

TWINSHIP: AN EMOTIONAL SEESAW

A seesaw is defined as follows:

“A long plank balanced in the middle on a fixed support, on each end of which children sit and swing up and down by pushing the ground alternately with their feet”. It can also be used as a verb signifying

“A situation characterized by rapid, repeated changes from one state or condition to another.”¹

This image captures the vicissitudes of a twin relationship.

There can be playful interludes where each twin enjoys the shared experience of creating a coordinated rhythm. The ride can be exhilarating and fun and scary. Alternately, the seesaw can be a metaphor for the emotional ups and downs that twins confront as they grow up together. Their efforts to keep the ups and downs manageable become much more trying as twins attempt to individuate. As their longings to be “known” rather than “noticed” intensify, they are no longer as willing to keep their competitive feelings in check. This wish for more autonomy topples the existing balance of power.

Rather than undermining their children’s competitive strivings out of fear that the twin bond will be broken, parents can effectively help twins work through their differences, their strengths, and their weaknesses by not buying into the ‘twin mystique’ - romanticizing the twin attachment as the idealized end game. The notion that all twins should be best friends for life is a heavy emotional burden to bear. Nonetheless, the message is promulgated in utero as well as in the NICU because premature twins often improve when placed together in the same bassinet. Naturally these early experiences are incredibly powerful; however, they can set the tone and trajectory of the twin attachment with the message that they cannot survive without the other.

When I speak to parents about the importance of spending time alone with each baby, there is a palpable groan in the audience. I know from first hand experience why so many parents react negatively to my advice and question my belief system. However, I would not ask for such a sacrifice of time and emotional commitment if I

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<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=definition+of+see+saw&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

did not believe wholeheartedly in the importance of alone time for the development of individuality and healthy parenting.

When you are caring for two babies at the same time, how are you able to attune to each one's temperament without constantly comparing one baby to the other? Alone time enables you and your baby the physical and emotional space to appreciate one another without being distracted. Susan Cain defines the difference between temperament and personality in her book *Quiet*. She writes, "Temperament refers to inborn, biologically based behavioral and emotional patterns that are observable in infancy and early childhood; personality is the complex brew that emerges after cultural influence and personal experience are thrown into the mix. Some say that temperament is the foundation, and personality is the building."

Effective parenting necessitates an exquisite attunement to temperamental differences and personality quirks. A strong parent-child attachment helps twins individuate. Thinking about twins as a "package deal" diminishes their personhood and disrupts the fulfillment of their emotional needs.

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