

Classroom Placement of Multiples Information for Educators

Although some aspects of schooling are no different than for singletons or siblings there are other areas where special consideration needs to be taken into account. Because they are at the same stage at the same time there is a natural tendency to compare more so than with siblings. Twins/triplets can be born physically different developmentally due to competition in the womb. In addition, there is the increased risk of prematurity and this can lead to developmental delays with gross and fine motor skills and speech and language skills (see section on prematurity). Each child may be affected in different ways. Even when not born prematurely multiples are more likely to experience language problems or delayed speech often resulting in reading problems. These are sometimes caused by group talk or twins speak reinforcing each other's mistakes as well as developmental delays.

Educators play an important role in encouraging and facilitating individuality and togetherness among multiples. To assist you, we have provided some background information on this topic, and some additional resources you may wish to consult.

Reasons to separate multiples:

While there is no substantial evidence to support the policy of separation in order for each child to grow and develop as individuals, sometimes circumstances exist which would indicate that separation is advisable. It is helpful to recognise that some behaviours may be an issue one year and not the next.

- Constant 'togetherness' is hindering the development of social skills in one, both or more of the multiples;
- A 'division of labour' exists;
- Insensitive comparisons by teachers, peers or even each other have led to feelings of inadequacy in one or more of the multiples;
- The multiples form a 'power unit' which is causing disruptive behaviour;
- The children use their multipleship to exploit, cheat or play tricks;
- One or more of the multiples appears to resent the lack of privacy resulting from sharing a classroom;
- One multiple proves to be a constant distraction to the other/s;
- In opposite-sex multiples, the female is overprotective or 'mothering' the male co-multiple;
- In skill-grouped classrooms where the abilities of one of the multiples are far above those of the co-multiple/s; and
- The multiples WANT to separate.

Reasons to keep the multiples together:

Sometimes there are valid reasons for keeping multiples together:

- Major emotional upheavals may have occurred with the family, e.g. divorce, moving house, death, etc;
- Only one classroom is available;
- Unequal education will be experienced due to two different teachers employing different methods of teaching;

- Multiples are at or near the same skill level in a skill-based classroom;
- The multiples do NOT want to be separated. Forced separation, with all of the other 'firsts' children face, especially in their first year of school, can add undue stress, cause regression and affect self-esteem.

Tips for Teachers of Multiples:

- Separation in the first year of school should not be an automatic decision. The added stress may actually reinforce their need to be together;
- Allow multiples as much independence as they are ready to handle. They flourish when allowed to separate on their own timetable. Forced separation can damage self-esteem, inhibit language development and delay learning;
- Encourage them to choose separate classes as they gain confidence in the school situation;
- Encourage multiples to sit apart for different class activities. This assists you in identifying who's who and discourages them from completing each other's work;
- 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 them in recognising that they are individuals;
- Some parents dress their children alike. If this is a difficulty in your classroom, ask that the children be dressed differently for easier identification both for yourself and their peers;
- Refer to each child by his or her own name. This helps you identify each child and sets a good example for their peers to address them individually as well;
- Expect differences in test scores, neatness and behaviour but don't be surprised if they are very similar;
- For parent/teacher interviews, compare each child to their peer group and not to each other;
- Make different interview times for each child rather than having one interview time to talk about all the multiples at once. One mother of quadruplets noted it was assumed by the teacher that they would be discussing all four children at one interview;
- If one multiple (especially monozygotic [identical] multiples) is markedly behind the co-multiple, investigate the cause;
 - Check to make sure that each multiple is doing their own work;
 - Plan a meeting with the parents to explore the situation;
 - Don't rule out the possibility of a learning disability in one of the multiples.

Recommendations Regarding Classroom Placement:

ICOMBO believes strongly that decisions about classroom placement of multiples should be evaluated annually, on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with the parents and if age appropriate, the children concerned. Just as each child is unique, each set of multiples is unique. Some multiples thrive in separate classes; others thrive in the same class. Similarly, what works for a given set of multiples one year might not work the next year. Therefore, we believe that blanket policies on this issue – either for separate or same-class placement – are inappropriate.

The final decision of having the children together or separated should be made jointly by the parents, the teacher(s), the principal, and at some stages, the children themselves.