

THOUGHTS ON PARENTING A TWINLESS CHILD

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Parenting my oldest son seemed fairly straightforward. I expected more challenge raising busy twin babies, and was getting psyched for it when our world fell apart in February, 1997. Jared was born a sole survivor, a 3 pound, 9 ounce premie, seven weeks early because his identical twin brother Bryan had died from a cord accident within two days of their birth.

As Jared enters toddlerhood, I'm daily realizing that the unique parenting path trod by grieving multiple-birth parents is largely uncharted territory. There are a few important points to keep in mind as we proceed through this life with our survivors but without our precious lost children.

Above all, we need to be cautious not to read too much into our survivors' behavior and expect them to be inconsolable over their loss. We don't want to doom them to despair. Their primitive, formless grief from losing their womb-mates is quite different from the complex way adults experience the same loss. Unquestionably, survivors are imprinted with the knowledge that they once were part of a pair. Adult survivors of stillborn or infant twin loss often report a sense of loneliness even if they are unaware of their twinship. Although we cannot replace their twins, we can give our surviving infants abundant love, consistent discipline, security and confidence, which are the things they'll need to maximize their happiness and success when they are grown.

Caring for a surviving infant is made difficult by the simultaneous grief. Parents can become withdrawn from their survivor, pulling away lest they be hurt by another loss, or alternatively can become smothering, pouring all their energies into the remaining child. Many parents admit they've missed a lot of the joy of parenting because the grief process has necessarily been combined with their survivor's early development. We constantly see the absence of the twin who should have accompanied our baby. Perhaps it helps to know that parents with two living twins must divide their time between them, and each receives less attention than they would if they were singletons. Looked at from that standpoint, I believe our surviving twins receive the amount of care they would have if their twin was alive. Their deceased twin occupies much of their parents' time the first few years, as we negotiate the early stages of grief. I still consider myself very much a mother of twins, since I spend considerable time remembering and honoring Bryan in addition to guiding Jared.

Our toddlers and older children need discipline--teaching, correction and guidance. This is such a rough task as Jared leaves infancy. It hurts to raise my voice to him, since I'm ever-conscious of his unfair loss at birth and his rough start in life. Parents of older surviving twins have told me of their reluctance to discipline their children, and many family members accuse them of "spoiling" their survivors. We

doubtless will be guilty of letting them get away with some things, since we already feel sorry for their suffering, yet they still need to learn to get along in an unkind world. Hopefully God will help us to successfully complete this task as our twinless children grow.

As parents, unless we are twins ourselves, we have not personally experienced the "twin bond." We can only observe it in others and imagine what it would be like to have shared our earliest development with a partner. I'm frustrated to realize there's much I'll never understand about that relationship. I struggle with the twin encounters I have when I am out with Jared. It pains me to see parents who have what I will never have, an intact set of living twins, but I know also that Jared needs to learn what twins are. Several parents have reported that their survivors seem to get along especially well with twin classmates in preschool, and with babysitters who are twins or surviving twins. Likewise, some older twin children seem particularly drawn to our lone twins. Whether or not there is any mystical bond that allows twins to recognize others of their kind, such experiences allow our survivors a glimpse of the uniqueness of twinship.

I believe Jared will someday meet Bryan again in heaven. He will be raised with the knowledge that he is a twin. But since it will hopefully be a very long time before that reunion occurs, my job is to guide him to be the best individual he can be, while knowing that he should have been not only an individual, but half of a pair, with a living partner and soulmate.