

## American Family Portraits

# The Generation Gap

Last fall we loaded up the car with 18-year-old Jake's clothes and computer, his towels and bedding, his supply of energy bars and *Iron Man* magazines, and made the five-hour trip to the college of his choice. I cried most of the way, suddenly realizing that, for me, the hardest job in parenting would be learning to open my arms and let my son try his wings in the world alone.

In my ongoing efforts to do this, I am being saved from abject failure, as well as utter embarrassment, by only one thing, a 48-pound secret weapon, Jake's 7-year-old sister, Rose. The fact that this squiggly little bundle of needs is still tucked safely at home with us, a bottomless repository for stories and lessons and cookies and kisses, makes the recent absence of her big brother *almost* bearable. Comfortably close by, she is giving me a second round of birthday parties and macaroni necklaces, glitter artwork and ungrudging cuddles, just as I am saying farewell to the first.

This is only the latest in a slew of dividends I've accrued as a result of having my children 11½ years apart.

Not that my husband and I ever planned to leave so much open space between our children. It's simply that we were older parents, and by the time we were ready for a second child, conceiving one was no longer the piece of cake it had been the first time around. Ultimately, it took us several years to accomplish.

So the fact that my children now live hundreds of miles apart is merely the latest evidence of their disparate circumstances from day one. The 11½ years between their births has meant that, metaphorically at least, they have always lived in two different worlds. It's also meant that, as their mother, I've always had to straddle both these spheres, a situation that I

can truthfully say has made life uniquely interesting.

Having one foot in the brightly colored playroom of a kindergartner, and the other in the murky den of an adolescent is, let me assure you, more than enough to keep you permanently off balance. When one of your children will eat only sushi, and the other will eat only gummy bears, what do you plan for dinner? When one of your children needs help writing a paper on Native American medicine, and the other needs help playing doctor (to the dog!), how do you switch intellectual gears quickly enough to do justice to each? When one of your children is fighting his curfew, and the other is fighting her bedtime, where do you choose to do battle?

But if questions like these have left me dizzy on more than one hectic evening, juggling two separate worlds has, on the whole, proved more exhilarating than exhausting, and has helped me to see that each is oddly reflective of the other. (For instance, both my children are always testing the limits of their various childhood constraints, whether that means refusing to take a nap or refusing to take a shave.) Moreover, trying to maintain my balance while they push my buttons from either side has kept me on my toes, from which vantage point I can watch my brawny first born connect with his pee-wee sister. It's a sight I've always found rewarding beyond words. They may look like a circus act—he Herculean, she a peanut—but they have provided one another with an attachment both instructive and incredibly loving.

While they've never had to share their toys (Jake prefers cellular phones to Barbie Walkie Talkies, and Rose prefers her Disney tapes to *Pumping Iron*), my children teach one another invaluable lessons and give one another inestimable gifts. Last year, for instance, when Rose was a kindergartner in the same



Far apart in age, Rose and Jake nevertheless give each other great gifts.

school where Jake was a senior, he walked her to her classroom every morning, proudly introducing her along the way to the fellow giants who were his friends, thereby making her, too, feel 10 feet tall. In turn, her little face seems to coax out the tenderness he usually keeps hidden behind a veneer of adolescent bravado, thereby giving him opportunities to air his secret sweetness. He will do for her what he would not do for anyone else. When it was her turn to bring something to show-and-tell, for example, she decided to bring him—and, like a tame bear, he gamely let himself be displayed to a roomful of her gaping, Lilliputian classmates. ("You're bringing a *person* for show-and-tell?" asked one stupefied 6-year-old.)

My children's relationship delights me, as does the realization that the decade-plus between them has added just that much more time to my nurturing years, giving me extended tenure as a hands-on parent. It's a role I figure I'm destined to play, all told, for about 30 years. And a lucky thing it is, too, because for the life of me I can't think of anything in this big wide world I'd rather do. ■

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