

“Helping Our Multiples to Shine” An Article by Nancy L. Segal, Ph.D.

Balancing twins’ individuality and friendship is a true challenge for parents, educators and anyone concerned with twins’ health and well-being. The dramatic increase in twinning in recent years means that we all need to pay closer attention to the abilities, talents and preferences of each individual child. We have moved past the days when twins were treated as a single unit and distinctions among twin types were considered trivial. The current goal is toward helping multiples shine as individuals, the brilliant theme of *ICOMBO’S Multiple Birth Awareness Week 2014*. This means knowing the zygosity of one’s twins, paying careful attention to each child’s interests and letting twins’ behaviors guide you as parents. In other words, twins will often let family members know in their own way what is best for them.

It is so important to appreciate that the twin situation differs significantly across twin types. Identical twins generally look alike, behave alike and share many interests. However, even though they share 100% of their genes, they do not show perfect similarity. Any number of environmental events, from prenatal nutrition to school experiences, can lead to differences in health and behavior. Same-sex fraternal twins share half their genes, on average, and show similarities, as well as differences, just like ordinary siblings. However, they are often “lumped” together by people outside the twinship. Finally, young male-female twins are often at different developmental stages, because females tend to mature physically, socially and intellectually ahead of males. Young male twins often enjoy the “supervision” of their sisters, a situation that should be monitored to enable them to feel confident and secure on their own.

Twins can certainly share bedrooms and classrooms and still acquire a strong sense of individuality. Children can decorate their side of the room in ways that appeal to them. They can sit in different places in a classroom, developing special friends and having experiences apart from their twin sibling. Some school officials maintain mandatory policies for separating twins, for fear that they will not develop fully as individuals. This is a misguided and simplistic approach to an important and complex issue. As indicated, twins can be in the same location (e.g., classroom) and have very different experiences within that location.

College-bound high school seniors face an especially trying task—deciding to go the same or different schools. Some twins choose to go school together, but live apart, while knowing that their twin brother or sister is close by. Unfortunately, science lacks studies and statistics on how many twins choose the same or different colleges, how they arrive at these decisions and the outcomes of their choices. Even if twins attend the same university they should follow the same major if that is what they prefer. If both are interested in math or in history or in psychology there is no reason that one should change just to differ from his or her co-twin—to do so would be to deny individuality!

There should never be a single policy for raising twins because all pairs have unique needs and situations. Furthermore, defining individuality is somewhat subjective. Some twins may spend a great deal of their time together, but still display independence and self-confidence. The primary goal is to raise twins who are content both in the company of their twin and on their own.

Nancy L. Segal, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology
Director, Twin Studies Center