Toddler Discipline Twin Style

Mothers and fathers of twins know that parenting twins is not "twice the work" of singletons. Parenting twins is "EXPONENTIALLY the work" of parenting singletons. Think "singleton, squared." I know. Not only do I care for twins (and triplets!) in the office, but also I have a set at home.

Discipline is tough. Twins squabble just like other siblings. The difficulty lies in that twins are at the exact same developmental stage as each other. In contrast, when you have a two-year-old and a four-year-old child, for example, you expect the two-year-old to **not** understand sharing or turn taking and you expect the four-year-old to understand both. Then, you can patiently explain to a four-year-old, "Well, if your younger sister has the doll, and you want it, you can make her very interested in another toy. Then, trade her the toy for the doll."

When you have two-year-olds fighting over the same toy, you have few options. You can force turn taking, which always involves crying (for the one who is waiting for her turn). You can put the toy in time out which causes both twins to cry. Or you can put both twins in time out which, to help you visualize, can be like putting two angry Houdini octopi into a net together.

Turn taking can be taught using the "count to ten" method. Take this scenario: both twins "need" the same red car at the exact same time. You know that the only reason twin B wants the car is because twin A has the car (this is the same logic as for any sibling: "I covet what you have because you have it.") You give the car to twin A and stay with twin B, hold his hand, and say, "When we get to ten, your brother will give the car to you." Then you slowly count out loud to ten. If twin A does not give up the car, then gently take the car from him and say, "Now your brother gets the car until we get to

ten." Stay with twin A while twin B plays with the car and you count out loud to ten. Keep switching off until one brother says "I don't want it" or simply gives the car away by the time you get to 3 or 4 in your count.

Using the "count to ten" method teaches several lessons: 1) how to count to ten, 2) how to wait your turn, and 3) that fairness matters in your home. You also convey to your child that you will not abandon a crying, frustrated two-year-old. The textbooks say that two-year-olds are young to learn to share. However, twins must learn how to share. And you know what? This method works.

When my twins started preschool at two-and-one-half years old, I warned their teacher that if she saw either of my twins standing next to a classmate and counting to ten slowly, loudly, and deliberately, that my child would expect that child to hand over whatever toy she had when my child got to ten! I had to prep my twins that home rules may differ from classroom rules.

What about time out? Time out doesn't work as well with toddler twins. If one twin is in time out, the other twin will sabotage the time out by making a raucous. One time, I put one of my twins in time out for biting the other one. Because the biter was crying, the victim startled me when he also started crying and yelling "Let him out of Time Out, Mommy!" One way around this is to put the toy that precipitated the squabble in time out instead of the child (one minute per year of the twin's age).

Even at the end of the day, discipline for twins differs. For twins who share a bedroom, every night is a slumber party. When my twins became old enough to talk to each other before falling asleep, I moved their bedtime earlier to allow them extra time to talk. I found their conversations too cute to interrupt and didn't have the heart to enforce sleep time. Plus I like to think that it made up for any bickering (ok,

fighting and tears) that occurred during that day and allowed for extra bonding time. Like so many other aspects of parenting, sometimes you just have to go with the flow.

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With special thanks to my psychology-major lawyer-friend Karen for passing on the “count to ten” stroke of genius method of teaching “twin sharing.”