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## Raising Twin Babies and Problems in the Family

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**Abstract.** Out of 296 mothers of twins interviewed about difficulties encountered while rearing twins, 49% mentioned inadequate sleep, 18% financial strain, 39% emotional disturbance, 22% disturbance in the marital relationship, and 43% lack of time to take care of other children. With the growth of twins, the problems gradually decreased, except for emotional disturbance, the most difficult period being the first year. Only 15% reported leaving the babies in the care of relatives during the day time. Overall, 68.2% felt the support from the father, but 39% of them felt the support was useless; 49% felt support from the mother-in-law, but 43% of them regarded the mother-in-law to be of no help; 36% were supported by their own mothers, but 54% mentioned that they had received little help. One must conclude that social support from relatives was inadequate. Public policy should take this fact into account and provide public health nurses and social workers to help the mothers of twins, especially during the first year.

**Key words:** Mothers of twins, Rearing problems, Social support

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### INTRODUCTION

Although the parents of single children and parents of twins face some identical problems, the compounding of demands in the case of twins requires greater expenditure of energy and money, while placing more stress on oneself and one's marital and personal relationships [2,3,13]. The literature shows mothers of twins are more vulnerable to postpartum depression [11] and mental distress [7,14]. They must negotiate intensified conflicts between the parenting and marital roles and have reduced space in which to meet other personal needs [10,12]. Life-style adjustments, particularly the sharing of childcare, are often made with difficulty [14]. Some mothers handle the double work load well; however, perceptions of enormous responsibilities and a sense of inability to cope as parent, spouse, and individual, all too often lead to despondency [12].

The international spread of information and organizations aiding such families has yet to reach Taiwan [1,4,8,15]. Prior research in Taiwan has been limited to case studies of the feeding and reactions of newborn twin babies and to comparisons between post-partum anxiety in mothers of twins vs mothers of singletons [5,6,10]. Our study aimed (a) to delimit the problems facing mothers of twins in the Taiwan context, and (b) to understand the available social networks as perceived by these mothers.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A survey probing experienced difficulties, childrearing methods, and social support was administered once to 166 mothers of twins; 59 mothers were interviewed twice, while 9 were interviewed three times giving a total of 296 person/times analyzed. Since this study is connected with a longitudinal study on twins, the intelligence of the twins was tested at intervals between the ages of 3 and 30 months.

## RESULTS

### Difficulties in the Parenting of Twins

Prior literature noted mothers of twins frequently make mistakes in distinguishing between twins [6,9]. However, 84% of the 269 mothers of twins under age 3, reported having had little difficulty (Table 1), based on appearance (68%), body size (14%), and sex (15%). As shown in Table 2, 49% of respondents complained of inadequate sleep, but the frequency of this complaint decreased with the age of children. Complaints peaked at ages 3-18 months, and were especially prominent in the first six months. While 18%

**Table 1 - Mother's difficulty in distinguishing twins (% values)**

Age (mos.)	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	Total N
3	7.7	12.8	79.5	39
6	4.5	11.4	84.1	44
9	2.9	14.7	82.4	34
12	–	3.1	96.9	32
15	–	–	100.0	16
18	–	12.8	86.2	39
24	–	27.3	72.7	33
30	3.1	21.9	75.0	32
Total N	7	37	225	269
Total %	2.6	13.8	83.6	100.0

Table 2 - Difficulties encountered by mothers of twins (% values)

Age of twins (mos.)	Difficult features <sup>a</sup>				
	A	B	C	D	E
3	65.8	23.1	41.1	28.2	39.1
6	70.4	15.9	50.0	26.2	47.6
9	34.3	25.8	37.2	24.2	36.8
12	54.5	12.1	35.5	37.5	70.6
15	50.0	6.3	37.5	13.3	37.5
18	53.8	20.5	43.6	13.2	47.8
24	38.9	13.9	38.9	15.2	40.0
30	18.2	24.2	25.8	12.9	25.0
Total %	49.4	18.6	39.5	22.1	43.5
Total N	277	275	271	263	147
Mothers reporting moderate to severe difficulties	137	51	107	58	64

<sup>a</sup> A = Inadequate sleep; B = Financial strain; C = Mood fluctuation; D = Disturbance of marriage; E = Lack of time for other children.

mentioned financial strain, 20% reported no such problem. A fairly constant 39% experienced mood fluctuations between the ages of 3-24 months. About 22% reported disturbance in the marital relationship — but 25% reported feeling much closer to the spouse. Among 147 mothers with other children in the family, 43% reported a lack of time for other children. All difficulties, with the exception of emotional disturbance, gradually decreased with the growth of the twins. We conclude the most vulnerable group consists of parents of twins in the first two years

## Social Support

This study confirms Ainslie's finding [1] that husbands and mothers-in-law are the major source of help. In addition, maternal mothers and baby sitters were also found helpful. We now consider these findings in detail.

Only 15.5% of the twins were cared for separately. Of the 38 pairs who were separated, 16 pairs were divided between parents and sitters. Separate sitters provided care for each sib in 22 cases. Responding to the questions, "Who in your surroundings has assisted you in taking care of the twin babies?" and "How do you feel about the support?", 68.2% of mothers reported support from their spouse, but 39% of these felt the support useless, while 29% felt it helpful. Also, 49% reported assistance from their mothers-in-law, but 43% felt that she was no help, while 39% felt her to be quite helpful. Assistance from the respondent's mother was reported by 36%, but 54% contended their mothers were of little help, as compared to 47% who reported them very helpful.

**Table 3 - Perceived assistance from others (% values)**

Relatives	Perceived assistance	If yes, how satisfactory?				
		No help	Little help	Some help	Much help	Very much help
Husband	68.2	10.9	28.7	30.7	16.8	12.9
Mother-in-law	48.9	29.7	13.8	17.9	14.5	24.1
Mother	35.8	44.3	10.4	7.5	19.8	17.9
Father-in-law	30.0	60.7	12.4	14.6	7.9	4.5
Father	2.0	78.9	5.6	5.6	5.6	4.2
Husband's sister	27.0	63.8	13.8	5.0	10.0	7.5
Sister	27.0	62.5	6.3	11.3	8.8	11.3
Baby sitter	32.6	44.8	4.2	4.2	11.5	35.4
Others	15.5	56.5	15.2	10.9	10.9	6.5
Total N	296					

One-third reported some kind of support from the other family members. The percentage finding other relatives significantly helpful was only 4% to 11%; most of the relatives were deemed of little help (60%-79%). Outside the family, 32.4% of the mothers had assistance from baby sitters, and of these, 47% reported them to be helpful. Surprisingly, 49% offered that sitters were no help at all. Overall, Table 3 shows the most helpful person to be the husband, followed by mother-in-law, own mother, and baby sitter. Feelings on the part of mothers that they were supported were strongest (in descending order) for the baby sitter, mother-in-law, own mother, and husband.

## DISCUSSION

Clarke-Stewart [7] proposed that there is some ready basis for improving the social support system for parenting, but not for parenting multiple births. He suggested special services are justified and the study here finds this especially true for mothers of twins in Taiwan. Sources of potential assistance range from both parents, family members, self-help groups, as well as social policies emanating from the state.

The mother needs more than physical assistance. She wants tips on how to cope with a particular situation, what equipment to buy, how best to carry two babies, what to do when one is crying and there is no spare pair of hands. Perhaps most important of all, she needs a sympathetic ear. In this regard, there is no better person than someone who has been or is going through it herself. Here self-help groups can make a contribution [4].

Regarding the problem of attention to other sibs, mothers of twins should learn how to manage the other children by asking other persons to assist. Beyond the potential supporters listed above, the role of older children as helpers must not be underestimated. Solving this problem, the mother can concentrate on one child at a time and share affection in turns [13].

In most families, the father is the most consistent helper. Even those who have shown little interest in helping with one baby usually rise to the occasion with two [15]. This study finds that while the father is the most important supporter, the help is often unsatisfactory; therefore, training and practice on father's part will be needed. Public policy should take these facts into account and provide health-care workers to regularly visit the homes of twins and be readily available by telephone, especially during the first two years [4]. These visitors should include public health nurses and family planning workers, as well as social workers who have special training in the care of young children and their developmental needs. Our study also indicates that support should extend beyond children's needs to the special needs of the mothers of twins for at least the first three years of childhood.

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