



Twins Need Alone Time: Moms Feel Conflicted

I was having coffee with a girlfriend who had just finished reading my book. With a perplexed and distraught look on her face, she confided that she felt upset and disappointed about the fact that it had NEVER even occurred to her to spend time alone with her son and daughter. She was shocked as well as confused that she had not thought about this idea at all. Furthermore, as she did have help at home most weekdays when her twins were babies, she had the luxury and the opportunity to spend alone time. She admitted that in retrospect, spending alone time with each baby might have provided the most feasible and logical solution to help soothe the helplessness and guilt she experienced as she attempted to bond with both babies.

I reassured my friend Sheila that many parents of twins do not embrace this idea for lots of different reasons. From a practical standpoint, without help from outside caretakers, the notion of alone time is unrealistic. Understandably, many parents who have limited help want to spend the time away from their children to enjoy *their* alone time or to plan that well-deserved date night with their husbands. Nevertheless, I have learned through my work with many families that resistance to or lack of awareness about the importance of spending alone time is not strictly a matter of logistics, finances, or inconvenience.

There are a number of possible explanations. My friend Sheila, similar to many other moms of multiples, certainly considered her fraternal boy/girl twins as individuals. She celebrated their uniqueness in terms of names and clothing; yet, this awareness did not extend to the importance of spending alone time with each baby. She felt that the *triadic connection* between her babies and herself blinded her to the importance of spending time alone. She recalled vivid memories and visceral images of those overwhelmingly difficult first few months. She reminisced, with a sad smile on her face, about the time her husband had come home from work to find Sheila and the babies crying - all three of them lying together on the blanket covered floor. She remembered her reactions after seeing those first ultrasound images of the fetuses. The indelible visual memory of the two babies embarking upon this journey inside of her conceptually created a threesome that continued well after the babies were born. Also, Sheila said that taking care of TWO babies gave her a sense of success, mastery and competence – feelings she desperately longed for in the face of sleep deprivation, frustration, and depression. Looking back on this time she reflected that it did not occur to her to go out with each one separately because the trio was thriving well. Sheila spends alone time now with her four year old son and daughter whenever she can. She relishes the time and rejoices that doctor appointments can be handled one at a time!

My experience with alone time is a bit different. Being an identical twin and the mother of three singletons before I gave birth to my fraternal twin sons, I did not subscribe to what I call the “twin mystique”. I define this term to mean a romanticized or idealized notion of the twin bond. Unlike many mothers of twins, I did not have worrisome concerns that my spending alone time with Jonny and David would interfere or jeopardize

their connection. On the contrary, based upon my own experience growing up in a culture that perpetually thinks about twinship as a magical and mystical experience, I deliberately accentuated the separate experiences as I felt that this would strengthen my bond with each child. While this thinking may seem counterintuitive, I believe that it is sound advice because a child's sense of self is inextricably linked to his attachment with his parents. In my struggle to feel bonded to Jonny and David, I took both boys out separately from the time they were born. It did not occur to me that I was breaking any taboo or interfering with their relationship. In addition, time alone helped to minimize the effects of the twin attention on the other children. My efforts to provide both boys with individual attention whenever possible were motivated by my own struggles about feeling as if I were half of a whole and recognizing that ***being seen*** is not the same as ***being known***.

Cultural taboos as well as societal stereotypes also make it difficult for some families to plan for alone time. A mom in my twin support group told me that separating siblings – whether they be twins or singletons – in order to spend alone time is simply not acceptable in her culture. She shared that she and her older brother by three years did everything together outside of school. As she reflected upon it, she realized that it was similar to having a twin. While she is still very connected to her brother, she related that her parents played a secondary role in her life. She said with utmost candor that she would not be able to tolerate the criticism and disapproval of her extended family if she were to decide to try to be alone with each of her twins.

Of course, all of us have our unique life circumstances and complex variables underscore our parenting decisions. The parental longing to keep twins paired because of the twin mystique, pregnancy and birth experiences, and the sheer fact that they look so precious together distract us from focusing upon the importance of nurturing the parent-child connection. Committing to alone time and working through protests and anxieties on the part of both twins and their parents is an important goal. A strong bond with one's parents is the cornerstone of healthy emotional growth and an avenue toward achieving a harmonious twin relationship. ■

