

SINGLE PARENTING OF MULTIPLE BIRTH CHILDREN

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PURPOSE: The purpose of this survey done by ICOMBO was to gather information from parents of multiple birth children who reared their multiples as a single parent. The information obtained will be relayed to multiple birth organizations to help them better serve their members who are single parents.

METHOD: A survey consisting of 43 questions was distributed via Survey Monkey to single parents of multiples. The survey was distributed mainly by social media (Facebook) and was distributed in seven languages: Czech, English, Finnish, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish. The survey was opened in February 2016 and closed in August 2016.

RESULTS: A total of 522 single parents of multiples completed this survey. The majority who responded were mothers but there were also six fathers who completed this survey. The largest percentage (32.4%) were never married, followed by divorced (28.2%); separated (18.8%); single by choice (adoption or assisted reproduction) (16.9%); and widowed (2.9%).

Sixteen countries on five continents were represented in this survey, with Australia (96), United Kingdom (94), Finland (82), United States (70) and France (61) having the most respondents. Other countries represented were: New Zealand (36), Canada (34), Germany (17), Denmark (11), Sweden (10), Czech Republic (6), Japan (1), South Africa (1), Ecuador (1), and 1 each of countries in Central America and Europe not specifically named.

The great majority of the single parents responding to this survey (92.7%) had twin children. There were also 6.9% with triplets, one parent (0.2%) with quadruplets and one parent (0.2%) who had two sets of twins.

The multiples represented in this survey were as follows: DZ boy/girl twins (30.8%); DZ (fraternal) males (18.9%); DZ (fraternal) females (17.1%); MZ (identical) females (13.4%); MZ (identical) males (12.6%); combination of MZ and DZ (HOMs) (4.9%); and Unknown (2.4%).

The majority of the parents (29.4%) were aged 31-35 when the multiples were born, followed by ages 26-30 (22.5%), ages 36-40 (22.1%), ages 20-25 (11.9%), ages 41-45 (8.5%), <20 years of age (3.1%), and >45 years of age (2.5%).

The current ages of the parents taking this survey were primarily 31 and over, with ages 36-40 being the largest group (25.7%), followed by ages 41-45 (24.8%), ages 31-35 (22.8%), ages 46-50 (9.4%), ages 26-30 (8.6%), ages 51-60 (4.6%), ages 20-25 (3.7%) and ages <20 and > 60 (both, 0.4%).

The multiples represented in this survey were primarily ten years of age and younger, with the largest group being ages 3-5 (31.7%), followed by ages 6-10 (23.6%), ages 1-2 (19.6%), <1 yr of age (10.6%), ages 11-15 (4.4%), ages 16-20 (4.4%) and ages 26-30 (0.2%).

When asked how old the multiples were when they became a single parent, 23.6%, the largest percentage, said that they were single when they became pregnant, and 15.6% became single during the pregnancy while 5.8% said they were single by choice. The other respondents said they became single when their multiples were the following ages: <1 year (16.8%); ages 1-2 (15.6%); ages 3-5 (15.1%); ages 6-10 (5.2%); ages 11-15 (1.9%) and ages 16-18 (0.4%).

Most of the moms were 31 and older when they became single parents of multiples. Ages 31-35 were the largest group (28.0%), followed by ages 36-40 (25.0%); ages 41-45 (15.4%); ages 26-30 (14.9%); ages 20-25 (9.1%); <20 (2.4%); ages 46-50 (3.2) and >50 (1.0%).

Just over half of the parents (50.4%) fed their multiples breast milk and formula from a bottle, while 21.9% bottle-fed exclusively; 13.2% breastfed exclusively; 11.9% used both expressed breast milk and breastfeeding; 1.4% said “other” and 1.2% used only expressed breast milk.

A majority of the respondents (66.0%) said they did not have any children born before the multiples. Similarly, a majority of the respondents (89.3%) said they did not have any more children after having the multiples. When asked how many children they had altogether, 54.2% said two; 29.3% said three; 11.5% said four; 3.4% said five; 0.6% said one; 0.6% said six and 0.4% said more than six.

The majority of the parents (75.5%) were employed for the majority of the time they were single parents, while 18.8% said they were stay-at-home parents and 5.7% said they were unemployed. The largest percentage (35.7%) worked full-time, followed by part-time (28.5%); both full and part-time (6.8%) and self-employed (4.5%).

Child care arrangements that the single parents had while they were working were as follows (more than one answer was allowed): “Took the children to a day care establishment while I worked” (73.6%); “Family members watched the children for me” (41.3%); Other (32.0%); “Friends watched the children for me” (6.7%) and “My employer provided child care” (2.1%).

When asked to describe their family’s parenting situation (at this time, or when they were young if the multiples were grown), the majority (51.8%) said that the non-custodial parent was not active in their children’s lives. About a fourth of the parents (23.2%) said there was split parenting time with the majority of the time being spent with the custodial parent and regular weekly or bi-monthly time spent with the other parent. A slightly smaller percentage (19.4%) said there was split parenting time but very limited time was spent with the non-custodial parent. The smallest percentage (5.7%) said the parenting time was 50/50 with the children spending equal amounts of time between households.

Most of the parents said they had outside help from family members or friends, with 40% saying they had help and 42.9% saying they had limited assistance. Just 17.1% said they didn’t get any help at home from family members or friends.

The most common type of support the parents received from family and friends was help with caring for the multiples (76.3%), followed by: financial help from family (39.2%); family help with housework (33.4%); friends helped care for the multiples (26.9%); family helped with meals (25.5%); other (22.0%); friends helped with meals (9.7%); friends helped with housework (9.5%) and financial help from friends (4.4%).

Over half (60.0%) of the single parents said they had a strong, helpful support system in their family. The other 40% did not, saying that the family members either lived too far away to help (24.6%), or they were not emotionally close to family members (14.3%) or that there were no living family members (1.0%).

Over a third (39.4%) were not members of a parents of multiples club, while 33.2% were members of both a local and a national club and 27.4% belonged to a local club only. Less than half of those in a local club (41.3%) said they attended their first meeting as a single parent of multiples.

More than half who became single after joining a local club (66.2%) said that they were not treated any differently after becoming single. However, 16.4% said they were treated with more sympathy and understanding by a majority of the members and 9.2% said they were treated with more sympathy and understanding by only a few. Unfortunately, 5.1% said they were treated negatively by only a few and 3.1% said they were treated negatively by the majority of members.

About a third (38.3%) who became a single parent after joining a local club said they received emotional support from the other club members and 12.0% said they did not, while 49.7% said “they were unaware of my needs because I didn’t tell anyone.”

Only 8.9% said that single-parenting materials and other resources were made available to them at their local club meetings, while 45.0% said they weren't available and 46.1% were unsure or did not ask for such materials.

Only 15.7% were aware of support for single parents of multiples at the national level in their country, and 9.3% did contact someone on the national level for guidance or assistance. The majority (64.7%) said they weren't satisfied with the support they received from their national organization, while 22.2% were well satisfied with the help they received and 13.1% said they were directed to another resource that was helpful. Only 30.7% were aware of any articles about single parenting of multiples in any national publications.

About a third of the single parents (30.1%) joined a single parent support group in their community, while 35.3% said they didn't need one and 34.7% said they couldn't find any to join. The most common group, by far, that single parents joined was a Facebook group or some other online support group (95.4%), followed by Other (13.9%); Parents without Partners, or a similar group (11.3%); a national single parents of multiples group (7.9%) and a church single parent group (1.3%).

Only about a third of the parents (33.7%) said that they received regular child support from their multiples' other parent. Unfortunately, a great number of the parents (42.4%) received no financial help, while 16.0% received irregular child support; 4.3% said Other; 2.1% received Social Security payments from a deceased partner/spouse and 1.6% received a life insurance payment from a deceased partner/spouse.

Over a third of the single parents (39.4%) did receive financial support from assistance programs, while 60.6% did not.

Those parents who were single during their multiple pregnancy received the following help prior to the birth of the multiples: support from family at antenatal (prenatal) appointments (35.8%); support buying needed equipment for the multiples (29.2%); financial help from the government (24.9%); support from friends at antenatal (prenatal) appointments (23.0%); financial help from family (20.2%); other (14.0%); financial help from friends (5.8%) and financial help from charities/churches (2.7%).

The single parents received the following help after the birth of their multiples: financial help from the government (53.3%); financial help from family (30.0%); accommodation supplement/low-income housing (23.3%); other (17.5%); food stamps or vouchers (11.3%); free or reduced price school lunches (5.8%); utilities assistance (5.1%); financial help from charities/church (3.5%); financial help from friends (3.1%) and fuel assistance (1.2%).

When asked what they found made it difficult to cope as a single parent, they responded with the following: lack of sleep/tiredness (70.4%); financial problems (59.4%); keeping up with housework (56.2%); loneliness (54.8%); physical stress of caring for more than one baby/child (52.5%); worries and fears (52.5%); feeling inadequate (51.9%); being able to get out of the house on their own (47.9%); not having adults to talk to (45.4%); breastfeeding (17.1%) and other (11.7%).

The single parents felt that these areas were lacking or inaccessible to them: physical assistance (someone to help in the home with all the work that's required for caring for multiples) (57.3%); emotional/psychosocial assistance (52.1%); financial assistance (49.6%); legal assistance (18.8%); "had access to all the assistance that was needed" (17.3%); health benefits (13.3%) and other (6.9%).

The single parents felt that these factors contributed to the separation/divorce from their partner/spouse: marital/relationship problems after the birth of the multiples (51.8%); other (44.1%); marital/relationship problems before the birth of the multiples (42.4%); alcohol/drug problems (26.5%); stress of caring for more than one baby (15.1%); financial problems (11.4%); stress from having an ill infant (or infants) (6.1%); maternal complications from the multiple birth delivery (5.7%); employment issues (3.3%) and stress from the death of a multiple (1.2%).

Over half (59.1%) felt that not having both parents in the home did not affect their multiples negatively, while 37.1% said "Yes, sometimes;" 3.0% said "Yes, most of the time" and 0.8% said "Yes, all of the time." Of those who said it affected

their multiples negatively, 35.6% said there were behavioral problems while 34.1% said Other, 29.8% said there were problems with emotional growth, 8.8% said there were social problems and 1.0% said their multiples were bullied at school.

More than half of the parents (65.1%) felt that growing up in a single-parent home affected their multiples positively. These are the ways the parents said that it affected their children in a positive way: didn't grow up in a household with parents fighting all the time (75.7%); learned self-reliance (41.4%); family got away from an abusive parent (28.5%) and Other (22.3%).

The next to the last question in the survey asked: "What's the most useful advice/help you were given which has helped you cope as a single parent?" Respondents were to write out their responses. There were no replies in the Japanese or the Czech surveys, 9 from the German surveys, 37 from the French surveys, 40 from the Finnish surveys and 209 from the English surveys.

Many of the comments talked about the importance of setting up a routine and trying to be as organized as possible. Some recommended doing things in stages – no need to clean the entire house or apartment in one day! Many reminded single moms of multiples to ask for help and to try NOT to be a "Supermom" - don't be a martyr – "if mum is well, the children will be well!" They also said not to compare yourself to others – remind yourself that you are doing the best you can. Several said not to sweat the small stuff and to realize there will be bad days but they will pass. Many reminded single moms to focus on spending time with their children and making memories for them – more important to give them hugs and your time than to clean the house. Some recommended seeking advice about financial support available from the government. Several respondents talked about how helpful it was for them to network with other single parents of multiples – either on line or in their community. Many said to try not to feel sorry for yourself – they won't always be babies / toddlers and things will get easier. But also don't look too far ahead – take one day at a time and enjoy each day spent with your multiples.

The final question said: "Please feel free to add any other suggestions or you may elaborate on your experiences with single parenting of your multiples." These were also responses that were written out by the respondents. There were no replies in the Japanese or the Czech surveys, 7 from the German surveys, 13 from the French surveys, 25 from the Finnish surveys and 90 from the English surveys.

Several moms said that they liked being able to make all the decisions for their multiples but often wished their children had a good male role model. As mentioned by several moms in the previous question, there were also several comments about the struggle with "no me time away from the children." One mom advised single moms of multiples to contact a social worker at the onset of the pregnancy to get all the information available about possible care and support. There were several comments to please remember LGBT parents of multiples – they feel that they are often overlooked/invisible. Many moms lamented the high cost of child care – often no price breaks for those with twins or more. Several also commented on how hard it is to find assistance or help because all the services needed – lawyer, notary, social worker, psychologist, social security office - are located in different areas all over town. Several single moms of multiples said they felt judged or experienced negative comments/attitudes because they were single – some felt it was because they conceived easily, or via IVF by choice, and the married moms who had experienced infertility for many years treated them differently. Several moms noticed kindnesses and support extended to married parents but the needs of the single parents often weren't addressed. Often club events were geared to couples and the single parents felt excluded. One mom said she does household chores in the presence of her young multiples and they often spontaneously take part in common tasks – great way to get housework done, be with the multiples and teach them about normal household chores. One mom said there is an exceptional online community for single moms by choice, but that the hospital experience, as a mom without a partner, was particularly bad. An advocate for single parents in the hospital would be helpful. Several moms remarked about the insensitivity of people in their local club, and in other settings, when they keep harping on and on about how hard it is for TWO adults to care for multiples when the single moms have been doing this all on their own! Many moms felt that not having the other parent in the household was a positive for the children – much less stress and more harmony in the household.

CONCLUSIONS: 522 single parents of multiple birth children from 16 countries completed this survey. Single parents of multiples, no matter which country they live in, face similar stressful challenges every day while rearing their children alone.

They need the support of family and friends, and they also need the support of social services. Reduced child care costs are also greatly needed.

Hospitals and medical staff need to be more sensitive in their care of LGBT parents and parents who are single by choice.

They also need the support of their local parents of multiples group. They need to be accepted wholeheartedly and their needs should be taken into account when club events and meetings are being planned.

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