunity to teach their multiples about the value of individual differences. At the same time, it's important to note that many parents of multiple birth children experience significant problems when there is a vast difference in teaching style and/or class management techniques between teachers in their children's separate classrooms. If one child is falling behind academically or seems unhappy with the classroom setting, parents should schedule a conference to discuss these problems with the teacher. Never allow the situation to go on without some effort to resolve it.

In the early grades, it may become apparent that one child is more advanced academically than his or her co-multiple. Differences in abilities can be expected in boy/girl sets, since girls mature intellectually at an earlier age than boys. However, many parents of multiples experience the difficulties that arise when their children have vastly different academic abilities. One child may be placed in an advanced level of instruction; or one may require remedial instruction in reading or math. Report card grades may vary significantly. There may be social or behavioral problems with one child in the set.

It is generally best to be honest and forthright when discussing any learning difficulties that arise within the set of multiples. The children will be aware of their different levels of achievement, and they need to develop healthy, compassionate attitudes towards each other despite those differences. If a medical condition is the cause of learning problems, this should be fully explained to all of the children. If special testing identifies a particular learning problem, it should be addressed openly in the family so that the children do not attach any feeling of shame or embarrassment to it.

There are a variety of different learning disabilities that can be diagnosed through special testing, however the most common problems affecting elementary-age children are attention deficit disorder (ADD) and dyslexia. Children diagnosed with ADD commonly show signs of short attention span and impulsive behavior. They may also exhibit hyperactivity, uncontrolled behavior such as jumping up and down out of their seat, jerking motions, waving their arms or legs and so on. All children exhibit this behavior on occasion, so parents and teachers must ask themselves if the behavior they are concerned about is persistent and if the child exhibits

such behavior in most settings. If either parents or teachers express a concern that this condition exists, parents should first consult their pediatrician or another health care provider. A doctor will know the medical signs of ADD and can recommend sources of information or a psychologist for further testing. There are two primary federal laws applying to the education of children with ADD, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. If parents suspect that their child has ADD, according to federal law a school is responsible for providing an educational diagnosis. The best intervention is getting the right diagnosis, educational plan, and support systems in place.

### **School Retention**

If learning problems are so great that one of the children is failing, the school may consider retaining that child in the same grade for an additional year. Parents and educators should move with extreme caution when considering retention of one or more children in a set of multiples. Psychological and social considerations involving the nature of the multiple bond must receive equal weight with academic considerations. Current research even questions whether retention has a positive educational effect.

The effects of school retention are much greater on a multiple birth child since they may alter the sibling relationship in a profound manner. These effects can range from mild loss of self-esteem and confusion over the status of the siblings in the multiple birth grouping to a deeper sense of loss of identity with the co-multiple(s) and feelings of anger and rejection. On the other hand, there is a definite need to separate the multiple birth issues from the issue of what is best for the individual child. As a result, the question of retaining a multiple birth child is highly complicated and needs to be approached with full consideration of all the possible benefits and injury that may result from the decision. Parents should make decisions based on facts and needs of the multiple in question.

### **Conclusion**

The school years are most often a time of exciting growth and development, but parents of multiples birth children need to be aware of the special issues and challenges that they may face. An open and honest attitude toward the value of each individual family member will promote a healthy atmosphere in which the children can explore their own strengths and talents.

Parents should always be aware that they are the primary educators of their children. Multiple birth parents may also need to be educators for their local school staff. Multiples of America welcomes questions and concerns, and is prepared to assist multiple birth families in making effective educational decisions. Contact your local multiples club or the Multiples of America Executive Office for further information.