

# Identifying the effects of children on family relationships

Identificação dos efeitos dos filhos nas relações familiares

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## Keywords

Parent-child relations; Primary care nursing; Maternal-child nursing; Family relationships; Twins

## Descritores

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To identify the effects that children have on family relationships and identify the ranking of concerns of parents with and without twin children.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was developed with 265 parents with small children, of which 143 had twin children. The instruments used for data collection were: the Family Impact Questionnaire and the Parent Concerns Questionnaire.

**Results:** The most important parenting concerns in both groups were: "Lack of sleep and tiredness"; "Financially providing for the family"; "Increased chores and housework"; "Individual stress about roles and responsibilities." The greatest impact felt by the family was in respect to finances and this value was significantly higher in families with twin children.

**Conclusion:** Nursing professionals must care for the main difficulties perceived by parents by promoting strategies and fostering resource mobilization.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Identificar os efeitos que os filhos têm nas relações familiares e identificar a priorização de preocupações dos pais com e sem filhos gêmeos.

**Métodos:** Estudo transversal com 265 pais com filhos menores, dos quais 143 com filhos gêmeos. Os instrumentos de coleta de dados: escala de impacto familiar de um filho; lista de preocupações parentais.

**Resultados:** As preocupações parentais priorizadas por ambos os grupos de participantes foram: "Falta de horas de sono e cansaço"; "Necessidades econômicas da família"; "Aumento das tarefas domésticas"; "Stresse individual com os papéis e com as responsabilidades". O impacto familiar dos filhos é maior na dimensão financeira, sendo que esse valor é significativamente maior nas famílias com gêmeos.

**Conclusão:** Os profissionais de enfermagem devem atender as principais dificuldades percebidas pelos pais promovendo estratégias e favorecendo a mobilização dos seus recursos.

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## Introduction

Families experience significant changes when couples transition into parenthood. The family must now articulate personal, marital, social and professional needs with parenting ones.<sup>(1)</sup>

When deciding to have children, families must consider the implications and impacts of this change on their lives, and such a decision should be shared and negotiated by the couple.

Over the last few decades, Portugal has observed a reduction in the number of children per family. This change in birth rate is a transversal reality present in several countries. On one hand, reasons given for having a child are linked to being and feeling, such as "Seeing the children grow and develop" and "Personal achievement." On the other hand, reasons not to have children are related to possessions and capacity, which are "Financial costs associated with having children" and "Difficulty finding a job." In Portugal, these impediments of practical nature could be associated to the economic crisis that the country has been immersed in over the last few years. However, it also originates from the conflict between personal projects and the demands associated to parenthood. Women have taken on roles of equality with men outside the home, considering that a great percentage of Portuguese women practice a professional activity.

The demands of the parent role require adjustments and quite frequently bring about losses in the other subsystems. In this sense, studies have suggested that becoming a parent is associated with decreased marital satisfaction,<sup>(1)</sup> which is more prevalent among women.<sup>(2)</sup> The difference between family roles in terms of gender is perceived by women as unfair, although some women report more positive attitudes towards domestic activities and child care and feel more responsible for them than men do.<sup>(3,4)</sup>

Family relationships are based on reciprocity and are multi-determined. The child's characteristics and a secure attachment with the parents are aspects that influence marital satisfaction, which is also influenced by the trust each partner feels in the other and time spent together as a couple.<sup>(1,2,4)</sup> The parents' professional lives also

bring consequences to the family, for the physical and mental fatigue related to work influences performance of family chores, leading to lack of enthusiasm and irritability.<sup>(5)</sup>

The demands of the parent role is even greater with twin children, and in this sense, research indicates that mothers of twins report difficult experiences more frequently, and present higher levels of stress and symptoms of depression.<sup>(6-8)</sup> In families with twins, role renegotiation and work reorganization take on particular relevance for the couple, for taking care of two or more children of the same age and with the same needs becomes a taxing job that is almost impossible for one person to accomplish alone. The demands of twin children can bring multiple vulnerabilities and difficulties to the families, on the level of daily management, as well as increasing the family's financial needs and making it challenging to have a social life.<sup>(8,9)</sup> When families are cared for within a reductionist view, centred on fragmentation of care, this leads to a lack of comprehensiveness which contributes to a more difficult parenting experience. It is important to care for these families within an efficient, comprehensive and longitudinal framework.<sup>(10)</sup>

The objective of this study is to identify the effects that children have on family relationships and identify the ranking of parenting concerns of families with and without twins.

## Methods

This is study an exploratory descriptive cross-sectional study conducted in a health centre of Northern Portugal, between September and December 2012. The sample consisted of two groups. One comprised twin parents, who were selected through the registration list at the health centres. The other group consisted of parents without twins, and they were invited to participate upon showing up at the health centre for their child's appointment during the period of time mentioned above. A total of 400 parents were invited to join the study, 200 of which had twins. Out of these, 282 turned in the instruments, and 17 questionnaires were excluded

for being only partially completed. Nonprobability convenience sampling was used, and the sample group consisted of 265 families with small children, of which 143 had twins.

The instrument used for data collection was a self-administered questionnaire divided into three sections: sociodemographic characteristics: age, gender, marital status, family composition, number and age of children and the existence of twins; and the Parent Concerns Questionnaire<sup>(11)</sup> consisting of 12 possible concerns. Of these twelve items, participants selected a maximum of 5 that they identified with, and a maximum of 5 they perceived the mother/father of their children to feel. They also answered the Family Impact Questionnaire.

The Family Impact Questionnaire assesses the impact that children have on the family's social, marital/parental, and financial levels, as well as on their sense of accomplishment and frustration with parenting. Translated and validated for Portugal, its conceptual structure is organized into five dimensions of family life: "Impact on social life," which takes into account the challenges which having children brings to holding and participating in social activities; "Impact on financial life," related to the costs associated with the child; "Impact on marital relationship" refers to the dynamics and support between the couple, including how the parenting is shared; "Positive feelings about parenting," evaluates the satisfaction that people feel with their children and "Negative feelings about parenting," regards the frustrations felt with the parenthood experience.

Each dimension consists of two or more items, totalling 29 items expressed in a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The last item evaluates how positive the parents' experiences are when compared to that of other parents with children of the same age. It is also answered on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (much less positive) to 7 (much more positive). Possible values varied from 0 to 100, being that the maximum value is associated to the most positive impact.

The first phase consisted of analysing the scale's conceptual structure, via factor analy-

sis. Thus, its main components were analyzed with varimax rotation and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value normalization. The value obtained was 0.82, which allowed to conduct factor analysis. According to the author's recommendations, first the value of items whose response were negative was inverted, i.e., items 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24 and 26.

The result of our factor analysis was coherent with that of the original scale. The scale's reliability was evaluated through Cronbach's Alpha and the following values were obtained: 0.54, for the "Impact on marital life" dimension, however, when item 11 was eliminated, this value increased to 0.78\*; 0.88 for "Impact on social life"; 0.78 for "Impact on financial life"; 0.63 for "Negative feelings about parenting"; 0.58 for "Positive feelings about parenting". Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale comprising 29 items was 0.83. When compared to the scale validated for Portugal, the "Impact on marital life" and "Positive feelings about parenting" dimensions presented lower reliability values.

Data were collected with the help of nurses from the family health units of the Health Centres Groups, which were contacted before contacting the participants.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program, version 21.0, was used for statistical treatment. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used according to the nature of the variables and the objective of the study. The statistical significance of the correlations found was set at 0.05.

The development of this study complied with national and international ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

## Results

### Sample characteristics

The great majority of participants were women (68.5%). Education levels were similar for both groups, with a prevalence of 12 years or more of education. There was, however, a great dispersion among the three groups. Most had two children,

were married and lived with their spouse and children (Table 1).

The distribution of the ages of the oldest child was positively irregular, which means that there was a prevalence of younger ages. The mean age was 8.4 years.

The group of parents with twin children has similar sociodemographic characteristics to that of the group of parents without twins, with exception to the number of children, for parents of twins have significantly more children  $t(229) = 10.45$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ .

**Table 1.** Parental characteristics

Parental characteristics	Parents	Parents of twins	p-value
Women	72.8	63.6	Ns
Mean age (Min-Max)	37.1(24-53)	36.3(22-54)	Ns
Education level			
≤ 9 years	33.9	28.2	Ns
10-12 years	28.2	30.0	
>12 anos	37.9	41.8	
Marital Status			
Married	89.6	90.0	Ns
Co-habitation	5.6	8.2	
Divorced	4.0	1.8	
Single	0.8	0.0	
Number of children			
1	41.9	0.0	0.0001
2	51.6	58.2	
3	6.5	38.2	
4	0.0	3.6	
Lives with			
Spouse and children	89.5	93.6	Ns
Spouse, children and parents	3.7	2.4	
Spouse, children and in-laws	2.4	0.9	
Children	4.8	0.9	
Children and parents	0.8	0.9	

## Parental concerns

The parental concerns prioritized by both groups were: “Lack of sleep and tiredness”; “Financially providing for the family”; “Increased chores and housework”; “Individual stress about roles and responsibilities.” Parents of twin children also reported “Loss of free time for self and for social activities” while parents without twin children included “Unpredictable shifts in mood and anxiety” as one of the five main parental concerns. The perception of their own feelings was similar to how they perceived that of their spouses (Table 2).

In order to assess any significant differences between the groups of parents, the chi-square test was applied on each parental concern. The results suggest that “Decline in sexual interest” is the most relevant concern for parents with twin children. “Individual stress about roles and responsibilities” and “Unpredictable shifts in mood and anxiety” were more relevant for parents with no twin children. Regarding the other parental concerns, no significant differences were observed between groups.

## The family impact of children

Results of the descriptive analysis per dimension and of the total sample were as follows, expressed in mean values in descending order: Positive feelings about parenting 86.18; Impact on social life 79.34; Impact on marital life 65.80; Negative feelings about parenting 49.91; Impact on financial life 24.82 and the total scale 61.21.

Upon comparing the sample of parents with twin children and those without, statistically significant differences were observed only for “Impact on financial life”, yet highly significant ( $t(263) = 2.07$ ;  $p = 0.04$ ). The first group displayed higher negative impact on financial life ( $M = 22.79$ ;  $SD = 18.03$ ) with respect to parents without twin children ( $M = 27.19$ ;  $SD = 16.34$ ).

When analysing the sociodemographic variables and the family impact of children, statistically significant differences were identified for parents with twin children in the “Impact on financial life” dimension, in function of: education level ( $F(4.138) = 3.58$ ;  $p = 0.008$ ). These differences were found between individuals who had completed elementary school compared to those who had finished high school, being that the latter presented a more negative impact. The age of the oldest child also presented a weak, yet significant, negative correlation ( $r = -0.21$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ). This means that, the older the child, the more financial limitations are felt. A significant difference was also verified in “Impact on social life” in function of the parents’ age ( $F(2.107) = 4.00$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ). Individuals from the mean age group presented a more positive perspective on the impact of children on their social life than

**Table 2.** Ranking of parental concerns in percentages

Concerns	My concerns		Concerns of the mother/ father of my child	
	Twins	No twins	Twins	No twins
Lack of sleep and tiredness	70.9	72.8	55.5	60.8
Increased chores and housework	70.9	59.2	55.5	52.8
Decline in sexual interest	29.1	16.8	27.3	20.8
Financially providing for the family	70.0	64.8	60.0	56.8
Personal doubts about parental competence or skills	29.1	38.4	26.4	36.0
Intrusive in-laws	10.9	12.0	9.1	12.0
Couple disagreements about roles	18.2	22.4	20.0	29.6
Individual stress about roles and responsibilities	51.8	65.6	34.5	49.6
Change in work situation	23.6	28.8	14.5	24.8
Loss of free time for self and for social activities	49.1	37.6	41.8	36.8
Changes in body figure	19.1	24.8	10.9	9.6
Unpredictable shifts in mood and anxiety	31.8	56.0	24.5	39.2

the older parents. The age of twin children presented a highly significant statistical correlation ( $r = 0.26$ ;  $p = 0.006$ ) with impact on social life, being that parents with older children had better social lives.

Among parents without twin children, a weak negative correlation was found, yet highly significant, with negative feelings about parenting ( $r = -0.26$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ), being that the parents of older children had more negative feelings about parenting.

## Discussion

The limitations of this study relate to its cross-sectional design, which does not allow the establishment of causal relations. Furthermore, the intentional sample is not representative of the population.

The results of the present study contribute towards more evidence-based interventions with families of small children, and more specifically, twin children. Thus, nursing professionals can create more adequate intervention plans, centred on parents' main concerns.

Participants reported the same main parental concerns when considering their own and that of their spouses. This phenomenon is corroborated by the idea that the couple's perceptions are mutually influenced.<sup>(12)</sup>

Economic issues, work overload and lack of sleep and the responsibility of roles were ranked as the main concerns, corroborating the results of a study conducted in Portugal. This study found that financial difficulties and the challenges of juggling professional life with the family needs, especially those of the children, are at the heart of deciding whether or not to have children.

Among the parent's main concerns, a connection was observed between lack of sleep, tiredness and work overload, leading to a sensation of parental exhaustion. The latter is a variable that greatly influences levels of parenting stress.<sup>(13)</sup> The study also identified other variables, such as professional activity, and number of children, which can increase parenting stress, which are closely related to tiredness and work overload.<sup>(14)</sup> Parenting stress was also one of the main causes of depressive symptoms among mothers of multiples.<sup>(8)</sup>

Lack of sleep and tiredness were substantially mentioned by parents, regardless of having twin children. Another study presented results which suggest that the smaller the child, the more relevant this concern. It also found that as the child grows older, it gradually decreases in importance.<sup>(15)</sup>

Financial concerns were prioritized by both groups of parents, but were more significant for parents of twins. The number of children truly increases financial needs and these reflect on family life and on shared parenting.<sup>(16)</sup> The significance of financial impact was coherent with

this reality and was higher among parents with twin children.

Such financial concerns were more acutely felt by families with adolescent children, a finding corroborated by the data presented in a report by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM). This report indicated that the costs of raising a child increase progressively, reaching a peak at the end of adolescence.<sup>(17)</sup>

The perception of personal and family needs depended greatly on the socioeconomic and cultural context. Parents who had completed high school considered financial overload to be greater when compared to parents who had only completed elementary school. This finding corroborates that of other studies, suggesting that lower-income families, which commonly present lower education levels, have fewer costs with their children than those with higher incomes.<sup>(17)</sup>

On the other hand, these results indicated that the parents' age conditioned their perception of the impact of twin children on the family's social life. In other words, the older the parents, the lower this impact. This finding agrees with the opinions of other authors who consider that, as a whole, parenthood is perceived as less difficult by those who became parents later in life.<sup>(18)</sup>

Both groups reported very positive impacts of their children on family life when compared to other families. After becoming parents, the child's central role in the family became preeminent, bringing consequences to the parents' personal and marital life. Routines are changed and there is less time available for friends and leisure.<sup>(18)</sup>

## Conclusion

The impacts of children on family relations were: negative regarding financial impact, which was more significant among families with twin children and positive regarding impact on social life. Both positive and negative feelings about parenting were emphasized, for both were valued and strongly perceived. The main parental concerns were very

similar between groups and are related essentially to financial issues, as well as work issues and parental role responsibility.

## Collaborations

Andrade LMC; Martins MMFPS; Angelo M; Santos ATVMF and Martini JG contributed with the project conception, data analysis and interpretation, drafting of the article, critical review of its intellectual content and final approval of the version to be published.

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