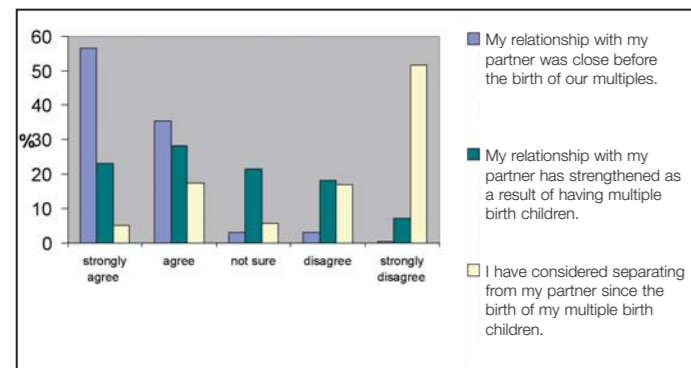


# Tamba relationship survey – the results

The transition to parenthood can have a huge impact on the couple relationship. This issue has been discussed frequently in the last year through the family relationships session of *Tamba's* Parenting Course 'Parenting with Multiples in Mind'. So last May we devised a survey to explore the challenges that couples face when there are multiples in the family. We had an astonishing 1,113 responses from parents all over the UK with 73 per cent from *Tamba* members and 54 per cent from twins clubs. Eight per cent were from fathers of multiples, four per cent from lone parents and five per cent from parents of triplets. **Carol Robins** reports.

## Family relationships

The first section of the survey asked parents to give a level of agreement with statements about their family relationships. Responses from the first three questions are shown on the graph below:



Our findings are in keeping with studies that suggest that relationships can take a battering when children arrive in the family. Studies show that the best predictor of relationship satisfaction is the quality of the relationship before the arrival of children and scores for this were high in our survey (92% agree or strongly agree 'my relationship with my partner was close before the birth of our multiples'). Research also shows that the more a couples' lifestyle and activities diverge postnatally – the more likely they are to be disenchanting with their relationship'. The Newcastle Twin Study<sup>2</sup> showed that dads are often 'hands on' and are reported as 'mother's doubles' and that can lead to relationship cohesion. However, for some couples the arrival of multiples can be a 'make' or 'break' situation and this was reflected in the 298 responses from those who reported couple relationship difficulties and their comments:

*"Life was hell. I could not cope with the twins and singleton and my marriage. I loved my husband but the adjustments were too big. I left him"*

*"My ex was delighted at the prospect of becoming a dad and then had a melt down when I was told it would be twins and really decided he didn't want to play when it was going to be triplets!"*

*"Considering splitting up after 15 years of marriage, IVF and the experiences associated with it haven't helped."*

## Parenting

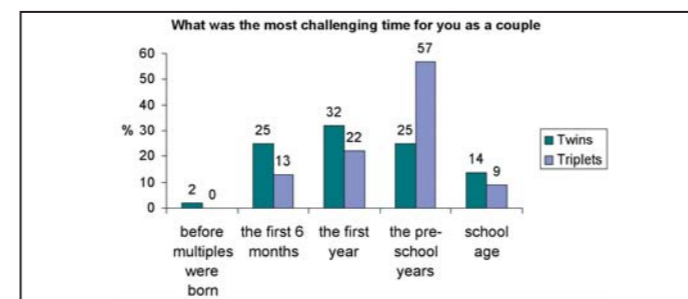
Encouragingly, the majority of parents (more than 80%) felt that both they and their partners were doing a good job parenting their children. But there was less agreement with the statement 'My partner and I generally have the same approach to parenting our children' (21% were not sure or disagreed with this statement). The Institute of Public Policy Research has recently identified the importance of stable and consistent parenting, whether it is from one parent or two, to be crucial when predicting whether children will succeed in life.<sup>3</sup> Of this group of parents, 72% reported that they were not able to spend quality time as a couple and 52% had considered separating from their partners.

## Time together

Getting out as a family or spending time as a couple is difficult for many parents, and our survey suggested that this is particular the case for multiple birth families. Fifty-five per cent say they are not able to go out as a family as often as they would like and 57% say they do not have opportunities to spend quality time together as a couple. Comparing with other surveys these figures appear high.<sup>4,5</sup>

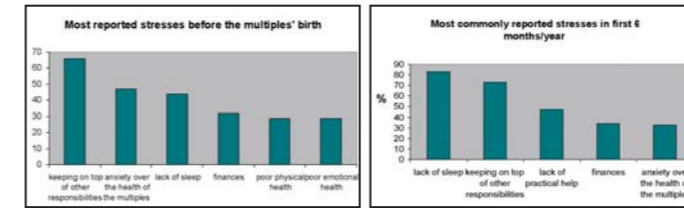
## Most challenging time and stresses

We asked parents to identify the most challenging time for them as a couple in relation to the age of their multiples. The graph below shows the responses from those with older multiples (aged five plus years) who were able to reflect back on earlier stages.

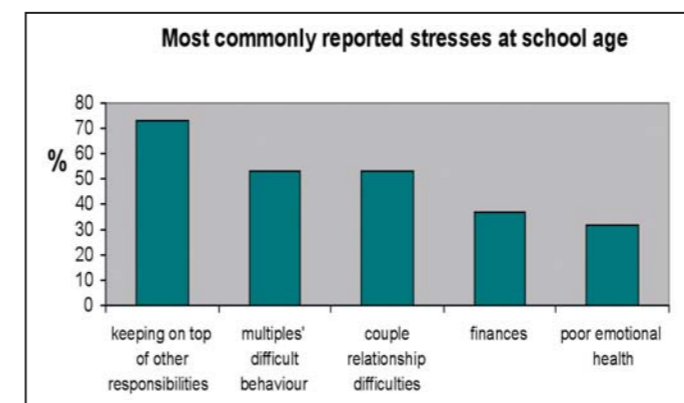
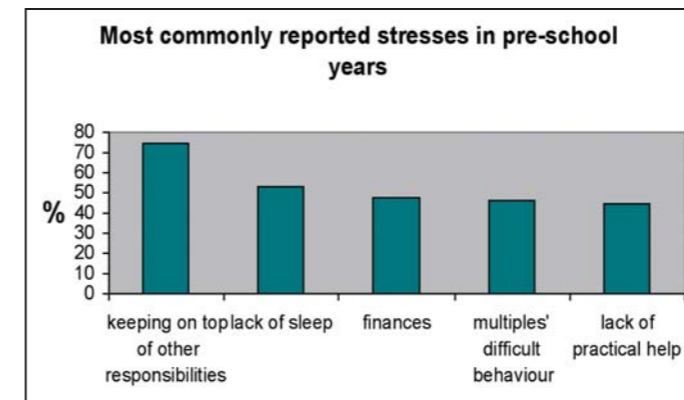


Interestingly, when we look at the parents with multiples aged 11 plus years, the most challenging time was school age. Perhaps it does suggest that to a certain extent the present time is perceived as the most challenging time! But these responses do indicate that there are difficulties to be faced even when multiples get older. The

following graphs look more closely at each stage:



Lack of sleep, keeping on top of other responsibilities and finances are common stress factors for parents of multiples. For those who found the antenatal period most challenging, anxiety over the health of the babies and their own poor physical and emotional health were key stress factors. After the birth and within the first year, lack of practical help causes stress for parents. In the pre-school years lack of practical help is matched by concerns about the behaviour of the children and concerns about behaviour continues when the children reach school age. At this stage parents are also reporting stress in their couple relationship and their own poor emotional health. Studies have shown that couples can often put their relationship 'on the back burner' in order to cope with young children and then experience difficulties in their relationships once their children start school and couples have more time to themselves.



## Finances

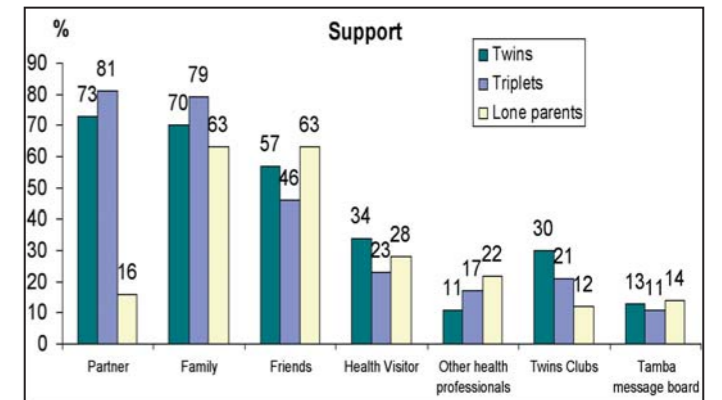
The additional financial demands of having multiples put a stress on many couples' relationships (45%) and was reported more frequently by those with older multiples (60%). The following comments highlight the difficulties faced.

*"We had to remortgage and pay for a mother's help two afternoons a week as I was sick following the birth of my twins and found it hard to look after three children."*

*"Change in income - husband had to become sole breadwinner placing massive pressure on him. Self employed and this made him really stressed."*

## Support

The survey shows that parents are looking for the majority of their support from their partner, family and friends, triplet parents rely slightly less on their friends but for lone parents, friends are the most important source of support.



Getting support from those outside the immediate family can be a great help, not only because of the very practical demands of caring for multiple birth children, but also because it enables parents to devote time to nurturing their own relationship. Some parents reported the enormous benefits that they have gained from accessing support from organisations such as Home Start, twins clubs and from the local church community.

The findings from this survey highlight the needs of multiple birth families and recognise that the couple relationship may come under stress. Communicating these findings to practitioners will enable greater understanding of the challenges and stresses that families experience. It will also help *Tamba* develop and direct our parenting services to offer information and support for family relationships.

## References

- 1 *Normative family transitions, normal family process, and healthy child development in Normal Family Processes*, Cowan, P & Cowan, C (2003) 3rd edition, ed Walsh, F. New York: The Guildford Press
- 2 *Effects of the birth of multiples on parents' psychological wellbeing* Debbie Sen & Stephen Robson in *Multiple Pregnancy* Ed Mark Kilby et al RCOG Press 2006
- 3 *Freedom's Orphans: Raising youth in a changing world* Julia Margo and Mike Dixon with Nick Pearce and Howard Reed, Institute of Public Policy Research (Nov 2006)
- 4 *Vanishing Britain survey* Community Services Volunteers (CSV) (August 2006)
- 5 *Changing Face of Parenthood* Future Foundation Report (October 2006)

For more information about the research please contact Carol Robins on 0870 770 3305 or email carolrobins@tamba.org.uk