

Suggestions and Resources to Encourage Individuality in Multiple-Birth Children

While all children must experience the individualization process to reach their full potential as adults, twins, triplets or more have the additional developmental challenge of becoming autonomous with respect to each other. Multiple-birth children are often at least as deeply bonded to each other as they are to their parents. This bond must be respected and considered by all involved: parents, teachers, health care and service providers, family members and friends. Parents of multiple-birth children need to find a balance between supporting the close bond between the children, and encouraging them to express their own personal preferences and discover their own gifts and interests, independent of their co-multiple(s).

Monozygotic or “identical” multiples are generally socially closer than dizygotic or “fraternal” sets, according to researcher Dr. Nancy Segal. They have more physical and psychological traits in common, and have to cope with others’ perceptions and expectations of them to be very similar or the same. Therefore parents and caregivers may need to pay extra attention to helping monozygotic multiples explore their individual identities.

The following are some suggestions for parents and caregivers to encourage multiple-birth children to develop their individuality.

Encourage multiple-birth children to make individual decisions. This strategy will help them to become strong, self-assured, independent adults. Whether they make the same or a different decision from their co-multiple(s) is equally acceptable; the important thing is to encourage each child to make autonomous choices.

In early childhood, toddlers might choose what snack they want to eat, what shirt to wear or what story to read. Preschoolers can dress themselves and make more choices about games and activities each day.

If you notice one child making eye contact with another for guidance or approval of a decision, you have an opportunity to talk about individual choices. Discuss how it’s okay to choose the same things sometimes but different things at other times, and how each child should feel free to express their own wishes. Give examples of parents or other family members who sometimes have different preferences but also like some of the same things.

At school age, children can choose what after-school sport or musical activity they would like to try, what kind of lunch to pack and what chores to help with. Eventually they can discuss whether they would like to be in the same classroom with their sibling(s) or their own classes. In higher grades there will be opportunities to choose musical instruments, clubs and sports activities, perhaps what high school to apply to and what courses to take.

Later there will be choices to make for summer camps, part-time jobs, and relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends. For young adults there will be more choices of post-secondary education, work opportunities, careers, first apartments and roommates, travel, relationships and marriages. Learning to make good choices and be content with the consequences is an important life skill that takes practice from a young age.

Help others to recognize each child as an individual. Introduce each child by name, and suggest ways to tell them apart using cues from appearance, hair or clothing choices. Teach the children to say their names and correct anyone who calls them by the wrong name. Ask others not to call the children “the twins” or “the triplets” but to use their names.

Give the children their own clothes and their own toys. Set up separate places to keep personal things that are not shared. Of course many toys and games will be shared by everyone in the family, but children need to have some belongings of their very own. Colour coding or stickers may be used to help the children identify their own belongings. Encourage friends and family to give individual birthday cards and gifts, considering each child's preferences. Sing "Happy Birthday" separately for each child.

Encourage separate experiences from a young age. Talk to each baby individually when the opportunity arises during diaper changes, bath times, feedings or play. Take turns playing or reading with each child and listening to their stories. Take turns bringing just one child on an errand while the other(s) stay at home with the other parent or a caregiver. Partner children with a parent or older sibling to do chores or help in the kitchen, so they are not always together with their co-multiple(s). Invite a friend over for each child so they can have separate play dates in your home, and eventually visit friends' or family members' homes separately. Take photos of each child individually as well as together. Collect some of their photos and artwork in separate scrapbooks.

Some final words of insight:

Pat Preedy, a UK educator and researcher with a specialty in multiple-birth children, provided this important note for parents:

"The critical thing is developing 'mature dependence' which starts as soon as the children are born. For multiples that are mature dependents, it actually doesn't matter whether they are together or apart – they function as individuals and enjoy being a multiple."

Pat Malmstrom wrote in "Encouraging Individuality in Twins", cited below:

"In their desire to promote individuality in their twins, parents may encourage or impose differences between the children which do not exist. Identical twins and even some fraternal twins may have very similar interests and abilities. They should not be deprived of the opportunity to pursue the same hobbies, sports or lessons if that's really what they are inclined to do. Try to support and respect each child's true inclinations as much as possible, however alike or different they may be."

Learn more about multiple-birth children and developing individuality:

Online Resources:

1. Pat Malmstrom: "Encouraging Individuality in Twins", published by Twin Services Consulting, 2006. <http://www.twinservices.org/articles/encouragingindivid.html>
2. Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA): "Encouraging Individuality" <http://www.tamba.org.uk/parenting/preschool-years/encouraging-individuality>
3. Ken Mellor: "Intimate Autonomy, a worthwhile goal with twins". Published in the Transactional Analyst V.3 issue 2, Spring 2013, page 11-17. A longer article on the relationship between multiples, and how parents can support each child. <http://www.awakeningnetwork.net/TA/TheTransactionalAnalystItems/TAMagazineSpring2013Twins.pdf>
4. Kate Bacon: "'It's Good to be Different': Parent and Child Negotiations of 'Twin' Identity" published in Twin Research and Human Genetics / Volume 9 / Issue 01 / February 2006, pp 141-147, Cambridge University Press, 2006. A psychological research article. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8493386>

5. Sue Grossman, Ph.D.: "Offering Children Choices: Encouraging Autonomy and Learning while Minimizing Conflicts"
http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=607 Early childhood education article on the benefits of offering choices in the classroom.
6. KidsMatter, an Australian Primary Schools booklet: "About Good Decision-Making"
http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMP_C2_HCMD_AboutGoodDecisionMaking.pdf Advice on helping primary school children learn to make good decisions.
7. Multiple Births Canada: "Multiples in School: Parent Tips" and "Multiples in School: A Guide for Educators", 2009. <http://multiplebirthscanada.org/index.php/education/publications/fact-sheets> Information on classroom placement decisions for multiple-birth children.
8. Dr. Joan A. Friedman: "Twins need alone time". <http://www.joanafriedmanphd.com/twins-need-alone-time/> Advice on the importance of parents spending time with each multiple individually, to strengthen the parent-child bond.
9. Insight, an Australian TV documentary: "Two of a Kind", 2006. Interviews with many pairs of monozygotic twins, and with researchers on genetics and psychology, discussing various aspects of twin relationships. <http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/213612099887/>

Books:

1. Dr. Joan A. Friedman: *Emotionally Healthy Twins: a new philosophy for parenting two unique children*, 2008. <http://www.amazon.ca/Emotionally-Healthy-Twins-Philosophy-Parenting/dp/0738210870/>
2. Dr. Joan A. Friedman: *The Same But Different: How twins can live, love and learn to be individuals*, 2014. <http://www.amazon.ca/Same-But-Different-Twins-Individuals/dp/0989346439/>
3. Patricia Maxwell Malmstrom and Janet Poland: *The Art of Parenting Twins*, 1999. <http://www.amazon.ca/Art-Parenting-Twins-Challenges-Multiples/dp/0345422678/>
4. Christina Baglivi Tinglof: *Parenting School-Age Twins and Multiples*, 2007. <http://www.amazon.ca/Parenting-School-Age-Multiples-Christina-Tinglof/dp/0071469028>

Recommended Sources of Information

Multiple Births Canada
www.multiplebirthscanada.org
Toll-Free (in Canada): 1-866-228-8824

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Email: office@multiplebirthscanada.org

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