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What Is It Like to Be a Parent of Twins?

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Abstract. A questionnaire was given to parents of twins concerning their perceptions of dependency and similarity in their twin children. Also, the parents were asked if they tried to influence their children to become more dissimilar. 70 same-sex twin pairs (35 MZ and 35 DZ) were included in the study and a questionnaire was sent both to the mother and the father of the twins. The twins were approximately 12 years old and attended grade 4, 5 or 6 in the Swedish compulsory school. Results indicated that parents consider MZ twins to be dependent upon each other and to spend more time together. This was especially evident for girls. If the twins had a free choice they would also tend to choose similarly. This trend was also more pronounced for the MZ girls. Irrespective of zygosity, most parents reported that they did not try to influence their children. In the case of MZ twins this will probably make them become more similar over time. Differences between maternal and paternal answers tended to be nonsignificant.

Key words: Parental attitude, Dependency, Twins

INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have shown that parents of twins generally report an extra work load and practical as well as economical problems related to the multiple birth [7]. Also, parents seem to perceive less problems with the first born compared to the second-born child in different respects [7].

In a Swedish study of parents who knew they were expecting twins, Alin-Åkerman [2] reports that the majority were very positive to the idea of getting two children instead of one. Also, very much attention and care were given to this parental group, which might imply that these results are not possible to generalize to other twin parents. The author discusses the difficulty inherent in being a parent of twins. When you attend to one twin, for instance, in feeding or diaper-changing

situations, the other twin might feel neglected and both children might experience conflicting reactions from the parent.

The problem of identity development in twins has been discussed by many researchers [8,10,12]. Parents often wonder if they should stress the differences in the children or treat them as similarly as possible. Practical concerns could be whether to dress them alike, give them similar names, place them in the same preschool or school class, etc. Often, it is easier for the parents to give the same treatment to the children, share clothes and toys, have contact with one preschool or school teacher instead of two. Parents, therefore, must adopt a planned strategy if they feel it is important to stress the children's individuality. Conflicts and competition as well as too much dependency on each other might also be experienced as problems for the parents [1,8].

A twin birth is a particular strain on the parental marriage and stresses the need for parents to act in a congruent way towards their children. Information on one-parent families with twins is so far very scarce but Lytton [9] and Thorkelsson-Lindahl [11] report that no negative consequences have been found for the children's development and that a consistent and firm upbringing might result from having to relate only to one parent.

In a previous longitudinal Swedish twin study Fischbein [4] has found that MZ twins tend to react similarly to the same environmental influences, while DZ twins tend to react differently. In a permissive environment this pattern was more obvious than in a restrictive one. This divergent trend with MZ twins becoming more concordant and DZ twins less concordant was more pronounced for twin girls than for twin boys. In the present study, the main purpose has therefore been to investigate parental perceptions of dependency and similarity in the twins, as well as parental influences in different respects.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Subjects

The KAM-project (a cultural comparison of heredity-environment interaction) started in 1985 in collaboration between Sweden and Israel. It is a follow-up study of one twin group in the Swedish compulsory school and one in the Israeli kibbutz school. In addition to school data, information has been collected from the parents of twins, the teachers and caretakers in the kibbutz [5,6]. The present study presents data only from the Swedish part of the project.

The Swedish twin sample was selected from a birth register comprising all twins born in the Stockholm area from 1973 to 1975. The criteria for selection of the twins were that they should be same-sexed pairs and both twins should be living with their mother (and most often also with their father). The mothers of 221 pairs were contacted and asked if they wanted to take part in the investigation. 127 parents were positive to this approach, and of these, 70 were chosen whose children attended grade 4, 5 or 6 in the Swedish compulsory school.

Methods

The mothers and fathers of the twins have separately been given a questionnaire comprising: a) general questions about the twins and their upbringing, b) questions about the twins' school situation, and c) questions about the twins' behavior at home.

The results presented here mainly concern parental answers to questions about the parents' perception of their twin children and their parental role analyzed in relation to twin zygosity and sex. In addition to this, maternal and paternal differences will be discussed.

Twin zygosity has been classified according to similarity diagnosis. Both mothers and fathers have been asked if the twins are mistaken for each other by parents, teachers, siblings and friends. The parents were also asked if the twins were similar with respect to "teeth", "nose", "hair", "ear", "lips", and "eyes". Finally, they gave their opinion on the zygosity of the twins.

RESULTS

Dependency in Twins

Table 1 shows that 33% of the parents of MZ twins think that they are very dependent on each other, while only 17% of the parents of DZ twins gave this answer. Also, 41% of DZ parents answered that their twin children were little or not at all dependent on each other, vs only 28% of the MZ parents.

Table 1 - Parental answers to questions about dependency in MZ and DZ twins (% values)

| Questions | Very often | | Rather much | | A little | | Not at all | | No answer | |
|--|------------|----|-------------|----|----------|----|------------|----|-----------|----|
| | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ |
| Are the twins dependent upon each other? | 33 | 17 | 37 | 42 | 24 | 32 | 4 | 9 | 2 | |
| How often are the twins together? | 53 | 25 | 33 | 42 | 14 | 22 | | 8 | | 3 |

MZ twins are considered by the parents to be together very often or always in 53% of cases, vs only 25% for DZ twins. 33% of DZ parents also say that the twins are together sometimes, seldom or never, while this is very rare for the MZ pairs.

Table 2 shows the answers to these questions classified by twin zygosity and sex. It appears that 44% of the parents of MZ twin girls, but 25% of the parents of MZ boys, think that their twins are very often dependent upon each other. In answer to the question about how much time the twins spend together, 68% of parents of MZ twin girls, but 40% of parents of MZ boys, think that their twins are

very often or always together. The DZ girls also seem to spend more time together than the boys, according to their parents' opinion.

No significant difference was found between answers from mothers and fathers.

Table 2 - Parental answers to questions about dependency in MZ and DZ twins (% values)

| Questions | | Very often | | Rather much | | A little | | Not at all | | No answer | |
|--|---|------------|----|-------------|----|----------|----|------------|----|-----------|----|
| | | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ |
| Are the twins dependent upon each other? | M | 25 | 22 | 44 | 35 | 31 | 30 | | 13 | | |
| | F | 44 | 13 | 28 | 49 | 16 | 33 | 8 | 5 | | 4 |
| How often are the twins together? | M | 40 | 30 | 48 | 30 | 12 | 22 | | 13 | | 5 |
| | F | 68 | 22 | 16 | 51 | 16 | 21 | | 6 | | |

Twins' Choices

The parents have also been asked whether they think their twins make similar choices, when they are free to do so. Table 3 shows parental answers to this question by twin sex and zygosity.

It can be seen that MZ twin girls, according to parental answers, tend to make similar choices, while this is more unusual for MZ twin boys. For the DZ pairs there is an opposite trend, so that the boys tend to choose more similarly than the girls. A comparison of answers from mothers and fathers shows that mothers tend to perceive more similarity than fathers in the twins' choices.

Table 3 - Parental answers to the question "If the twins have a free choice, will they then choose alike?" (% values)

| Sex | Very often | | Often | | Sometimes | | Seldom | | Very seldom or never | |
|-------|------------|----|-------|----|-----------|----|--------|----|----------------------|----|
| | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ | MZ | DZ |
| Boys | 19 | 9 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 26 | 15 | 13 | 6 | 22 |
| Girls | 36 | | 44 | 19 | 16 | 42 | 4 | 33 | | 6 |

Parental Influence

Parents of twins have been asked whether they influence their children to become dissimilar. Table 4 illustrates the answers to this question.

Table 4 - Parental answers to the question "Do you influence your twins to become dissimilar?" (% values)

| Zygoty | Very often or always | Often | Sometimes | Seldom | Very seldom or never |
|--------|----------------------|-------|-----------|--------|----------------------|
| MZ | 5 | 7 | 18 | 16 | 54 |
| DZ | 9 | 8 | 6 | 22 | 55 |

More than 50% of parents say that they are not influencing their twins to become less similar. This is irrespective of the zygosity of the twins. Looking at mothers and fathers separately, there is a tendency for mothers to interfere more than fathers.

When asked if they influence their twins to dress differently, practically all parents (more than 80%) say that they do not interfere. This is true for all parents, both of MZ twins (84%) and of DZ twins (88%).

There is a tendency for parents of MZ twins to be less positive toward twin birth. Especially the mothers say that of course there are positive things but that it has also been very laborious. One reason for this seems to be that there have been more health problems with MZ than DZ twins during and after birth.

DISCUSSION

A main purpose of this study has been to investigate the parents' of twins perceptions of dependency and similarity in their twin children. It has also been of interest to find out whether parents deliberately try to encourage dissimilarity and individuality in their twins.

The results show that MZ twins, according to parental opinion, are more dependent upon each other and spend more time together than DZ twins. Parents also seem to think that this is especially evident for female pairs. As part of a more general sex role pattern, pair relations among girls tend to be more frequent than among boys. On the other hand, boys spend more time playing in larger groups where one or both twins can take part.

When the twins have a free choice, parents also think that MZ twins, particularly girls, tend to choose similarly. It could perhaps be expected that MZ twins make similar choices if they are free to do so. This would mean, however, that if parents don't interfere, identical twins will tend to become even more similar over time and that this trend could be more evident for girls than for boys. This is also what has been found in previous longitudinal twin studies [4].

When parents are asked if they interfere and try to influence their children to become more dissimilar, very few parents say that they deliberately do that. There is no difference between the answers from parents of MZ and DZ twins. Cohen et al [3] report consistent results in a study of parental perceptions of relations with their twin children. They conclude that "parents described MZ children as much

more similar than DZ children but acted similarly with children in both types of twinships."

Parents seem to be aware of the importance to treat their twin children as two separate individuals. Especially for MZ twins, this could greatly facilitate identity differentiation during puberty. In spite of this, there seem to be difficulties to realize these intentions in practice. Of course, it is easier for the parents to let the twins have their own way, and it probably requires a deliberate strategy in the way of upbringing to enhance small differences in the twins and consistently treat them as separate individuals.

There is also a tendency for MZ parents to experience more problems with having twins, presumably because of more frequent health problems. One father expressed this in a drastic and humorous way: "Children premature by three weeks. Underweight. The smallest girl did not eat enough in spite of 12 feedings every twentyfour hours, very slow weight gain. Parents exhausted! Oldest girl allergic to milk after completed breast feeding. Parents almost knocked out! Problems gradually smaller. All survived!"

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