

Helping parents understand and navigate the twin bond

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All too often, children of multiple births are thought of as a singular unit. They're known as 'the twins' rather than two separate people. Encouraging individuality when raising twins requires a discriminating appreciation for each twin's emotional needs. This article outlines the essential principles that help cultivate a healthy twinship and a harmonious parent-child relationship while still nurturing the unique sibling bond.

Keywords: twin pregnancy, parenting challenges, twins' emotional development, twin bond, individuality, ambivalence, marital adjustment

The core tenet of my philosophy is that parents and professionals need to treat twins as two distinct children who happen to be born at the same time. This perspective goes far beyond the conventional advice to dress twins differently and choose names that don't begin with the same letter of the alphabet. Authentically perceiving and treating twins as two unique children may involve fundamentally changing your mind about what it means to be a twin and adjusting expectations about how twins should interact.

THE TWIN MYSTIQUE

In order to consider a new perspective on how to raise emotionally healthy twins, it's important to think about how twins are romanticized in Western cultures. Stereotypically, most people think of twins as soul mates connected to each other through a kind of sibling extra-sensory perception. Many of us assume that one twin not only knows what the other is thinking and feeling but can also fill in the empty spaces in the other's persona. It is assumed that each feels lost without the other and that they seek to preserve their twosome status even as adults. Non-twins fantasize that in a twin relationship, one twin always knows what the other one wants and needs, and for this reason, it is generally felt that twins are each other's pre-destined partner and confidant.

Each of these assumptions contributes to what I call the 'twin mystique', and it has been around a long time. There is something inherently captivating about the idea of having a double, because it invokes a human longing for an intimate, lifelong companion who thoroughly understands us. With such a companion, we feel we would never be abandoned or alone. People project this longing onto twins and see them as enjoying an idealized, intermingled relationship.

Twins can indeed be lifelong friends, and can fulfill many emotional needs for each other. But if they are expected to fulfill the fantasy of telepathic soul mates who inhabit a mysterious world of their own, they will never be free to develop as separate individuals.

MANAGING MIXED EMOTIONS

Professionals who work with twins moms-to-be should model a measured response to the news. Not every woman will react well to a flippant remark such as 'double trouble'. Being sensitive to each individual's experience is essential. Finding out about a twins pregnancy can elicit a myriad of emotions on the part of the mother and father, some of which they may feel guilty or ashamed about. Even if the parents had anticipated the possibility of twins owing to in vitro procedures or genetic history, learning for certain that they'll be bringing two babies into the world is an emotional jolt. Parents' responses can include shock, ambivalence, anxiety and distress, as well as pride and fulfillment.

If they are first time parents-to-be and have struggled to get pregnant or undergone months - even years - of in vitro treatments, their initial reactions are, of course, elation and triumph. Women feel they finally belong; they are at last entitled to join the most primal and meaningful of sororities: birth mothers. Men who have experienced with their partners the possibility of permanent infertility may feel especially validated and proud about having twins. After trying, failing, and trying again and again to help create a baby, they are now thrilled to be expecting two. Chances are words such as 'grateful', 'blessing', 'ecstatic' and even 'miracle' describe how both feel about the news. Even expectant parents who have not undergone in vitro treatment are generally delighted to find out that they'll be having twins.

However, there are the less-than-joyful, yet very common emotional responses, many of which parents expecting twins tend to keep under wraps. First there is the shock - contemplating the reality of two babies instead of one: being pregnant with them, delivering them, and somehow managing to care for them. Parents worry that they won't be able to handle the physical work of taking care of two babies at once, that they won't be able to give each baby adequate attention or be able to cope financially. If they already have children, they worry about devoting enough time to them once the twins arrive. Women who work outside the home may fear a loss of identity due to the

need to cut back on working hours or put their career on hold. Parents are also concerned about the increased physical risks for the babies and the mother during pregnancy. Common concerns include intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes and needing bed rest or hospitalization during the pregnancy. Concerns about labor and birth include placental abruption, pre-term labor/delivery, cesarean birth, low birth weight and fetal demise/loss. For all of these reasons, expectant parents of twins may secretly wish they were having only one baby and feel guilty for harboring such thoughts.

Tips for professionals to share with expectant parents of twins

- Arrange enough outside help for the first few months of your babies' lives. If a nanny or babysitter is beyond your budget, compile a list of trusted friends, relatives, or neighbors who might be willing to pitch in, even for an hour or two a week.
- Sit down with your spouse and devise a workable plan for each of you to spend alone time with each baby. The more prepared you are ahead of time, the less frazzled you'll be when your babies arrive—and the more benefit your children will derive from the alone time spent with each of you.
- When buying or borrowing necessary baby items, don't forget to include a single buggy so that you can take each baby out separately during your alone times.
- As you get ready to bring two new babies into your family, continue to think about each child as a distinct individual whom you will get to know and cherish as his or her own unique person.

CORE GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING PARENTS OF TWINS

a) Help parents think of the twins as unique individuals

Twins need to be seen and addressed as individual children who will grow up to be individual adults. If parents relate to them as 'twins' rather than as separate beings, the twins will relate to each other and the world as 'twins' because that will be the reality they know. Helping parents to think of their babies as distinct individuals from the moment they are told that they are pregnant with twins will ensure that the babies/children/adults think of themselves as unique. The twins are defined by many more influences than simply their relationship to each other inside or outside the womb. In the first stages of life, the parent-child relationship, not the intrauterine communication between the twins, is the most important aspect of a child's development.

b) Help parents understand that they will have different feelings for each child

Even parents of singletons can feel guilty

about having different feelings for each of their children. Parents of twins tend to feel such guilt more strongly. A core emotional dilemma facing many new parents of twins is feeling more attached to one baby than the other.

However, if we accept that our children are unique, it only makes sense that they will elicit different feelings in us. Feeling impatient with one twin baby and delighted by the other, feeling angry at one two-year-old's wilfulness and relieved that the other plays happily by herself, or even a feeling of having more in common with one pre-teen twin than the other does not mean that parents love one child more than the other. Accepting different feelings in response to each child's behavior and personality acknowledges their uniqueness.

Parents of newborn twins need to understand the challenges of bonding with two babies, and that their relationship to each is fluid and changeable. The healthiest way for parents to negotiate this initial phase of getting to know each of their babies is to be honest and authentic about their feelings. Yet, some parents are so upset by their feelings of favoring one baby over the other that they can't acknowledge or discuss the emotional turmoil they're going through. Many insist that they have no preference, that they love both babies the same. Yet, when parents acknowledge that they prefer one baby over the other for various reasons, they not only unburden themselves of troubling feelings, but they can take whatever steps might be necessary to avert a potential problem. Preferences reveal the distinctions between two babies whose relationship with their parents and whose emerging personalities are unique. Ambivalent feelings about parenting babies are normal and have nothing to do with loving or caring about them.

Tips for professionals to share with parents of twin babies

- Make sure that you provide each baby with experiences apart from his or her twin so that each one has the chance to be an individual.
- Try to avoid comparing one baby's milestone moments to the other's. Each child develops at his or her own pace.
- Use your alone times with each baby to discover each one's unique personality.
- Don't feel guilty about preferring one baby's behavior over the other's. Your preferences don't mean that you love that baby more; your preferences reveal that you perceive your babies as distinct beings.
- Find a peer support group where you can openly discuss the parent-of-twins emotional overload that you're likely to be experiencing.

c) Support parents to have 'alone time' with each child

Every infant requires one-on-one time with his or her parent; it is a basic human need. A child cannot feel known to his parent, and a parent cannot adequately know her child without regular, focused time together which enables the parent to attune to the baby's emotional and physical communications.

As a baby experiences being responded to again and again, a secure attachment develops. He comes to expect that he will be appropriately nurtured when he is hungry or tired, happy or excited. Enabling him to get to know his parent - and feel known by her - lays the foundation for his sense of who he is in relation to the world. The need for alone time with parents does not end at infancy. Parents of twins need to offer each child regular one-on-one time throughout their childhood.

Even when parents of twins believe wholeheartedly in the importance of nurturing their children's individual identities, and even though they may long for exclusive time with their babies beyond basic care-taking duties, there can be a certain resistance to undertaking the alone time strategy. There are several reasons for this. First of all, a parent's need to prove their parental competence may inhibit them from spending time alone with each child. There may be the sense that, 'I desperately wanted these babies and I'm determined to show that I can handle caring for both of them at the same time'. Another factor is a parent's concern about bonding equally with each baby. Although parents may acknowledge that it's natural to have different responses to their babies' distinct temperaments and demands, they may nonetheless worry that if they spend time alone with each child, they might bond with one more than the other and thus be guilty of 'unequal' treatment. Finally, the 'twin mystique' feeds the erroneous notion that separating twins is somehow unhealthy. Parents are led to believe that if they separate their babies even for relatively short periods of time, the sibling bond will be diminished or harmed.

Yet, in reality, alone time generally relieves parents of the sense that they're not meeting either child's needs properly or are meeting one baby's needs more than the other's. When parents spend one-on-one time with each baby, they experience a positive emotional reaction rather than a guilty or conflicted one. They receive satisfaction and fulfillment from bonding with their babies, but unless they create alone time with each child, this can't happen. Alone time helps parents celebrate each baby rather than feeling guilty about 'inequality' or 'unfairness'.

Tips for professionals to share with parents about encouraging individuality

- Take separate photos of each twin with mom and dad as well as photos of each twin by him/herself.
- Sing happy birthday twice with two separate cakes or cupcakes!
- Give different birthday presents in the same genre - for example, a dump truck and a crane.
- Buy or borrow an inexpensive single buggy to have on hand for alone time with each twin.
- Describe personality traits rather than labelling your twins. For example, instead of labeling one child 'shy' and the other 'sociable', you can say one twin loves being the center of attention while the other one needs more time to get accustomed to new situations.

d) Help parents not to worry about providing a fair and equal childhood for the twins

Just as it is impossible to create a completely safe environment for children, it is also impossible to create a fair and equal one. Yet most parents, especially parents of twins, understandably feel the need to try to do just that. In fact, an important part of parents' job is to help their children learn how to adapt to or overcome unfair circumstances. Parents who attempt to create a 'fair and equal' environment for their twins, however well-meaning, give them a false impression about themselves and the world and inhibit their ability to deal with life's inevitable inequalities.

e) Help parents understand that their twins do not need to be each other's constant companion or surrogate parent

It can be a relief for parents to assume that their twins want to be together and take care of each other. As young children, the twins may seem like built-in playmates; as they get older, they may appear to enjoy being each other's best friend and most trusted confidant. One twin may take on the role of surrogate parent, seeing to the other's emotional needs. However, when 'two much togetherness' shuts out parents and others, twins don't learn how to socialize in an age-appropriate manner. And the lack of psychological boundaries between twin children can lead to confused roles and, sometimes, inappropriate behavior.

'Two much togetherness' shuts out parents and others

When twins parent each other, they may develop an intense need to maintain an emotional equilibrium. This means that, in order not to disturb their overly close connection, each child denies her own feelings or prevents herself from branching out on her own for fear of upsetting the other. When twins become each other's parental figure, it can be a sign that their real parents are not adequately fulfilling their parental roles. Every child, even those who have a close relationship with a sibling, needs focused attention, guidance and emotional support from their parents.

Parents of twins are understandably impressed with their children's compassion toward each other and their overall ability to get along. They may seem to have interpersonal skills that singletons of the same age don't have. Parents may boast about how the twins take care of one another, share their possessions, and play with each other for long periods of time.

Since twin togetherness is taken for granted as an inherent aspect of the twin relationship, it may not occur to parents that their children might be missing an important part of their social and emotional education by not having

the experiences singletons have. When children cling to the safety net of their friendship with their twin, many have difficulty forming relationships and making friends outside the family. A twin relationship involving too much togetherness can push compassion into the unhealthy realm of negating one's own abilities, desires, and goals. If twins go through their childhood as a couple, they miss out on the experience of being an individual, of testing their own behavior and personality against new people with whom they interact.

One twin taking care of the other may seem natural and loving. However, it is important for parents to understand that when the caretaker role characterizes one twin's interactions with his sibling, or when the cared-for twin expects his twin's attention and can't seem to function without it, the relationship is seriously interfering with each child's ability to become his own person.

FATHERS AND BABIES, FATHERS AND MOTHERS

Having twins provides an expanded opportunity for a father to be involved with his children when they're babies. A father's participation in early child-care always enriches a child's life, but with twins it is a necessity. When twin babies are fortunate enough to have the full involvement of both parents, they don't have to struggle as much over sharing their mother, and they enjoy the added benefit of getting to know their father intimately from day one. Not only does a dad's involvement lessen a mother's burden and help lay the foundation for a stronger bond between the father and each child, but it can also create a happier relationship between the parents.

However, men may feel profoundly confused by their wives' emotional swings. On the one hand, new moms may be resentful that their spouses are not helping out more with the babies, and at the same time, criticize themselves for needing help. Many judge their maternal adequacy in terms of how well they can handle their parenting duties without assistance. Needing help may engender feelings of dependency which can lead to anger. Some moms may displace their self-criticism for feeling unable to manage two babies without help by getting angry with their husbands and partners.

The new dad is also going through his own emotional changes. He may feel disconnected from and abandoned by his partner and replaced by two tiny, needy babies whom he's trying his best to adjust to. He may attempt to help with childcare chores, even take on an equal parenting role, but the mother may be so critical of his efforts that he feels ineffectual and unappreciated.

Professionals and others seeking to help families with young twins need to remember the father's or partner's need for support as well as offering suggestions on how he or she can help the mother through the exhausting first months and year of the twins' lives. Partners need to understand the need of the new mother for compliments on what a wonderful job she is doing. The slightest hint of disapproval of her mothering can be construed as intensely critical or disparaging, especially in

the initial months after the babies' arrival. Partners who simply ask how they can help or take charge of what needs to be done will be cherished!

NOTE

An extract from Joan Friedman's latest book, 'Twins in session: Case histories in treating twinship issues' can be found on the Book Page.

Tips for professionals to share with fathers of twin babies

- Be as involved as possible from the beginning of your babies' lives. This will help you establish your role as a father, ease the mother's exhaustion, and most importantly, help you to form a unique relationship with each baby. Get to know each child separately, apart from his twin and his mother.
- Help the mother spend alone time with each baby by spending time alone with the other baby. This way you'll both feel uniquely connected to each child.
- Make your own plans for alone time with each baby/toddler, choosing activities you and the child enjoy. This way, you won't feel as if you're being controlled by your partner and lack independence as a father.
- Let the mother know that you are supportive of her getting the outside help she may need. New moms tend to be hard on themselves and may view the need for help as a measure of inadequacy. Reassure her that this is definitely not the case.
- Make time, if at all possible, to be together with your partner - just the two of you. With all that you're both going through, you need experiences that help you reconnect and enjoy each other's company away from your babies.
- Think about reconnecting primarily with physical affection rather than sexual contact in the initial period after the babies' births. In time, this will lead to greater intimacy.
- When your partner reveals how distraught she is by all that is expected of her as a new mother of twins, don't feel you have to come up with specific solutions. She will appreciate just being listened to.
- The greatest support you can give your partner is time, patience, love and affirmation.

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AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REFLECTION ON THIS ISSUE OF THE IJBPE

In order to help readers meet their CPD requirements, every issue of the IJBPE presents a reflective tool or a series of reflective questions to support close examination of a selected article, or articles, or the whole issue.

These prompts for reflection can be used either by individual readers or by groups of colleagues and provide a structure that enables you to get the most out of what you have read.

The aim is to help you to apply ideas that you have gained from reading the issue to your individual practice and to the overall service that you provide for parents. This reflection is based on Roger Greenaway's 'Active Reviewing Cycle' (Greenaway et al., 2015)

Consider these Four 'F's for reflection:

- **Facts:** What have you learned about twins and parenting twins from this issue?
- **Feelings:** How do you feel about what you have learned and what you have read?
- **Findings:** How can you take what you have learned into your work with parents of twins, and with twins?
- **Future:** How can you learn more about twins so that your practice develops in a way that serves families with twin children better?

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