

Time to be an individual

As the mother of fraternal twins, I am often asked what it's like to raise two boys at a time. I find the experience to be a constant reminder that our genes are just one part of who we are, and our experiences shape us just as much. My boys' personalities and looks are so different that at times teachers and coaches don't even know they're brothers until they meet me or my husband! I think that's a testimonial to how strong each of their temperaments are, and a consequence of not being treated like "twins" but rather just like any other kids.

One successful tactic to parenting twins is to ensure each child gets time alone with you as a parent. It doesn't have to be a special occasion; sometimes I just take one of my sons along for errands and leave his brother at home. While ostensibly he's accompanying me to help, it's also a wonderful opportunity to connect one-on-one. I'll usually tack on a side trip to a bakery for a treat just to extend the time together. Sometimes the conversation starts in the car and just takes on a life of its own; at other times, I need to subtly ask a few questions to get the ball rolling. But within an hour or so, I feel like we've caught up with each other in a way that wouldn't have happened with other family members around.

You don't need to be a twin to benefit from time alone with mom or dad, of course. But the sheer "together time" brought about by the twin experience can make it more necessary to be apart. For example, my boys will often have conversations over dinner that feel more like a ping-pong match than a friendly chat. One routinely corrects the other or adds more details to a story. When called on his behavior, his version is that he's just trying to help get the story straight. His brother sees these corrections as annoying interruptions.

Every once in a while, emotions boil over to the point that the story gets lost in the process of arguing over who started talking first, who witnessed the event firsthand vs. through the rumor mill, etc. In my experience, this is not as common in non-twin families, simply because most siblings don't have as much shared time together. Growing up in a family of five kids, I remember cross-conversations, but there was usually a hierarchy involved so that the older sibling could dominate based on age or experience alone. With twins, such convenient boundaries aren't there (and, while challenging, maybe that's more fair!)

One potential trap for parenting twins is relying on the "convenience factor" to make family decisions instead of looking at each child's needs. It's much easier for me when both children choose the same sport or join the same after-school activity. I can arrange for one ride for both, or not feel like I have to be in two places at one time. However, that's not necessarily what's best for the boys. One is more inclined to try out for multiple sports. Now that they're 13, I'm able to leave his brother at home. This strategy works far better than in years past when I'd drag both to practice and games. (I know lots of families travel as a group to one sibling's activities, but when you're a twin and you're on the sidelines while your brother plays, more attention is called to it.)

School is one place where my boys have increasingly grown apart. While this makes me sad on the one hand – I want this incredible, close relationship they have to last forever – I also know this change is inevitable. While volunteering at a school fundraiser recently, I noticed how my boys didn't even acknowledge one another during lunchtime. They sat with their separate group of friends and didn't give each other so

much as a glance. (Since second grade, they've been in separate classrooms, but they used to sit together at lunch.) I know I should see this growth as just a normal part of adolescence, especially since neither one of them seems to care. But as a mom, I used to take comfort in imagining them going through milestones together, helping each one navigate through the day.

What they've shown me, though, is that their relationship has simply shifted. They are separated much more during the day, but they share and contrast their experiences on the bus, during dinner and before bedtime. It's allowed each of my sons to grow on his own, while still having a reality check with his brother to validate his response to peers and teachers in the comfort of home. What time they do share together is more of a choice now and is therefore not taken for granted. It's just another way that being a twin is a special gift!

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