



Twins in School: What Teachers Should Know

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The incidence of multiple births has increased dramatically in the past two decades. The birth rate for twins, who constitute the most common kind of multiple births, increased 42% from 1980 to 1994 (Lytton, Singh, & Gallagher, 1995). Given this trend, it seems reasonable to assume that many teachers will have twins and other multiple siblings in their classes at some point in their classroom careers.

To a large extent, the available research on twins stems from a long tradition of studies focused on the nature–nurture debates. These studies look at twins reared together and apart and attempt to ascertain the relative influence of genetic and environmental influences on personality development. Research on the effects of twins' separation in school and other practical questions is as yet very limited. Nevertheless, difficult decisions about their education have to be made by school districts, principals, and teachers while new research is awaited. This Digest offers some pointers for educators facing the challenges of educating multiples.

Different Types of Twins and Other Multiples

There are two basic types of twins and other multiples. Identical twins are defined as monozygotic because they are the result of the split of a single fertilized ovum. Dizygotic twins, usually referred to as fraternal twins, are the result of the fertilization of two separate ova, as in other siblings born years apart. There are four types of identical twins, depending upon how early in the development of the ovum its division occurs. The earlier in the division, the more alike the individuals are likely to be physically. In the case of other multiples, as for example in the case of triplets, two of the three may be identical, but more typically all three are as different as any other three siblings.

These variations in the extent to which siblings from the same pregnancy resemble each other suggest that teachers may want to keep in mind that most multiples are as unique as any other set of siblings, although their psychosocial situation differs from that of singletons. Identical twins will be more behaviorally alike on average than fraternal twins. It is also the case that many multiple-birth children are born prematurely and have low birth weight. Many of the same kinds of problems typical of single premature low birth weight children will be typical of premature twins. However, for parents of multiples, even if they are not subject to the strains related to the risks of prematurity, the stresses and strains of the early care of multiples are substantial and appear to have some short-term effects on the children's development (Lytton, Singh, & Gallagher, 1995). Because twins are the most typical type of multiples, that term is used

in the discussion below, although much of the discussion applies equally to other multiple-birth siblings.

Separating Twins in School

One of the most frequently asked questions by preschool and elementary teachers and principals is whether the classroom separation of multiples should be encouraged. Dreyer (1991) and Brodtkin (1997) point out that many schools and preschool programs have a fixed policy of separating twins. In other schools, however, the decision may be left to the principal or to the teachers.

Is it necessary for schools and preschool programs to have a strict policy about separating twins? Dreyer concludes her discussion of what little research is available on this question by stating that "Twins feel that the best policy is no policy at all" (Dreyer, 1991, p. 6). Similarly, most parents seem to feel that such decisions should be determined on a case-by-case basis and that a rigid policy should be avoided.

Even in very small preschools and elementary schools that have only one class per age group, teachers often wonder if they should encourage the twins to engage in separate activities, participate in different learning center activities, sit at different tables for meals, and team up with other peers.

Making Separation Decisions

The Parents of Multiple Births Association, Inc., of Canada provides a list of possible circumstances to be considered when making a decision about separation (Dreyer, 1991, p. 11). Included in this list are questions such as whether the twins' "togetherness" might hinder the social development of one or both. Thus, parents and the teacher might ask whether, by about the age of 5, each of the twins is capable of initiating and maintaining satisfying relationships with nonsibling peers. If the answer is "yes," then separation would not be warranted. If the answer is "no," then separation, perhaps for part of the day, might be attempted on an experimental basis. Separation may also be considered under the following circumstances:

- Classmates engage in frequent comparisons of the pair, and the comparisons provoke negative feelings in either twin. Constant comparison of twins is one of the greatest sources of distress to twins and one of the most difficult things for parents and teachers to resist. Although parents, and even teachers, often compare different-age siblings, the fact that the twins are the same age as well as frequently of the same gender considerably heightens the temptation to draw comparisons. Even at the pre-school age, twins are likely to be aware of such comparisons and may become more competitive than

other siblings. Most twins ultimately weather school situations successfully, but if one of the multiples typically comes out on the poorer end of these comparisons, a pattern of discouragement may develop and could lead to a pattern of "learned helplessness" (Burhans & Dweck, 1995).

- There is no evidence that twins are more disruptive than non-twins. However, if disruptions do occur and standard procedures for handling disruptive behavior fail to alleviate the pattern, separation might be one course of action to consider.
- A female twin "over-mothers" her male co-twin. In the case of fraternal opposite-sex twins, females tend to be the more dominant of the two and more critical of their twin brothers, who "appreciated their twin sister's guidance but felt somewhat threatened by their 'superiority'" (Dreyer, 1991, p. 3).
- Many twins develop a pattern of helping each other through both academic and social predicaments. Educators might want to consider how separation will affect twins who are accustomed to helping each other. Teachers might observe the twins closely in the classroom to ensure that one twin does not help the other excessively, or that the one being helped does not become too dependent on the other. In the case of preschoolers, perhaps the best advice is to make the separation gradual, if it is done at all.

There are other situations in which separation might be a poor or untimely decision. For example, if the pair is undergoing particular stresses within the family, or if there are health concerns for one or both twins, separation may place unnecessary stress on twins.

In the case of school-age twins, it is a good idea to check their own preferences about separation. Although their feelings on the issue should be considered, these feelings should be put in a larger perspective of the long-term development of each member of the multiple sibling group.

Placement decisions should also take into account the views of parents. Some parents will have strong feelings on the matter (Segal & Russell, 1992). However, it is a good idea to keep in mind that parents may not be fully aware of how their children behave in the classroom environment. If parents disagree on the best course of action, teachers may want to listen carefully to each, make suggestions for them to consider, invite them to observe their children in the classroom, and suggest a short-term experiment of separating or keeping the twins together. During that time, the twins can be closely observed and evaluated by teachers and parents. In this way, the school personnel and the parents can address the issue as a team focused on the long-term best interests of the children.

Look Alikes

Ideally, as suggested by guidelines for the education of multiple birth children recently issued by the National Organization of Mothers of Twins Club, Inc. (1998), educators should learn to recognize each child in a set of multiples without resorting to extraordinary measures, such as requiring identical twins to wear name tags, different color clothes, or different hair styles. However, for teachers struggling with large classes, this ideal may take much time and effort to achieve. In the case of twins who look very much alike, and who often behave alike, a teacher's inability to distinguish between the twins and to use the correct name

of the child may be a source of stress for the children and the teacher. It may be preferable to consult the parents about the possibility of helping the teacher to make the correct identification by dressing the twins differently, giving them different haircuts or shirt colors, or providing other consistently different patterns in their appearance. Speaking as a twin, the experience of being called by the other's name can be very annoying!

For More Information

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