

# twins in school: *tips for a smooth transition*

by dr. joan friedman



Getting back into the school routine after a more relaxed summer timetable can be challenging for both parents and kids. While many moms and dads look forward to having more structured time for their multiples, the school year demands that the whole family gets back into a more rigid schedule --- which has its pluses and minuses. If this school year is the time your multiples are beginning kindergarten, this is an even more exciting and memorable time, which requires a bit more focus and attention to precious emotional details that accompany this momentous developmental milestone.

As many parents of multiples are well aware, different states and even different school districts have varying policies about the placement of multiples. Some have strict regulations about separating them and others will leave it up to the discretion of

the family. So the first order of business is to find out in plenty of time what the school district's policies are so that you can amply prepare yourself and your children --- especially if they have not had opportunities to be separated in the past. It's important to understand that the separation anxiety that some twins might experience is not so much about missing their sibling; rather, it has much more to do with the fact that they are dependent upon one another to feel secure and safe because they spend so much time together. Having their "security blanket" wrested away without explanation or preparation will naturally be traumatic and scary.

With these ideas in mind, I want to share some advice and suggestions to help enjoy and facilitate these back to school experiences.

### *Dress your multiples differently*

If your multiples are in the same or separate classroom, it will be very helpful to dress them differently or have distinguishing characteristics that make each one clearly identifiable, especially with identical twins. Without this distinction, teachers and other children will have a very hard time deciphering who is who. At times, the default position is simply to refer to each child as "the twins". Multiples want and need others to know their

names; after the novelty of the confusion has worn off, many multiples feel frustrated and annoyed that they are not recognized singularly. Help them select non-matching backpacks/lunch containers so that they feel special about their own belongings.

### *Educate teachers about the multiples' connection*

Many educators perceive the twin relationship with preconceived notions and perceptions that cloud their capacities to evaluate each multiple as an individual. My sons' high school counselor always was annoyed with me when I followed up to make sure that Jonny and David were in different classes. She told me that since twins are supposed to be best friends, she did not understand my concerns about my wanting them to have separate experiences. Be vigilant about making sure that the teacher has understanding about your children's different personalities and temperaments and be able to recognize each one by name.

### *Don't introduce yourself as the parent of twins*

Introduce yourself as the mother of Jonny and David, for example --- not the twins. You might be surprised to learn some parents of singletons have issues with twins in general --- not specifically yours. They

believe that twins do not want or need playdates because the twins have each other. They are concerned about having two children over and may not make an effort to get to know you. In the course of the relationship, you can make it clear that your twins would enjoy separate playdates because they are individuals, as well as twins.

### *Watch out for the caretaking syndrome*

It's entirely probable that one twin may have an easier time adjusting to the new school environment. While it is important that they have empathy for one another, it does not mean that the twin who is adjusting more quickly is responsible for helping his sibling feel more comfortable. He or she may not want to be in a caretaking role now that he has the opportunity to experience being on his own. Parenting is an adult's job, not one's twin.

### *Be prepared for the comparisons + disparities*

It is just a matter of time until one child comes home and begins to talk about how he has a friend at school, or how he has made a terrific project, or how great his teacher is, etc. This is a trying but important time for everyone to begin to adjust to a world where things are different, unequal, or unfair, so let them learn it in his or her own way. ♦

**Dr. Joan A. Friedman** is a psychotherapist who has devoted years of her professional career to educating twins and their families about twins' emotional needs. A twin herself and having worked through her own twinship challenges and parented her fraternal twin sons, she is a definitive expert about twin development. She is the author of *Emotionally Healthy Twins: A New Philosophy for Parenting Two Unique Children*. Her second book that is now available, *The Same but Different*, addresses the intricacies of adult twin relationships. Connect with her on **facebook** and **twitter**.

