

A Health Visitors Guide to Twins Triplets and More

Why a health visitor's guide?

Tamba aims to raise awareness of the special needs of parents bringing up twins, triplets or more and to enable health visitors and other community practitioners to understand some of the unique problems expectant and new mothers of multiples can experience.

Incidence of multiple births in the UK

The table below shows the latest multiple birth statistics. The last 20 years has seen an upward trend in the number of multiple births, although since 1997 the yearly increase has slowed somewhat compared to the previous 10 years.

Number of maternities in UK, 2005	
All maternities	715,556
Twins	10,533
Triplets	159
Quads	2
Multiple birth rate per 1,000	14.95

Source ONS

The average length of pregnancies in multiples is 37 weeks for twins, 34 weeks for triplets and 32 weeks for quads. 59% of women who have twins do so by Caesarean section and 50 % of twins require some time in special care.

For more information see '*Tamba* Multiple Birth Fact Sheet'

The antenatal period

Most parents learn they are expecting more than one baby during an ultrasound scan. Initially they may feel elated, but then the joy can give way to apprehension and anxiety. For some parents, the news can be devastating. It is important at this point that they receive information about the pregnancy and birth and the support services available to them.

Expectant parents of multiples may have many concerns including:

- Future possibility of employment
- Length of paternity leave
- How they are going to manage financially
- Cost and availability of equipment
- Suitability of accommodation
- Sources of support
- Transport

How can health visitors help?

Work carried out by *Tamba* has shown there is a need for continuity and communication between different health professionals when caring for a multiple birth family.

Sharing information between GPs, midwives, consultants, special care nurses and health visitors is vital with health visitors playing a key role especially after a mother and her new babies have been discharged from hospital.

Before the birth it may be helpful to:

- Visit parents at home, listening to their worries and trying to address their anxieties
- Prepare them for the possibility of premature labour and admission of the babies to a Special Care Baby Unit
- Encourage early attendance at antenatal classes and a visit to the neonatal unit. Many babies are born before the classes are complete
- Encourage attendance at classes specifically for those expecting multiples, if available
- Promote a healthy lifestyle by encouraging healthy eating, providing help on quitting smoking and emphasizing the importance of rest in preventing premature delivery. If necessary, suggest that mothers consider stopping work earlier than they had envisaged
- Support applications for special services, regarding help, re-housing, or playgroup/nursery places for siblings
- Ensure that sufficient help at home has been organised for the early months after the birth
- Encourage parents to accept any support offered and suggest sources of help e.g Home-Start, NNEB students and paid help
- Put parents in touch with *Tamba* and other parents of multiples who will be able to answer some of their questions. It may be possible to arrange an antenatal meeting with members of the local twins club. The club can be a source of literature, hints and tips on practical management, and second-hand clothes and equipment
- Give expectant parents the *Tamba* Twinline phone number. This confidential helpline gives advice, support and information (see below for details). Contact *Tamba* for Twinline posters to display

The postnatal period

Support from an extended family or friends and outside agencies is essential. Initial problems that parents may meet include:

- Isolation, due to the practical difficulties of getting out and about
- Less time to cuddle and enjoy each baby individually
- Guilt at not being able to give each baby equal time if one is more demanding than the other
- Exhaustion due to frequent feeding and baby care tasks and adjusting to new family relationships
- Babies' sleep problems
- Medical problems
- Jealousy and behaviour problems in older siblings
- Complications after birth
- Separation from babies while they are in Special Care, allowing babies home at different times

Postnatal anxiety

Studies have shown that parents of multiples are more likely to suffer from anxiety about caring for their children than parents of one child or widely-spaced singletons. Some studies have suggested that the level of PND in mothers of multiples may also be higher. Health visitors can help by encouraging families to make practical arrangements for coping.

Couples relationships can be put under excessive strain following the birth of multiples and fathers of multiples are more likely to become physically unwell than fathers of singletons

Some mothers have experienced a difficulty in bonding with the smaller baby where there is a significant difference in their birth weights.

Mothers who had lost one of their multiple birth children at birth were the most likely to experience depression. They may feel they are not allowed to grieve. (Putting them in touch with **Tamba's Bereavement Support Group** may help.)

How can health visitors help?

- Careful monitoring of low birth weight babies
- Encourage the family to accept all help offered and to seek assistance if it is not forthcoming. Many mothers don't have extended family living nearby. They may be able to benefit from local colleges running childcare or nursery nurse courses that have students needing family placements, or they can contact Home-Start whose volunteers are ideally placed to help multiple birth parents, especially those who have older siblings
- Identify the problems and discuss possible solutions - the family may be too busy with the babies to do this
- Offer support with breastfeeding. Encourage mothers to believe it is possible to breastfeed multiples. *Tamba* has an invaluable booklet on breastfeeding. Refer to breastfeeding counselor
- Sensitivity is needed to any special circumstances - bereavement, special needs, single parents, higher multiples and those born following infertility treatment
- Encourage parents to think about safety in the home and identify potential hazards
- Clinic visits can seem impossible due to lack of transport, changes in routine, lack of practical help, restrictions on prams/buggies in health centres. Regular home visits for several months and/or extra pairs of hands at the clinic will be welcome. Babies may be less likely to miss developmental checks and vaccinations if visited regularly at home.
- Allow adequate time for discussion at health checks. Mothers may need to share fears and feelings of guilt and those in the early stages of depression can be more easily identified.
- Advise on how to deal with problems with older siblings - e.g. transport to school/nursery, jealousy and other behaviour problems that result from feeling overwhelmed or abandoned within the family.
- Encourage parents to have some quality time alone with their other children in order to give them their full attention.
- Encourage couples to make opportunities, however small, to spend time together e.g. making a 'date' to have

Pre-school years

Research has shown that multiple children are more likely to have language delays than their singleton peers. Individual attention for each child can help with this and behaviour problems. Family and friends can help with this too, or the children can be sat around a table with individual activities with the parents speaking to each child in turn. It is important that twins or higher multiples are encouraged to retain their own identity and not seen as one unit. Those who do this from an early age may have fewer difficulties with separation later on.

How can health visitors help?

- Encourage parents to ask family and friends to read and talk to the children individually.
- Explore ways in which it may be possible to support families by applying for funding from social services for extra sessions because they will benefit developmentally.
- Discuss the possibility of the children having opportunities to spend time away from their sibling(s)

What support does *Tamba* offer?

Tamba aims to provide high quality information and mutual support networks for families of twins, triplets and more, highlighting their unique needs to all involved in their care. Its services include **Twinline** a confidential helpline for parent to parent support (see details at the bottom of page one). There are parent to parent support groups including lone parents and higher multiples and specialist support to parents through honorary consultants.

Tamba offers **Professional Membership** for those practitioners supporting families of twins, triplets or more. Benefits include a twice yearly copy of *Tamba* Bulletin with current health research and parenting support information, priority booking for *Tamba's* training sessions and conferences as well as access to *Tamba's* Honorary consultants.

Tamba's 'Parenting with multiples in mind' seven week course is for parents and carers of multiples aged one to five year olds and includes sessions on individuality, managing behaviour and play and development. Please contact *Tamba* for details of courses in your area or if you are interested in becoming a course facilitator. In addition *Tamba's* 'Parenting with multiples in mind' video can be used as a resource for both parents and health professionals.

For more information

***Tamba* Multiple Birth Fact Sheet**

***Tamba* A Midwife's Guide to Twins Triplets or More**

***Tamba* Expecting More than One**

***Tamba* Twins, Triplets and More, the First Year**

***Tamba* Breastfeeding More than One**

***Tamba* Parenting with multiples in mind - video**

Twins and Multiple Births - The Essential Parenting Guide by Dr. Carol Cooper, Vermillion

Home-Start www.home-start.org.uk free information line

0800 068 63 68

Ball, Helen and E. Heslop Twins co-bedding research www.dur.ac.uk/sleep.lab/

For more information on any of the issues raised in this sheet please contact *Tamba*