



Separation Not Severance

I feel compelled to write because I am outraged, saddened, but not surprised about society's disingenuous beliefs about the "twin mystique". A recent experience recounted by an acquaintance of mine has riled my discontent. A conscientious and psychologically sophisticated mom of four-year-old twins decided to separate her fraternal twin daughters into their own classrooms. They had been together the first year of preschool, and both mother and the teachers agreed that the girls would thrive in separate classes. One child has an independent, outgoing, and free spirited personality; her sister has a propensity to be dependent, clinging, and easily frustrated. Mother consulted with friends, family and professionals to discuss her concerns and ideas. Mom's fraternal twin sisters validated her decision; they were understanding and steadfastly supportive about their nieces needing opportunities and permission to be on their own. Understandably mom was upset and worried when the class roster arrived. She realized that one twin would be in class with all of her friends while her sister would be in a classroom without any former classmates.

Mother attended a school event prior to the preschool's opening day. Unsuspectingly, she found herself barraged and assailed by other families about her decision to put her girls in separate classrooms. They treated her as if she were committing a despicable crime. Her sole allies were the teachers, who encouraged her to follow through with her plans.

The transition has been a bit difficult –however, not impossible, not tragic, and not traumatizing. Many developmental milestones involve a brief period of deregulation. The twin in the classroom without her own friends does feel lonesome, upset and envious that her sister is comfortable and happy. She cried about this with her mom and dad and told them how she felt. However, when her dad asked her if she wanted to be in the classroom with her sister, she resolutely answered no. Her parents empathically support her desire to be on her own and recognize that she has emotional hurdles to overcome. Nonetheless, the family feels confident that this is the right move for their free spirited daughter. With their love and support, I am quite convinced that this child will manage the challenges and emerge from the experience feeling masterful, confident, and self-assured.

For those of you who might feel that it is wrong, unnecessary, or even unconscionable to "put a child through this" and believe that twin separation/individuation issues at this age are exaggerated or unimportant - please reflect upon the following. Many of our children's expectations about their burgeoning individuation are inextricably linked to parental consideration of separateness. Do not delude yourselves into believing that the older the twins get, the easier it becomes to individuate. While in some instances this is true, in other cases it is not. Just yesterday I received the following email from a distraught parent:

My twins just started kindergarten and are having an extremely difficult time making friends. For all the reasons you lay out, we have been the beneficiaries of having children whose best friend is each other. However, now we see the harm that may have been done, as each girl has no interest in making friends and moreover does not know how to make a friend.

I can assure you that if you have faith in your child's capacity to handle age appropriate challenges, rationally assessing whether or not your twins will benefit from separate classrooms is not inhumane, insane, or insignificant. Stereotypic as well as mythic beliefs that relationships between twins will be harmed rather than strengthened by thoughtful opportunities for alone time deserve an educated, calm, and thoughtful reappraisal by families, school administrators, and society at large. Generally speaking, it is an uninformed public that perpetuates narrow-minded thinking about twins and their needs for togetherness. What is not appreciated is that twins need advocates and parents who understand that most of us need to experience our singular shining moments undiluted by the presence of another. ■