Research conducted by Shannen Robson and Ken Smith of the University of Utah suggests that **mothers of twins are actually healthier than mothers of singletons.** According to Dr. Robson and Dr. Smith, twins may be a measure of their mother’s durability.

Throughout their lives, women are challenged to allocate resources to both reproduction and the maintenance of their overall health. In the Utah researchers’ view, a mother of twins appears to have successfully divided her resources in such a way that she is not only more reproductively successful but also healthier than her singleton-bearing counterparts.

Upon examination of Utah’s Pedigree and Population Resource, a database that yielded 4,600 mothers born between the years of 1807 and 1899 who had given birth to twins, the researchers’ viewpoint was confirmed. Not only did mothers of twins tend to have more children than mothers of singletons, but they also had a greater number of their children survive to maturity, had shorter intervals between births, and gave birth to their last child at an older age. Moreover, they lived longer than mother’s of singletons. **We think all mothers of twins are Supermoms!**

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Autumn marks a period of transition and goes by all too quickly in Wisconsin. Many twin families sent their twins to college for the first time or saw them off to other new adventures. At the other end of the age spectrum, families are cheering on their young twins at soccer tournaments, little league. Whatever your next chapter was this fall, it likely entailed feelings of anticipation and shopping for new shoes. The Twin Research Program also experienced a transition as we closed our 20th year of data collection, 15 years in our statewide studies. We are preparing to launch several new lines of research in the coming months. Some families who participated in our GEO project when their twins were 6 months – 3 years old will be invited back for a new follow-up. We are also beginning a new study of infant development and will follow a new cohort of babies and families during the first two years of life. These new studies will be lead by myself and some of my colleagues at UW-Madison as part of a new Conte Center investigating biological and behavioral origins of anxiety. We look forward to talking with you and wish you and your family a wonderful school year!

With gratitude,

Hill

Fun Facts

Up to 22% of twins are left-handed. In the general populace, only 10% are left-handed.

The nine banded armadillo has identical quadruplets as the rule, not the exception.

Research Update

Individuality and Emotional Development
Becky Brooker, PhD.

Parents of multiples know first-hand that even genetically identical children can often be very different. Nonetheless, child development is often discussed as a “one-size-fits-all” model. This model may overlook the vast differences in children’s physical, emotional, and behavioral development. The Wisconsin Twin Research Program’s rich data offer a unique perspective on early development and challenges the standard “one-size-fits-all” model. With the generous research participation of hundreds of twins across infancy and toddlerhood, we observed strong evidence for multiple – rather than one – commonly-occurring pathways of emotional development. For instance, we observed multiple trajectories of anger development between 6 and 12 months of age. The first pattern, which was observed in the majority of infants, was an increase in anger over time, which may be adaptive as it motivates mastering new challenges as children gain independence. The second pattern observed was infants with stably high levels of anger from 6-12 month of age. The third pattern observed was infants with stably low levels of anger.

We also found evidence for four different pathways of fear development across infancy and toddlerhood. Between 6 and 36 months of age, two groups of children showed the expected increase in fear of strangers, believed to promote a tendency to stay near parents as infants become mobile; one group showed a more rapid increase in stranger fear. A third group of children showed levels of stranger fear that were high during infancy, but decreased over time. A final group showed high levels of stranger fear across all ages. Children who remained high in stranger fear across infancy and toddlerhood showed more fear and withdrawal behaviors in our laboratory at age 3 years relative to the large group of children who showed increased fear over time. Prolonged excessive levels of fear and withdrawal may denote an early risk for child anxiety problems. Identifying risk and protective factors for anxiety is a central theme of our studies. For example, our work also suggested that high levels of stress reactivity and negative affect in parents were linked to higher stranger fear in infants over time. Promoting effective stress reduction techniques such as increasing social support for new parents and/or intentionally structuring time for positive interactions between parents and children may minimize risk for anxiety in young children.

We recognize emotional individuality as valuable to society. As individuals approach adulthood, they seek roles that fit their natural styles. Some individuals will be drawn to fields like accounting or actuary science for insurance companies. Others will be drawn to roles that require low fear, like EMTs or pilots. These examples illustrate the importance of individual differences to fill all roles in society.

Twin research allows closer investigation of emotional individuality. We observed that monozygotic twins more often show the same developmental trajectories for early fear than fraternal (dizygotic) twins. Patterns of fear development are both heritable and impacted by early environment. A select group of families will be invited for an exciting follow-up to examine links between early development and adolescence. The goal of the new study is to learn more about brain mechanisms involved in individuality. Twins allow a very unique perspective for these exciting research questions.

Sensory Over-Responsivity

A growing theme of our research concerns sensory experiences. A small subset of both children and adults experience unusually intense, even painful, responses to everyday sensory stimuli that most people experience as innocuous. For example, over-responsive children might find typical childhood play too loud and may be unable to engage in age-appropriate interactions in a school lunchroom or playground. Some children are bothered by different food textures. A growing body of research is interested in identifying the nature of sensory over-responsivity (SOR). It has been a wonderful opportunity to bring together the collective expertise from a wide range of disciplines to learn more about this phenomenon. Lucy Miller, Ph.D., OTR, is the founder of the first comprehensive research program nationwide and organized a scientific working group with researchers from all over the country to begin to address important questions about SOR with rigorous scientific methods. Several of our surveys have asked about tactile and auditory SOR during toddlerhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. We also asked parents to report about their own sensory experiences. With the support of the Wallace Research Foundation over the past several years, we have published a number of papers that examined early SOR, distinctiveness of SOR from other symptoms, and prenatal and temperamental risk factors. We are currently examining the stability of SOR over time. To learn more, visit http://www.spdfoundation.net/index.html. Lucy Miller also has two books on this topic: Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder and No Longer A SECRET: Unique Common Sense Strategies for Children with Sensory or Motor Challenges.

Contact Info Request

Wisconsin Twins
Wisconsin Twins are an exciting research project. With the generosity of parents and children all over Wisconsin, we have a unique perspective to offer the scientific community.

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Enjoy your twins!