

Strength in Numbers

By Terri Sapienza
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An organizer by nature and profession, Rachel Rosenthal Strisik's impulse toward order hit full throttle when she learned she was pregnant with twins.

Right away she sought out a local support group and started networking with mothers who had twins or triplets. At her Bethesda home, she created folders for medical bills and parenting articles. She set up areas upstairs and down to diaper and dress the babies. She baked and froze lasagnas and chicken casseroles for those days when she was sure to be too harried for cooking.

Her operating theory: "You need to bring order to the chaos before it happens."

For most parents, hearing that they are having multiples is "joy mixed with terror mixed with moments of calm," says Patricia Malmstrom, co-author of "The Art of Parenting Twins" and director of Twin Services Consulting, a support Web site for parents with multiples. After absorbing the news, Malmstrom says, many parents-to-be find themselves "scrambling to find balance in the midst of a very unstable feeling."

Much of that scrambling centers on how to keep a household running smoothly -- or just running -- with two, three or more babies crying at once.

Multiple births are increasingly common in this country. Between 1980 and 2005, the rate of twin births almost doubled, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Triplet and higher-order multiple births more than quadrupled. Experts say the jump can be attributed to more women delaying childbirth: After the age of 35, women have an increased chance of conceiving multiples, especially if they are undergoing fertility therapies.

This trend complicates matters on the home front: Women expecting multiples are often confined to bed before delivery and may have a longer recovery afterward, which can add to a general unraveling of housekeeping.

Rosenthal Strisik, 30, runs Rosey's Urban Style, a personal organizing and shopping service, so she was already skilled at planning. And since the arrival of identical twins Ellie and Marin in January -- the first children for Rosenthal Strisik and her husband, Marshall Strisik Schattner -- she says she has also learned to be flexible. Because her girls are different weights and require different amounts of food, she started labeling bottles with their initials. She makes a habit of keeping Ellie on the left and Marin on the right during feedings, naps and playtime so friends and relatives can tell who's who.

"Get your systems in place as early as possible," she says. "But know that the babies will change your system. Things are constantly changing."

Annie Elliott, 37, is a Washington designer and first-time mother of 3-year-old twin girls.

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They require flexibility: Ellie, left, and Marin Strisik. (Len Spoden - for The Washington Post)

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When she learned she was expecting, she put up plenty of open shelving in the nursery and hung a clear plastic shoe holder on the wall next to the changing table so onesies and wipes were nearby and visible. "You have to have everything at your fingertips," she says. "Wrestling a baby in and out of clothing is more stressful when you have another baby crying."

She devoted an entire shelf -- not just a charming little basket -- to diapers. ("Really stock up. You won't believe how fast you go through things.") And she color-coded the girls' clothing to help others tell them apart: red for Ruthie, green for Georgie.

Becky DeStefanis, 34, and John Spirtas, 33, parents of 2-year-old triplets, have some counterintuitive advice for couples expecting multiples: Resist the impulse to move to a bigger house right away.

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