

Schooling Multiples: Together or Apart?

There has not been a lot of research done on the effects of separation on twins in education and what there is has given mixed results. The best thing is to consider the pros and cons in relation to the multiples; and for the educator and parents to work collaboratively to achieve the best outcome for the children. Of course, sometimes separation is not an option. It can also be difficult as separation may be ideal for one multiple but not the other(s).

Things to Consider Before Separating

1) Ability:

- Is one markedly more able than the other?
- Does the less able twin opt out of activities?
- Does the able twin do work for the other?

2) Behaviour:

- Competitive, try and outdo each other
- Disruptive – fight, disturb others
- Compete for teacher attention
- Tattling to teacher or parents

3) Their Bond:

- Fear of separation
- Co-dependent
- One dominates or restricts the other

4) Socialisation:

- Do they make friends easily?
- Have they spent time alone?

5) Speech & Language:

- Does one speak for the other?

6) Family Life:

- Experienced recent loss/death
- Divorce
- Moved house or city

7) How Others View Twins:

- Constantly comparing them to each other
- Relate to them as one person
- Label them

Reasons to Separate:

Although there is no substantial evidence to support the policy that multiples must be placed in separate classrooms in order for them to grow and develop as individuals, there are sometimes circumstances which would indicate that separation is advisable. Here are some examples for when separation may be in the best interests of each child:

- Constant 'togetherness' is hindering the development of social skills in one, both or more of the multiples;
- A 'division of labour' exists;
- Insensitive comparisons by teachers, peers or even each other have led to feelings of inadequacy in one or more of the multiples;
- The multiples form a 'power unit' which is causing disruptive behaviour;
- The children use their multipleship to exploit, cheat or play tricks;
- One or more of the multiples appears to resent the lack of privacy resulting from sharing a classroom;
- One multiple proves to be a constant distraction to the other/s;
- In opposite-sex multiples, the female is overprotective or 'mothering' the male co-multiple;
- In skill-grouped classrooms where the abilities of one of the multiples are far above those of the co-multiple/s;
- The multiples WANT to separate.

Reasons to Keep Together:

Sometimes there are valid reasons for keeping multiples together:

- Major emotional upheavals may have occurred with the family, eg. divorce, moving house, death, etc;
- Only one classroom is available;
- Unequal education will be experienced due to two different teachers employing different methods of teaching;
- Multiples are at or near the same skill level in a skill-based classroom.

Advantages of Separation

- The children are able to operate as individuals within the class situation;
- Separation allows twins to work at their own pace without pressure from the other, or holding back to allow the other to catch up;
- The teacher is more likely to compare the multiple child against the peer group instead of his or her co-multiple(s);
- The multiple birth child is able to operate without his or her co-multiple telling, particularly if he or she is in trouble;
- The multiple birth child has an opportunity to make friends and socialise as an individual.

Disadvantages of Separation

- Multiple birth children may need the support of each other particularly if they have not experienced separation prior to school;
- Even if multiple birth children are comfortable when separated they may need to be able to check up on what the other is doing;
- If one child is dominant the dominant child may lose confidence as he or she no longer has the co-multiple to organise;
- The children may be compared more at home particularly if one appears to be making more progress (e.g. gets a reading book first);
- The teachers are less likely to understand how the children operate as multiples (e.g. being upset if one is ill or in trouble).

How Does Separation Affect Parents?

- Have to split time evenly to both classes;
- Increases comparison of the teachers;
- Sometimes have to learn two different ways of doing the same thing;
- Have to deal with emotional blowouts at home if twins prefer to be together.

Wise parents and educators will realise that some of the issues mentioned may be evident in one year but not the next. Evaluations/observations of the multiples' behaviour and development need to be regularly monitored.

Recommendations Regarding Classroom Placement:

1. It is not recommended to separate multiples who want to be together. Forced separation can damage self-esteem, inhibit language development and delay learning.
2. It is not recommended to automatically separate multiples in their first year of school. Such separation adds to the stress of starting school and may actually increase the multiples' need to be together.
3. All multiples need as much independence as they are ready to handle. Multiples flourish when allowed to separate on their own timetable. Whether they are in the same classroom or not can, and should, be evaluated each year. As the multiples grow older, they themselves will also have input as to whether or not they should or want to be together.
4. Encourage multiples to choose separate classes as they gain confidence in the school situation.
5. Decisions as to whether or not the children should be together needs to be made by a 'team' approach – the parents, the teachers and the principal. Educators need to realise that parents know their children best, and it is important, for any easy transition to school and the development of the children, that parental opinion be considered.
6. If multiples are in the same classroom, they can be in separate settings within the class.
7. If the children look alike, the parents should make it easy on the teachers and students, and dress them differently so that they are easily recognised and seen as individuals.
8. Parent/Teacher interviews need to reflect how each child is progressing compared to the rest of the class, rather than in comparison with each other.
9. Parents should be offered separate parent/teacher interviews for each child. Sometimes teachers expect one interview to talk about all the multiples together, and that can be confusing and perhaps not fair to the children since it is more natural in that environment for comparisons to be about the children in relation to each other rather than to their peer group.
10. ICOMBO strongly recommends that placement of each of multiples be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, that placement evaluation occurs annually, and that parents, teachers, principals and the children be included in the decision-making.