

Adolescence and Multiples: Steering Our Selfish and Sassy Teens to Selfhood

By Joan Friedman PhD, author and psychotherapist, expert on multiples

The goal of adolescence for most children in our Western societies is to become more independent from their parents. I reference Dr. Anthony Wolf and his terrific book on adolescent development. He writes that adolescence is not a single event, but a number of changes coming within a relatively short period. The two main forces of adolescence are the onset of sexuality and the turning away from parents. Young teens turn away from their childish feelings. They cannot feel close or dependent upon their parents. Home is a natural realm for them to express dependent and babyish ways of functioning. They only see what is day-to-day and have no long-term perspectives. They become immature, lazy, irresponsible, dishonest, and demanding.

He writes that boys generally close the door for four years and experience perfect passive pleasure and terminal lethargy. Girls spend the majority of their adolescent years yelling, lying, and sneaking around. Girls mask their struggles to separate by fighting with their parents, thereby keeping the attachment alive ostensibly on their own terms. He recognizes that the irony of this developmental timeline is that parents are asked to let go when the stakes go up.

Some multiples do not experience an average expectable adolescence because they have already moved away emotionally from their parents, having enjoyed a life long dependency on one another. In many cases this delayed separation might surface later on in response to pivotal life events such as marriage and job choices. Perhaps their connection has shielded them from experiencing a raucous or shaky separation from their parents; however, their own individual development is delayed in the face of inadequate individuation from their same age sibling.

I asked my fraternal twin son J, who is now in his early twenties, what he recalled about being a twin in his teenage years. He retrospectively can articulate what some of the difficulties were that he was not quite conscious about back then.

He mentioned how compromising it felt to have “our friends” instead of his own friends. Also he reminisced about how being compared and competitive in athletic endeavors was a strain, at times. There are so many possibilities about how multiples’ relationships will fare during this developmental phase – they may be seamless or fraught with expectable issues of conflict and dissension owing to the need to feel autonomous and independent.

In my work with families throughout the years, I have been privy to many stories about how multiples negotiate this stage: a teenage twin girl dyes her hair a wild color to make a statement about her individuality; fourteen year old identical twin boys have no friends because they prefer to be with each other; a fraternal twin argues with his twin sister because he does not want her to date his friend; a teenage boy is distraught and despondent that no one cares enough to distinguish him from his twin brother; a twin girl purposefully takes a back seat so that her sister can shine, believing that her sacrifice will ensure an unbreakable bond – a distortion which implodes when her sister becomes involved with a serious boyfriend.

Parents of multiples face tremendous burdens managing two or more unpleasant mouthy teens. It's a daunting task not to compare them. For example, if one daughter is lying and the other one is not, it's vital to make sure you are clear about who is doing what. Finding out that one twin is lying to protect the other or tattling on the other also presents difficulties. It is imperative to maintain a sense of humor, not personalize their attacks on your character, and remind yourself how much you love your children in spite of their temporary diabolical transformation.

Most teens will emerge again as loving, honest young adults whose presence and connection will be gratifying and nurturing.

Anthony E. Wolf, PhD

Get Out of My Life, But First Can You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?

Books by Joan Friedman PhD

