

I'll never forget the way my mother and father used to greet each other when he came home from work at night—maybe not every night, but enough nights for it to matter. I'd be lying on the living-room floor doing my homework or daydreaming over a book, and I'd watch as they met in the front hall and gave one another a hug and a kiss—not just a perfunctory pat and peck on the cheek, but a real hug and kiss. Their embrace made it apparent, even to an utterly self-absorbed adolescent like me, that they were still in love.

I always knew my parents adored me and my sister. They made that obvious in many ways. But they also made it clear that they loved one another, with a grown-up-to-grown-up sort of love that was somehow different from what they felt for us.

The four of us did a lot of things together as a family: weekend visits to Grandma and Grandpa; summers in a rented house at the beach; Sunday dinners out. At the same time, my parents did a lot of things on their own. And when they would leave the house for an evening out, to go to a party or to dinner with their friends, it was obvious that they were beautifully suited to one another, and that being together made them happy. I remember how comforting it was to see all this, and how solid and enduring our home felt because of it. One of the things I want most in life is to have my children feel the same way about the home their father and I are making for them.

I think this desire was in the back of my mind when my husband and I decided to become parents. Because at the same time we made that decision, we also determined to try and preserve something of our preparent relationship, and some of the privacy we shared as a couple.

When our son, Jake, was born 16 years ago, prominent among all the new equipment we installed in our home was a lock on our bedroom door. This was not so much something to keep him out as it was a symbol of our intention to keep part of "us" intact. To this day, we make it a practice to wake up earlier than Jake and his sister, Rose, and, turning the key in that selfsame lock, take some private time to make love, discuss what's going on in our lives or work out a parental strategy or decision.

By the time Jake was 6 months old, it became clear that we couldn't take it for granted we'd always find time to be

alone together. So we arranged for our favorite baby sitter to come to our home every Wednesday night. Wednesdays became our "date" nights out. We'd meet friends, or go to a movie, or just have a quiet dinner alone where we could catch up and reconnect outside the perimeters of parenthood. Those nights out kept us sane and insured that we went on seeing each other as the friends and lovers we still were, not simply as the co-parents we had become.

For the past few years, we've trusted a proud Jake to baby-sit Rose, now 5, on the evenings we go out. We've also enlisted the help of willing relatives to allow us the luxury of occasional brief, child-free vacations. These usually last for no more than a long weekend, but they give us time to unwind and recapture the sense of fun that was so much a part of our early relationship. Then they return us to our children refreshed and—as we tumble into their arms—eager to take up our parental duties.

When it comes to tumbling into *each other's* arms, my husband and I have never subscribed to the "not in front of the children" school of thought. Our kids are used to seeing us hug and kiss whenever the impulse strikes us, and they know that they are always wel-

come to join in—which they often do, spontaneously turning our embraces into whole-family-hugs.

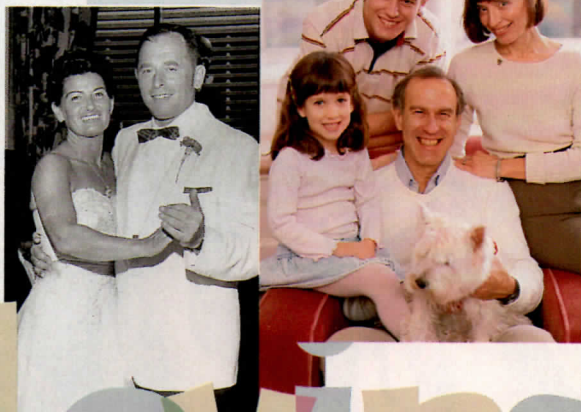
Ultimately, I believe that taking pains to remain a couple within our family has made me and my husband better parents because we've never resented our children for taking us away from one another. Rather than diluting our relationship, they've enhanced it, sharpening the mutuality of our joys and our concerns. In return, I like to think that we are passing along to them a legacy of loving—the same one, in fact, that my mother and father passed along to me.

For if my parents gave me and my sister many things when we were growing up—summers at camp, family vacations, piano lessons and pets—probably their greatest gift to us was not something they purchased, but something they effortlessly modeled by the way they lived: the image of what it means to be a loving couple.

It's that lesson as much as any other that I want my children to learn. ■

Bette-Jane Raphael is a writer and an editor-at-large for FAMILY CIRCLE.

The author (right) passes on to her children her parents' (below) legacy of love.



LOVING Couples Mean Happy Children

FC By Bette-Jane Raphael

