

Together or separately?

To improve our understanding of when twinship can be a resource or a vulnerability in relation to school start, the importance of twins attachment and identity must be understood.

Attachment theory is one of the most important theories regarding how people adapt to new and strange situations and how people in doing so, throughout their lives, use their most important close relationships. A close relationship is not necessarily an attachment, one can have a close relationship with a friend or a sibling without that person being fundamental to ones sense of security. Twins often have a close relationship, but do they have a genuine attachment when starting school and if so, what is it's significance in relation to school start.

Intity has been defined very differently within different theoretical frameworks. Our current understanding of twin's identity is largely based on a modern essentialistic perspective. A postmodern narrative understand is suggested, which resolves current dilemmas between twins individual identity and their identity as twins and has new implications for when and how the twin relationship can be understood as a vulnerability or a resource during school start.



Attachment is characterized by four key behaviors:

1. **Proximity seeking:** At the age of 4-7 twins (especially MZ) prefer to join each other when going on play dates (Koch, 1966), many twins wish to go in the same class (Preedy, 2010) and especially MZ seek each other in groups of peers (Thorpe, 2003).
2. **Separation distress:** In an adapted strange situation test twins react to separation from each other (Gottfried et. al., 1994) and there are reports of many twins having been unhappy at being separated in school (Gleeson et al., 1990; Preedy, 2010).
3. **Safe haven:** Twins seek each other, when in need of security, comfort and understand (Ainslie, 1997; Klein, 2003).
4. **Secure base:** In school twins can be seen to seek out each other in breaks (Segal, 1999) and many twins are affected if their co-twin is not well (Preedy, 2010). Twins seem to keep an eye on each other, which underpin their ability to concentrate (Hay in Stewart 2003).

These examples of twin's attachment behavior illustrate that many twins already seem to have a genuine attachment relationship when starting school.

The importance of twin's mutual attachment when starting school, must be viewed in light of:

1. It's position in their attachment hierarchy during school start.
2. Twins expectation of mutual availability and experience of breaches of this.
3. The significance of twins having their secure base present when exploring school life.
4. The significance of twins attachment style.

1. How central an attachment figure is in a person's attachment hierarchy, depends on how much the attachment figure penetrates various aspects of the attached persons life, which is based on:

- **Time spent together:** Twins spend more time together than singleton siblings (Goshen-Gottstein, 1980; Preedy, 2010).
- **Emotional commitment:** Twins often have a mutual friendship (Danby & Thorpe, 2005) and a higher degree of commitment (Wazlawik, 2008).
- **Quality of caring:** Twins can probably give each other a more contextual appropriate support at school, from a more age-appropriate understanding of each others' experiences, than any other attachment figure in their attachment hierarchy.
- **Social cues:** Contexts dominated by same age peers must necessarily emphasize twins reciprocal attachment relationship. The school is very much a context that invites the twins to base their sense of safety in their (same age) co-twin.

These examples illustrate that many twin's mutual attachment may be very central in their attachment hierarchy and especially when starting school.

2. Twin's possible experience of breaches of their expectations to each others availability must be understood in light of twin's unique situation when starting school:

- Singletons may form an asymmetrical attachment to their sibling. Peers may serve ad hoc attachment functions from middle childhood but not as attachment figures before adolescence, approximately around the age of 15. Therefore having a symmetrical reciprocal attachment in childhood is not normative during school start (Kobak et al. 2005; Zeifman & Harzan, 2008). Twin's symmetrical attachment when starting school must be very unique.
- It is not normative to share the school context with an attachment figure of central importance in ones attachment hierarchy.
- Twins expectations of each other's availability is not normative. Many are accustomed to having each other available in contexts dominated by peers and have little or no experience with being without each other among peers before starting school (Preedy, 2010).

Generalizations from singletons asymmetrical attachment, regarding when it is normative for a child to react to breaches and having their attachment system activated, are not applicable to twin's symmetrical attachment.

3. Twin's exploration of school life does not seem to be inhibited by the fact that their secure base comes along, as these examples illustrate:

- MZ share more friends than DZos, but do not seem to have fewer friends (Thorpe & Gardner, 2006).
- The existing studies of twin's school placement find a transient negative effect of placing twins in the same class – not in separate (Tully et al., 2004; Van Leeuwen et al., 2005; Webbink et al., 2007).

4. Twin's attachment style has implications for their adaption to school life. 70% of twins have the same attachment to their primary caregivers (van Ijzendoorn, 2000) and therefore most likely meet each other with the same attachment style (Vandel et al., 1988). Twin's attachment to their primary caregiver seems to be distributed with a slight overrepresentation of insecure attachment (A=23%, B=51%, C=16%) compared to van Ijzendoorn's (1999) global distribution (A=16%, B=58%, C=9%) (Birkholm-Buch, in review)

Insecure/avoidant (A)	Secure (B)	Insecure/ambivalent (C)
Twins will only minimally seek each other and do not profit from each other as a secure base for their exploration of school life. Therefore, being together or apart is less critical to their adjustment to school life. It is possible that the presence of the co-twin may make the new situation when starting school less strange, consequently lowering the experienced arousal. This would then reduce the tendency of children with an avoidant attachment style to react with hostility and aggression, and therefore create less negative social interaction, which would be more optimal for their adaptation to school life.	Twins will actively seek each other both for security, comfort and understanding as well as closeness, and they will benefit from close proximity to one another with regards to their exploration of school life. For some, the inability to have physical proximity could be seen as a violation of their expectations of each other's availability. This could trigger a separation reaction that activates the attachment system and separation will consequently be maladaptive for their exploration of and adjustment to school life - despite their secure attachment! This will particularly be the case if the decision goes against the twins' expectations about and experiences of having each other physically accessible in contexts dominated by peers. Other twins will not need the physical closeness to experience security. However, they will seek proximity to each other simply for pleasure and could miss each other to an extent that peers can not compensate for. This could also be maladaptive for their exploration of school life, but to a lesser degree. The same class will generally be most adaptive for securely attached twins.	Twins will seek each other, both for security, comfort and understanding as well as closeness. Because of their insecurity and ambivalence they will not benefit from proximity to each other, when their attachment system is activated. In such situations twins will remain preoccupied with each other at the expense of their exploration of school life. However, any form of physical separation could increase their arousal level further and be even more maladaptive for their exploration of school life. The same class will be most adaptive for twins with insecure ambivalent attachment, as this provides maximum security. Separation will generally be maladaptive.

The significance of twin's mutual attachment in the school:

- By recognizing twin's relationship as a genuine and unique attachment, twinship must be understood as a possible significant resource when starting school, especially when in the same class.
- Depending on the quality of their mutual, symmetrical attachment, placement in separate classes could impede some twins adaption to school life, which might even be the case if they have a secure attachment. Twins symmetrical attachment may explain why twins have more internalizing problems and inferior academic outcome in separate classes in the early years of school life (Tully et al., 2004; Van Leeuwen et al., 2005; Webbink et al., 2007).
- Because twin's situation when starting school is unique, twin's attachment may easily be misjudged: A secure attachment can be misinterpreted as "excessive dependence" while an insecure-resistant attachment can be misinterpreted as a "healthy" twin relationship. "Excessive dependence" will always be a product of the twins' attachment experiences and therefore cannot be understood as a "strong attachment" implying too much security, but must be understood as an insecure-ambivalent attachment style.
- **Focus should be shifted from the degree of twin's co-dependence to the quality of their mutual, symmetrical attachment - i.e. Instead of evaluating whether twins seek each other too much, based on when children generally seek their asymmetrical attachment figures, the focus should shift to whether the twins profit from their mutual proximity seeking behavior.**

A modern understanding of twins identity - involves certain dilemmas:

- Twins identity is often placed on a continuum from two separate individuals to a closely coupled pair, where it primarily is the degree of dependence that is the deciding factor in how much the twin's identity is characterized by their twinship. If twins define too much of who they are on their twinship, it is believed that the twinship may overshadow and inhibit the development of the individual's true inherent qualities (Klein, 2003; Preedy, 2010; Torgerson, 2004; Stewart, 2003).
- This essentialistic understanding of twins identity implies that:
 - The identity can be more or less true to ones inherent essence and more or less false, depending on the extent to which it overshadows ones "true" inner self. For twins, it might be hard to be perceived as having an appropriate individual ("true") identity: if they are too much alike or too opposite, if they complement each other too much or if they relate to much to others as a couple, it has been assessed that their individual identity is influenced too much by their twinship (Ibid.).
 - A dilemma arises between nurturing the twins close relationship and nurturing their individual identity. Because separate classes will reduce the influence of the twin relationship on their individual identity, separate classes becomes preferable, whenever the twins can handle the separation.

A postmodern narrative understanding of twins identity - can resolve these dilemmas:

- Identity is understood as a social phenomenon that people co-construct with each other, therefore twins are always co-authors in each other's identity narratives and can, for better or worse, validate each other's identity by mutually witnessing each others narratives about who they are and what they can together and / or individually.
- In this perspective individuals have endless opportunities to co-create narratives about who they are, and therefore there will always be aspects of life that will be overshadowed by more preferred narratives. Hence twinship can not be seen as an impediment to inherent qualities of the individual and the dilemma between nurturing the twins close relationship on one hand and their individual identity on the other hand dissolves.
- Rather than assess whether twins define too much of who they are from their twinship, i.e. have a more or less "true" identity based on normative qualities such as independence, the narrative understanding of identity focuses on the degree of flexibility, i.e. narrative multiplicity.

Multiple and flexible identity narratives - twinship as a resource:

- If the twinship offers more narrative positions to the individual child, the twinship can be considered a resource during school start, because narrative positions as both individuals and twins enhance their narrative multiplicity.
- Placement together may involve more narrative possibilities, because it may offer twins greater opportunity to co-construct narrative positions as both individuals and as a twins.
- Twins mutual validation and witnessing of each other's narratives will strengthen each child's narrative identity. In case of positive identity conclusions, of subjective value to the individual, this could imply greater self-esteem and confidence and less susceptibility to peer pressure or any other negative positioning of the individual child.
- Intervening in the twins opportunity to self-regulate when they want to make the narratives about themselves as twins be more or less prominent, could reduce their positional possibilities, and thus hamper the individual's narrative possibilities - this could be the case in same class, but in particular in separate.

Dominant and limiting identity narratives - twinship as a vulnerability:

- In some cases, twin's identity may rely on so few narratives that it imposes fewer positional options available to the individual child, and thereby overshadowing new and alternative options, thus limiting the individual child's opportunity to expand their narrative identity. Where applicable, the twins mutual witnessing and validation of their existing narratives will be an impediment to the individual child's narrative opportunities. This will especially be the case in the same class.
- If separated, the twin's ability to position themselves and each other so that limiting identity narratives are validated, could be reduced. In such cases separate classes will provide them with new opportunities to co-construct their identity narratives including their narratives about their twinship.
- In order to open up to new and thus more multiple narratives, the existing narrative identity must be expanded in such a way that the distance between the individual's previous experiences and the new narratives is not too big. For some twins, it is possible that separation will be experienced as a breach with their existing self-understanding, which would reduce their opportunities to expand their identity narratives, because in lacking valid narratives to lean against, they are missing a platform to do this from.

The significance of twins identity in school from a postmodern narrative perspective:

- Whether twinship is a resource or vulnerability during school start depends on whether twins are given opportunity to both maintain and expand their existing identity narratives, the goal being narrative multiplicity (i.e. flexibility) rather than some normative degree of independence.
- **Focus must be shifted from reducing the importance of twinship for the sake of their individual identity, to giving twins multiple ways of positioning themselves in relation to their twinship.**
- The emphasis on identity as a social phenomenon also implies that the assessment of twins should always involve their contextual opportunities to negotiate their identity - and not just be based on the two children and their interaction. The way twins are meet is therefore more relevant than the question of school placement.

- **Twins have a symmetrical non-normative attachment to each other, which can be particularly central in their attachment hierarchy when starting school.**
- **Twinship thus contains considerable resources for the individual child during school start, and it becomes evident that twin's possible co-dependence must be conceptualized as attachment and not as a sign of identity problems.**
- **Generally speaking it doesn't make sense to regard children's dependency as an identity problem. Children are dependent and they are dependent on their attachment figures. To the extent that twins have a non-normative mutual attachment in childhood, twin children will be dependent on their co-twin in a non-normative, but not necessarily, maladaptive way during school start.**
- **Secure attachment means that the individual's attachment system is neither over- nor under-regulated, as is the case, respectively with insecure/avoidant and insecure/ambivalent attachment. A secure attachment involves a flexible attachment system, which must be the optimal foundation for further co-construction of an identity characterized by a multiplicity of narratives (i.e. flexibility), in which the twinship can be a significant resource.**
- **With this new understanding of the significance of the twin relationship the following issues must be taken into consideration:**
 - **An assessment of the significance of twin's attachment should be based on whether they benefit from their proximity seeking behavior and not just too which degree they seek each other. Otherwise the significance of twin's mutual attachment may be misinterpreted and resources such as a secure attachment might be lost.**
 - **Proximity seeking behavior can be an expression of insecurity, and therefore the appropriate intervention should be to increase their security, which is not done by separating them.**
 - **The importance of twins identity (their subjective experience of themselves) should be assessed from the degree of flexibility - and not from normative expectations regarding the degree of for example independence, complementarity, splitting or polarization - twins can be twins in many different ways.**
 - **Twins school placement should provide them with options to both maintain and expand their existing identity narratives.**
 - **Attachment and identity are crucial in an assessment of the optimal school placement for the individual twin couple and must always be addressed in an overall evaluation of the significance of their special sibling relationship.**

