

# Teaching Twins

## A Conversation With Dr. Nancy Segal

**D**r. Nancy Segal is professor of developmental psychology as well as Director of the Twin Studies Center at California State University, Fullerton. She is the author of *Indivisible by Two: Lives of Extraordinary Twins and Entwined Lives*. Her involvement with twins is personal as well as professional: She has a fraternal twin sister.

Segal shared with *JS* some of her knowledge about teaching twins.



Nancy Segal

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**Q. Why are we fascinated by twins?**

**A.** In our culture, individuality is celebrated, even expected, so when we encounter two people who look and act so much alike, it challenges our beliefs. Most identical twins have a very close relationship. Everybody wants a soul mate, and identical twins seem to have been born with one. That's a real fascination for some people.

**Q. How can teachers be sensitive to the needs of twin students?**

**A.** It's very important to identify twins correctly. Ask other kids to call twins by name, not by "Hey, you." Parents can help by dressing identical twins differently [and] having their hair cut differently. Twins are individuals and regard themselves as such. They should not be treated as a unit.

I've dealt with a number of cases in which identical twins were accused of cheating because they turned in identical papers. But they think and act very much alike. When taking a test in the same class, they should be seated far apart to avoid any suspicion of cheating.

**Q. Should twins be placed in separate classrooms?**

**A.** I think that there should be no policy, period. You have to take every pair as it comes. Monitor the twins' progress, and be flexible. In the early grades, twins are often better off together. They're used to the companionship, and it's kind of unfair to make twins separate from each other and from parents at the same time.

Teachers should look at whether the children like being together. Ask the parents what they think. If the twins are too close, they can be put at different tables in the same classroom. That way, they have the security of being together but are allowed some separation. You want them to interact with other children. Boy/girl twins may be the ones you want to separate earliest, because girls mature ahead of boys, and the boys may feel a little bit left behind. But twins should always be kept in the same grade. Otherwise, people make unfair comparisons.

**Q. Has your study of twins influenced your position on the nature/nurture debate?**

**A.** I've always believed that genes have a substantial effect on development. [My twin sister and I] are very different, even though we were

raised in the same household.

What surprised me most was when I studied twins who had been raised apart. They had some unusual, striking, quirky habits in common that may have a genetic basis. In one pair of raised-apart twins, both wore rubber bands around their wrists, and both thought it was funny to sneeze loudly in elevators.

**Q. If so much about a person is genetically determined, how much impact can a teacher have?**

**A.** Genetically *influenced*; I would never say genetically determined! Teachers have a very important impact. The influences we have in school are often the ones we remember most vividly throughout life. Teachers are responsible for identifying and nurturing *all* students' individual abilities and talents. That takes a lot of sensitive observation and skill. **JS**

Dr. Segal's Web page:  
[psych.fullerton.edu/nsegal/index.html](http://psych.fullerton.edu/nsegal/index.html)