



Classroom choice:

It's your decision

by Elizabeth Blevins

What's the best choice for your multiples when they start school? Should they be placed in the same classroom or separated?

"I know it's easier for you to have your boys in the same class," a well-meaning teacher told me when I registered my twin boys for kindergarten. "But it really is better for them to be separated."

That was my first experience with the public school system and I was a little intimidated by the whole process of filling out forms, watching my kids go through endless screenings, meeting with the guidance counselor, talking with the kindergarten teachers and touring the school. Not to mention, I was in emotional turmoil over the reality that the tiny infants I held in my arms only yesterday were going to "the big school."

I had tried to prepare my boys and myself for this huge milestone in their lives. I sent them to preschool two days a week for two years, which I had fooled

myself into believing was just like "regular school." We talked about kindergarten all summer long. We drove by the school, looked at school buses and attended the school open houses. As the time drew nearer, though, it all became overwhelming and I was—for lack of a better term—freaking out. My babies were going to be riding a bus—all by themselves. They were going to have to find their own way to their classroom, make new friends, buy their own lunches... and, who knows what else. On top of all these worries, I needed to make a decision that could affect Andrew and Nathan's first experience with school and maybe even set the tone for their entire adolescent development. Should I keep them in the same classroom or separate them?

It seemed to me that the best choice for them during this time of transition would be to stay together. I felt that they would find comfort and feel less threatened by this new experience if they were

together. That's why I boldly and adamantly announced to the teachers, guidance counselors and anyone else, "I want my boys to be kept together."

Now, in the face of this professional educator telling me that my desire was not only wrong but was also somehow selfish, I began to doubt myself. Could I not know my twins as well as I thought? Did I want to keep them in the same classroom because it would make them feel more comfortable, or because it would make me feel more comfortable? Could the expert be right? Should all twins be separated? I didn't think so then ... and I don't think so now.

When I consulted the literature, there were differing views on the subject. Many experts, like the school teacher with whom I spoke, believe that separating twins in school will help develop their individuality while decreasing constant comparisons made by teachers, other students and the twins themselves. As par-



ents know, competition between multiples can become a real stumbling block to their development and self-esteem.

On the other hand, some experts believe that twins benefit from the social support they give one another when placed in the same classroom. Separation can actually be detrimental because the twins receive the message that there is something wrong with being a twin. Instead of viewing their relationship as unique and special, they begin to view it as different ... even abnormal.

Still confused, I spoke with adult twins. Janet, a co-worker and identical twin, was grateful that she and her sister were never separated in school. She did wish, however, that they had been forced to interact more on an individual basis in high school. Leaving each other to go away to college was almost unbearable because they had never been separated at any point in their lives.

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Where did the separation policy come from?

Extensive TWINS Magazine research into the academic foundations of separation rules failed to uncover studies or citations supporting separation of multiples in school. In fact, we found no empirical research documenting the experiences of multiples in school, separated or together, or the experiences of educators dealing with multiples together in a classroom.

Educators surmise that separation policies often stem from widely held assumptions about early childhood development in the 1960s when experts stressed the importance of the individual. Overly zealous educators likely extended the thinking to include all twins, regardless of situation or individual needs.

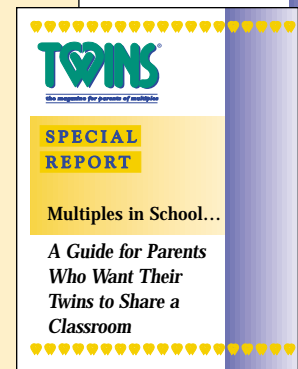
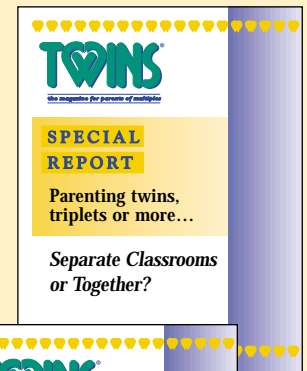
Educators today are quick to point out that these assumptions have changed dramatically in recent years, especially since 1985 when the birth rate of multiples began to soar.

How to plea for togetherness

The best argument for keeping multiples together in school is fairly straightforward: Separating multiples in kindergarten sometimes introduces an element of stress into their lives that makes early education experiences so unhappy they cannot learn and achieve the way parents believe they should.

Fortunately, many school administrators and teachers today are quite willing to listen to individual families and make their decisions on a case-by-case basis. Yet not all educators seem quite ready to toss out the rules that have been in place for many years.

TWINS Magazine advocates keeping twins together in the early years and publishes two special reports for parents who face separation issues in the classroom: "A Guide for Parents Who Want Their Twins to Share a Classroom" and "Separate Classrooms or Together?" These reports can help you build a successful case for keeping your multiples together in a classroom. For more information, or to order the reports, call (888) 555-TWINS.



Thriving in a common classroom

- Make sure the teacher views your children as individuals, not a unit.
- Check in with their teacher frequently.
- Help your multiples' teacher to tell them apart without relying on artificial means, such as seat assignments or nametags. Give the teacher a few clues, such as "Sally has freckles on her left ear." Encourage your multiples to dress differently. If one always wears blue, let the teacher know that. Or cut their hair differently — if they agree.
- At the same time, gently point out to their teacher that your twins shouldn't be compared and labeled to differentiate them. ("Mary's the shy one.")
- Expect the teacher to place your twins in separate study groups and promote friendships with others in the class.



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Wanda, a 70-something identical twin whom Andrew, Nathan and I bumped into at the grocery store, told me that people don't understand the bond between twins. Unlike Janet, she was separated from her sister in school and said that while they enjoyed having their own friends, they wished that they

were together more. This feeling was intensified for her now, she told me, because her sister had just passed away.

Having read what the psychologists, pediatricians and educators had to say, and then talking to twins myself, I decided that to make this decision, I needed to look at my own twins.

Andrew and Nathan are very sweet,

Separation: excerpts from experts

Although the elementary school that Cyndy Salamati's twins attend offered her the choice of separating or keeping her boys together, she was surprised to learn that many schools around the country have a "twin policy" that mandates separation. Cyndy's interest was aroused and she began researching the reasoning behind such a policy. She summarizes what she read.

The Joy of Twins (Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988), Pamela Patrick Novotny

The author states that the need to separate twins lies in the fear they will be "pathologically dependent on each other if not forced to strike out on their own while still young." Our society places great importance on individualism and fosters the belief that keeping twins together only invites comparisons that will hurt the twins, and obstruct their ability to develop separate identities. "The best policy," Novotny suggests, "seems to be no policy at all, which means that each year, you and your children need to decide what will work best for you."

The Art of Parenting Twins (Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999) by Patricia Maxwell Malmstrom and Janet Poland

Malmstrom and Poland agree with Novotny. "Twins vary in their need to be in separate or the same classrooms from year to year." The authors argue that twins benefit from placement together, however. They make the point "there is no research supporting the idea that separation is necessary for the growth of individuality at this stage. In fact, the evidence suggests that

twins who are separated inappropriately are liable to regress and cling more tightly to their relationship." The authors recommended separation if both children initiate the request, when they're different in personalities and abilities and one twin has trouble keeping up or if they are getting locked into roles that might restrict their behavior.

The Parents' Guide to Raising Twins (St. Martin's Press, 1983) by Elizabeth Friedrich and Cherry Rowland

The authors point out that starting twins in elementary school together makes it easier for each of them to settle into the new environment, especially if they go to a school where they don't know anyone else. Friedrich and Rowland, however, cite several twin behaviors that could "inhibit one or the other from participating fully in an area of schoolwork or play if they are kept together." For example, twins trying to be exactly the same or, in contrast, making an effort to pull apart and establish separate identities.

Separation may also be in the twins' best interest if one twin feels that he or she can't compete with the other in certain activities and, rather than risk failure, abandons attempts to participate, or in cases where one or both twins struggle with issues of inferiority or domination. For the most part, the authors encourage individualism and strongly suggest separation in the primary school environment.

Cyndy Salamati lives in Brookfield, Wis., with her 7-year-old twin boys.

self-assured little boys. They tremendously enjoy being together, but they also enjoy the company of other children. They are sensitive, caring and smart. When asked, they said they would like to have the same teacher and be in the same classroom. I agreed and decided that for my twins, separation would be detrimental — both socially and emotionally.

After the first grading period, Andrew and Nathan's kindergarten teacher agreed with me too. She made sure they had opportunities in the classroom to be on separate teams, to work at different stations with other children and to be themselves. At the same time she gave them the opportunity to be together. During our first parent-teacher conference, she was pleased to report that my boys were doing very well and she saw absolutely no problems with keeping them together.

So is this the best choice for every set of twins? No, I don't believe so. If there is one thing that I learned in my search it is that, as every child is different, every situation is different. For your twins or multiples, separation may be the best choice. It may be an opportunity for them to shine as individuals, to develop a positive sense of self and to experience a world outside of each other. Or, your twins, like mine, may find needed comfort and stability in being together. They may flourish as a team and be able to strike a balance between being together and being with others. Like nearly all aspects of parenting multiples, this is an issue that you need to figure out on your own — with the help of your children. Don't be afraid to ask others to get new perspectives, but ultimately, you know your children best.

Plan to revisit this issue every year. I believe that we made the best choice for Andrew and Nathan this year, but I also know from experience that they continue to grow and change. And, what's best for them down the road may be different. Such is life as a mother of multiples.

Elizabeth Blevins is a freelance journalist who lives with her four children, including 6-year-old identical twins, in Portsmouth, Ohio. ♡