



Joni-Lee James must face the everyday challenges of working while raising her twin 17-month-old daughters, Jolene and Henley, by herself.

Double trouble

Parents of twins or triplets need to be single-minded when it comes to feeding, changing and settling their babies – especially when they must cope alone

WORDS **GRACE HEATHCOTE** PHOTOGRAPHY **LUKE BOWDEN & MATTHEW FARRELL**

As any parent of twins, triplets or other “multiples” and they will tell you that pushing a tractor-sized pram in public invites questions and comments from passers-by – “Double trouble!” “Are they identical?” “Wow, how do you cope?” People are fascinated by multiples and what it’s like to raise them. A recent YouTube video of twin boys babbling together in animated conversation rocketed to fame, notching up a staggering 184 million views.

The relative scarcity of twins and triplets compared with “singletons” only elevates the curiosity factor. However, if keen questioners were to inquire further they would discover “multiples” families weather double or triple serves of the milestones most parents dread – sleep deprivation, teething, food fussiness, temper tantrums, seemingly endless winter sniffles and lost days at childcare. These stresses mean the rate of post-natal depression is significantly higher for parents of multiples, with

approximately 20 per cent of mothers of twins and 27 per cent of mothers of triplets suffering from the condition.

Now, imagine coping with all of this as a single parent.

The rate of multiple births in Australia has gradually increased since the 1980s, with roughly one in 65 of all births resulting in twins. Midwife and sleep consultant Libby Hughes says that during her 30 years’ caring for Tasmanian families, she has noticed not only the overall increase in multiple births but a rise in the number of single mothers. She attributes this to the more ready availability of assisted reproductive technologies like IVF and to single parenthood being more socially accepted.

“I always have my heart in my mouth when I farewell parents of multiples from the maternity ward, especially if they are single parents. Having any newborn in the house can be stressful, but having two babies together is really challenging,” Hughes says. “What do you do if one baby is awake two hours after the last feed? Do you feed them and then wake the second twin in

order to keep them feeding together? There are so many things to take into consideration when you have two or more.”

Among the 99 sets of twins born in Tasmania in 2016 were Jolene and Henley, born to 40-year-old Hobart woman Joni-Lee James on her eighth attempt at IVF. After being diagnosed with premature ovarian failure and early menopause, James realised IVF would be her only option of conceiving.

Facing parenthood alone was never a concern for this fiercely independent woman who had dreamt of being a mother since childhood. To fund a \$60,000 IVF journey that she describes as “emotionally and physically painful”, James accessed her super-annuation and travelled repeatedly to her chosen fertility specialist in Queensland.

For three weeks after they were born in Hobart Jolene and Henley remained in the Special Care Unit of the hospital until they were strong enough to suckle. Once home, James found the newborn stage brutal, had trouble holding two tiny babies

to breastfeed at once, and says that for weeks she "lived off less than an hour's sleep a day". The help of her mother and close-knit group of friends, as well as an online network of other women sharing similar experiences, was her saving grace.

As the sole wage earner, James had to return to work when her children were four months old and she says that on "my first day back at work I cried all morning".

An unexpected redundancy led to a new position as registrar with a Tasmanian regulatory body, which allows her the flexibility to work from home and structure her day around the needs of her children. However, this often means working late into the evenings and during nap times, leaving her with little time for herself. While she struggles to keep up with the constant demands of work and domestic chores, James emphasises raising her children is the easy part.

"Even 18 months on I still appreciate every moment with my girls because I fought so hard for them."

Launceston mum Ayece Singline was already raising six-year-old Hayley when she welcomed sons Declan and Lachlan in 2012 at the age of 24. Her partner left a few months before the boys were born and while Singline was daunted at the prospect of raising three young children on her own, she says matter-of-factly "you've just got to deal with what you've been given".

Predicting she would struggle to spend all day on her feet, Singline quit her hospitality job halfway through her pregnancy. This proved fortuitous when she developed pelvic separation, a common condition in twin pregnancies, and found walking and getting into her car difficult. Without a partner, she ploughed through everyday tasks like taking her daughter to school and carrying groceries on her own, but confesses it "got slower".

After the twins were born, Singline found it impossible to offer her children a great deal of one-on-one attention and when asked what she found most challenging, she says: "When they were both crying. You have one set of arms, so who do you console first?" Family stepped in for occasional babysitting help, but Singline's "just deal with it" attitude helped her to manage largely on her own.

Many of her pre-twin friends drifted away and Singline spent longs periods without other adult company, unable to get out of



Mother of two sets of twins, Kerri-Louise Hooper with her partner, Steve Wiggins and their three-month-old babies Quinn and Austin Wiggins, flanked by Kerri-Louise's five-year-old twins Luca and Shiloh.

the house for days on end. To ward off isolation, she relied on playgroups and a Tasmanian Multiple Birth Association pram-walking group as motivation to get going. With her boys now six, Singline has graduated from the intense years of parenting toddlers but laughs that the challenges continue. One twin has consistently reached his milestones first - sitting, walking, talking - and has developed a dominant personality that often overshadows his brother. As a result, Singline has had to go to great lengths to ensure her attention is divided evenly and not monopolised by the more demanding twin.

This year when Declan and Lachlan started school Singline wrestled with whether to split her sons into separate classes or keep them together. Teachers provided an important sounding board and the twins have been separated. While the boys are not yet used to the arrangement, Singline is confident the space will help them to learn to be their own people.

MATHEW FARRELL

Kerri-Louise Hooper has no family history of twins, so was not a likely candidate to have more than one set. After raising her first twins from ages two on her own, the 34-year-old real estate agent admits she was frightened to discover she was expecting a second set with her new partner Steve Wiggins.

"It was like being thrown back into my worst nightmare because it was hard having twins - not just physically carrying them, but also the emotional toll," she says.

Now mum to five-year-olds Luca and Shiloh and three-month-old boys Austin and Quinn, she confesses although she is severely sleep-deprived she feels lucky. This positivity wavers when describing her solo years, though, including having to support herself by working into the early hours of the morning after her children were in bed.

"Twins are like having the extreme version of everything, it's a double shot," she says. An outing to the hardware store proved this when the three-year-olds disappeared in opposite directions. The memory still makes Hooper anxious.

"Do you know how many knives and things there are to worry about in a hardware store?"

Surviving the experience qualifies Hooper to offer tried-and-tested advice to other single parents of multiples. "Foster a network of family and friends to call on", she says, "and use it!"

She picks which battles to pursue and which to ignore, such as allowing her children to shred a box of tissues while she enjoys a cuppa in peace.

Friends and family were encouraged to take one of the older twins on a play date occasionally so Hooper could enjoy one-on-one time with the other. Ultimately, though, she says: "When life gets too serious and it all feels too hard, forget what 'needs' to be done and just have fun with your children - wrestle, be silly, have a water fight. It's those moments of you letting go that they'll remember forever."

Multiple Birth Awareness Week runs from tomorrow until March 18, with the theme of "Strength in Numbers". The Tasmanian Multiple Birth Association will hold events during this week. For more information, go to tasmba.org.au or visit Australian Multiple Birth Association at amba.org.au

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