

Emotionally Healthy Twins: A New Philosophy for Parenting Two Unique Individuals

Joan A. Friedman (2008). Da Capo Press, Life Long Books, 224 pp., US\$15.95, ISBN 13 978 0 7382 1087 2

Reviewed by Danielle Cath, the Netherlands Twin Register, the Netherlands

To raise twins is a challenge, just as it is to be part of a twin pair. This was the message communicated by Joan Friedman, the author of the book: *Emotionally Healthy Twins: A New Philosophy for Parenting Two Unique Individuals*. Friedman is a twin herself and also a mother of twins, and a psychotherapist specialized in the treatment of twin-related problems. The book presents seven basic concepts meant to raise twins in such a way that they become emotionally healthy adults.

The core assumption of her philosophy is that twins basically stand the risk of becoming victims of the 'twin mystique', since they are born and raised as twins. This mystique entails how parents, family and friends are generally enchanted by the cuteness and speciality of a 'double', and therefore treat twins as 'hyperconnected' persons who share a special intimate relationship. This relationship is thought of as special, that is, without the disadvantages of normal relationships in which disappointment, quarrels, or abandonment might sometimes play a role. The author argues that, due to the expectations that are placed upon these relationships, twins do not feel free to develop a life on their own. Indeed, they are expected to fulfill the role of being a soulmate towards each other. As a consequence, twins do not sufficiently develop as individualized persons with the sense of freedom needed to act and make decisions on their own. Instead, they can be burdened with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility towards the other twin; they are responsible for the happiness and fortune of the other and will often feel guilty when feeling better or performing better than the other.

The answer to this twin problem is, according to the author, that parents need to be aware of the twin mystique, and instead of supporting it, to view their twins as individuals each with their own character and needs. In

order to help twins to develop into happy, well individualized and unique individuals, the following rules should be followed:

1. Think of your twins as unique individuals — call them 'my two children born at the same time' rather than 'my twins'.
2. Develop different feelings for each child.
3. Give each child sufficient and consistent 'alone time' with you
4. Don't attempt to provide a fair and equal childhood for your twins.
5. Don't compare the twins with each other.
6. Encourage the twins to build up their own separate lives with separate schools or school classes, separate friends and hobbies, and so on.
7. Don't rely on the twins to be each others' constant companion.

In the following chapters of the book this principle is worked out in a very detailed way, beginning in the first months of pregnancy (mental preparation for having two separate individuals), and then with chapters dealing with babyhood, childhood, teens, and adulthood respectively.

The book is full of information and very handy and practical tips on how to apply the principles above. It is richly flavored with tips and tricks that are certainly very practical for the busy parents of twins (mums and dads are

often separately addressed). The author has a fine sense of relationships and developmental issues at the psychological level.

A drawback of this book is the bold black and white stance that the author takes about how to raise twins. On every page of the book, emphasis is placed on the importance of supporting and developing the child's individuality in her or his relationship with her or his twin brother or sister. When reading, one gets the creepy feeling that instead of reflecting a gradual difference with relationships between sib pairs, the twin relationship might be entirely different. It is perhaps cute to have a twin pair at first glance, but the special experiment of nature that twin births entail is more of a burden than fun.

However, to what extent is this text the private opinion of the writer or an outcome from research? To date there has been more opinionating on this issue than actual research. Although appealing, and obviously the author has a point with respect to the difficulties in individualizing mentioned, this is one side of the twin story. As far as research informs us, twins do not differ from singletons with respect to emotional health. Emotional health is determined by a large variety of influences, of which the appropriate environment to enable individualization is an important one.

Individualization refers to a process that might be hard to operationalize, but that could be considered as the extent to which a person has gone through various developmental processes to differentiate, and develop the ability to optimally express himself as an individual apart from others. One can hypothesize that, the better this process, the more emotionally healthy the person becomes. To my knowledge, no comparative research has yet been performed between twins and singletons on the extent of individualization they show.

Now what is clear from the scientific literature? Very little; the only paper that I found concerning the comparison of twins with singletons is written in Japanese, so I only had access to the abstract (Nishihara et al., 2006). Nishihara found that parenting of twins is more stressful for parents than parenting singletons. Reversely, it is unclear to what extent the twinning

experience is more stressful for twins than the sibling experience is for singletons. With respect to the parents, the more negative their feelings are towards a twin, the worse the child's mental development. Although that in itself holds for parents of singletons as well, one can imagine that — considering the extra stress of parenting twins, twins might be more prone to parental stress and its subsequent negative impact on mental development than singletons.

The book is very informative on tricks and tips to reduce this parental stress. For instance, the recommendation to take time alone with one child is likely to work well, since it actually gives the opportunity for the parent to take some time out with subsequently a beneficial effect to the whole family. Whether it fuels the twins' individuality — the authors' rationale for recommending the time alone — is unsupported by evidence. Without

wanting to be provocative, I could also argue that positive and mutual twin-bonding is equally contributive to the persons' self-esteem and emotional health as individualization.

What is missing is a chapter about the advantages of raising same-age children within the families, along with tips and tricks to optimize these advantages and to stimulate twin-bonding; too much collectivization seems bad, but what about too much individualization?

Reference

Nishihara et al. (2006): *Nippon Koshu Eisei Zasshi*, 53(11), 831–841.

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As young people grow up, most will battle with their own sense of identity, but for twins this struggle can be more painful and prolonged. Some need to prise themselves from a 'twosome package-deal' identity, while others need to cast aside an identity based solely on differences from their co-twin: labelled by the well-meaning in an attempt to find uniqueness 'Linda is the creative one; Laura the scholar'. The path to emotional happiness is difficult to navigate. What can parents do to make the journey less painful? Joan Friedman's *Emotionally healthy twins* provides some useful pointers outlined in a new philosophy of twin parenting.

Friedman has all the credentials for authoring a book about twins. She is both a twin and a mother of twins plus three other children. Furthermore, she is a psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of twins and their parents, bringing to the book a wealth of real-life examples. The fundamental underlying tenet of Friedman's new philosophy is to replace the mindset that twins are a single unit with a mindset that they are two unique individuals. Not much new

about that you might think, but I believe she takes this philosophy several steps further than other authors I have read.

The new philosophy is outlined in the first chapter as seven principles. The usual advice of not choosing 'a pair of names' or not dressing the twins alike is all there of course, as these relate to how you and others perceive the twins as individuals, but that is just the beginning. With a mindset of two individuals in place, the most important of the seven

principles is that parent should create regular 'alone time' for each child. Certainly, this advice was around in 'my day' and such a regime can be a financial burden unless you have family or friends willing to get involved on a regular basis. Friedman emphasizes the importance of the alone time from babyhood right through to teenage years and with each parent separately. The logistics of this can be quite tricky, particularly if you have other children, but Friedman