

## Comparison between twins

Twins are constantly compared with each other by themselves, by relatives, by teachers and by other children. Despite having the same genes, *identical twins may differ from each other* for many other reasons, so it is unrealistic to expect them always to be or to perform the same. The difficulty is that it is easy to exaggerate the significance of even a small difference, eg. "John is the brighter twin, Jim the more athletic one", into a major distinction where Jim ceases to try as hard at school (and is not expected to by others) because he is not as "bright".

## Do all twins have problems?

Many twins go through childhood and schooling without any difficulties. It is important to identify those factors which may put particular twins "at risk", such as prematurity, birth difficulties, being male, being identical twins, and having brothers and sisters only a little older.



## What else do we need to know about twins in school?

It is only recently that the needs of twins have even started to be recognised and more has to be done to identify:

- (i) what problems twins have?
- (ii) which twins have them?
- (iii) why do they have them?
- (iv) what can we do about them?

## Where to go for more information

The South Australian Multiple Birth Association has had much experience with the various problems of twins and its Education Research Team comprises parents who are or were teachers. Through the national association of parents, the *Australian Multiple Birth Association Inc. (AMBA)* it has access to information on many different aspects of multiple births. The La Trobe Twin Study is constantly involved with multiple birth families experiencing a wide range of behavioural problems in and out of school, and can provide detailed advice to professionals who encounter a particular difficulty with twins. The National Health and Medical Research Council is currently funding its studies of reading disabilities in twins. The Twin Study has prepared leaflets on such topics in twins as language development, reading disability, social development and physical growth.



## For further information contact:

Marianne Patrick, 136 Penfold Road, Wattle Park, S.A. 5066 (for the Education Research Team)

La Trobe Twin Study, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Vic. 3083

Otherwise the Australian Multiple Birth Association Inc. can be contacted in all states and territories — see the local telephone directory under "multiple births" or "twins".

# TWINS IN SCHOOL



Dr David Hay,  
La Trobe University, Melbourne  
and  
Education Research Team  
South Australian Multiple Birth  
Association Inc.

## Why worry about twins?

In 1982, 2443 sets of twins, 31 sets of triplets, and two sets of quads were born in Australia. This means that one birth in 96 results in multiples and that one child in 48 in our school system is a twin or triplet. We seek to draw your attention to some of the issues facing these children so that parents and teachers are more aware of the needs of this large but often ignored group.

## What is different about twins?

Australian twins on average are born four weeks premature and 1000 grams lighter than single born children. The problems associated with birth are worse for boys and for identical twins and sadly the perinatal mortality of twins is still several times that of single born children. The extra work associated with the twin babies can impose both *financial and emotional stress on the parents* as well as meaning that the parents *have less time* to spend playing and interacting with their children. Many of the problems seen in twin children are considered to stem from this. There are associated factors such as the twins spending so much time in each other's company that they need not develop adequate communication skills and competing with each other for adult attention.

## Language in twins

The most noticeable difference between twins and single-born children, especially in the pre-school years is that *twins are often delayed in language development*. They are older when they say their first word, their sentences are shorter and baby talk persists longer. On average, at the time they start school, twins and especially boys are 6-9 months behind single born children in their language skills. *The twins are not intellectually delayed* in any real way in that those abilities which do not depend on words and language are completely normal. But as a result of their complex biological and social situation, the twins have not developed adequate skills at vocabulary, verbal comprehension and particularly verbal expression.

Delay in language development is associated also with delay in other areas. *Such twins are slower to develop imaginative or symbolic play and much less mature* than other children in their social behaviour towards their peers or the teacher. The contact with other children in

the pre-school setting only encourages communication skills in those twins who already possess adequate language.

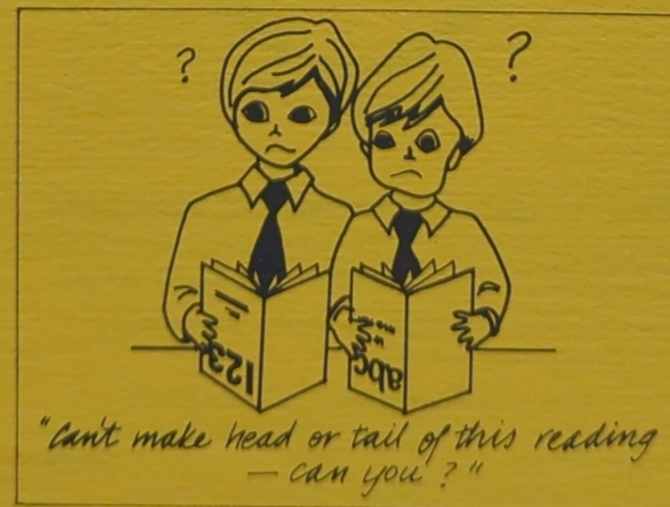
Twins often have articulation problems, slurring their words, missing out or substituting consonants or sometimes developing quite idiosyncratic rules of speech. Again their problems can reflect

- (i) the reduced opportunity parents have to correct the twins' language
- (ii) the familiarity of each twin with the other's speech
- (iii) their competition for parents' attention.

If twins are not learning correct language skills, *they frequently need speech therapy* to identify what is wrong and to help the parents, teachers and the children to correct this.

## Reading ability in twins

Although the language problems of twins may diminish and disappear during the primary school years, their consequences remain. *Twins with language problems in the pre-school years are very likely to have later reading difficulties*. They are three to four times more likely to be classed as reading disabled and these effects can persist throughout their school career. Our analyses of a 1975 national survey showed that twin boys and to a lesser extent twin girls were less likely at age 10 to have adequate mastery of literacy skills. But by 14 years the girls had almost caught up with their single-born peers. The twin boys had not. 71% of single-born boys, compared with only 42% of twin boys, were considered to have adequate literacy skills to cope with everyday Australian life. Comparable



data from United States and South African studies of older twins near the time of university entrance confirm this result.

Numeracy skills are less affected in twins except that teachers need to be conscious of the verbal demands of many questions in maths, science, geography and related subjects.

## Behaviour in school

Reports from teachers about twins in school highlight three problems:

- (i) *The twin boys may be less able to concentrate* for long periods and less interested in their work. The question of concentration may well stem from the few chances young twins have to work by themselves without the distraction of the other twin.
- (ii) Twins in primary school years may find more difficulty developing relations with their peers and may frequently seek the teacher's attention. One problem which twins face is that they are an attraction to the other children. *Twin girls may find it difficult* to develop the social skills needed to create and maintain friendships with other children instead of relying on their novelty as twins. Helen Koch in Chicago named this phenomenon the "prima donna" effect.
- (iii) One twin may become the leader and/or spokesperson for the pair. *This situation is most common in boy-girl pairs* where the girl may adopt this role because of the boy's slower language development. It can arise in any twin pair unless there is early intervention by parents and teachers.

## Should twins be separated in school?

The only answer to this is that there is no answer. *There should be no strict policy* but rather an individual decision taking into account the views of the principal and teacher, the parents, the children and possibly also some professional assessment of the children. Factors to consider include:

- (i) one twin being the spokesperson where separation may help
- (ii) the twins being a little behind in physical and language development where being in the same class may be a reassurance.

The question is one of balancing the need for individual development against the very close ties which do exist between twins.