

Joan A. Friedman, PhD



Teen Twins: A Mismatch on Parenting Teenage Twins

Working with twins of all ages and their families for many years, I have encountered a phenomenon that needs to be addressed and confronted. Parents seem clueless and surprised to find out how much twins begin to resent or be annoyed by their twinship as they get older. Many parents seem to be in utter denial about these circumstances. They do not stop to consider that the twinship might be a source of stress or conflict because “parents of twins” feel that being a twin makes you special and unique for life. While this belief is certainly true on many levels, the twin relationship must be viewed with a bit more realism and ambiguity. As with all intimate relationships, there are elements of love and hate that warrant reflection and understanding.

Many parents whom I have advised over the years will tell me about how one twin has gained weight or the other has lost considerable weight. Parents will acknowledge that the rivalry and competitiveness have become fierce. Others relate that they insist the more sociable twin include her brother or sister in her activities because the parents cannot tolerate how the other twin feels excluded or rejected. A young adult twin told me that the most difficult part of her twinship involved her mother making her feel bad and guilty for wanting to do things without her sister and to make her own friends.

Most parents would not ever consider making these demands upon their different age children. Nevertheless, somehow the notion of twinship makes parents feel uncomfortable or unforgiving if one twin wants to strike out on her own and be separate and away from her sibling. Often parents mistakenly assume that these needs for separateness will violate or undo the twin bond. In fact, the irony is that if parents do NOT allow the twins to have separate experiences away from each other, they unwittingly will create an emotional atmosphere of resentment, retaliation, and alienation.

An eighteen-year-old identical twin girl who I worked with expressed her disappointment and anger that her parents could not accept or understand her need to separate from her twin sister. In contrast to her “good girl” twin sister, she began to dress provocatively, hang out with a fast crowd, experiment with drugs and alcohol, and get involved in destructive sexual encounters. In retrospect, she realized that much of this “acting out” behavior was in response to feeling so unsupported and misunderstood by her parents, who were not able to appreciate her need for autonomy and a sense of her own uniqueness. She felt angry that she was made to feel guilty and bad for not wanting to take care of her sister. Indeed, it is not a twin’s job to make sure that her sibling is happy and well-adjusted. These are parental responsibilities, not a twin’s burden.

I have often advised parents to place their twins in separate schools when necessary so that the age appropriate need for being known as a person in his or her own right is appreciated and nurtured. The outcomes have been positive and healthy for everyone involved. Instead of viewing this action as drastic, parents of twins need to stop denying that adolescent twins have exaggerated emotional needs for autonomy

given the fact that their twinship has limited their ability to define themselves as individuals. Attempt to acknowledge this separation as a psychological gift, not a punishment or a parental failure. ▪
