

What I Learned from My Children

By Bette-Jane Raphael

Like every woman who chooses to have children, I always knew that responsible motherhood would entail teaching my offspring many important lessons as I steered them toward adulthood. What I didn't realize was that becoming a mother would mean becoming a pupil as well—and that the lessons my son and daughter would teach me would be copious enough to fill a college syllabus. Class meets every day we spend together.

Take, for instance, the afternoon four years ago when the three of us got stuck in traffic on the way to the dentist. It was 10 minutes before our appointment, and we were sitting on a bus 20 blocks away. Upset, I began moaning about the fact that we were going to be late.

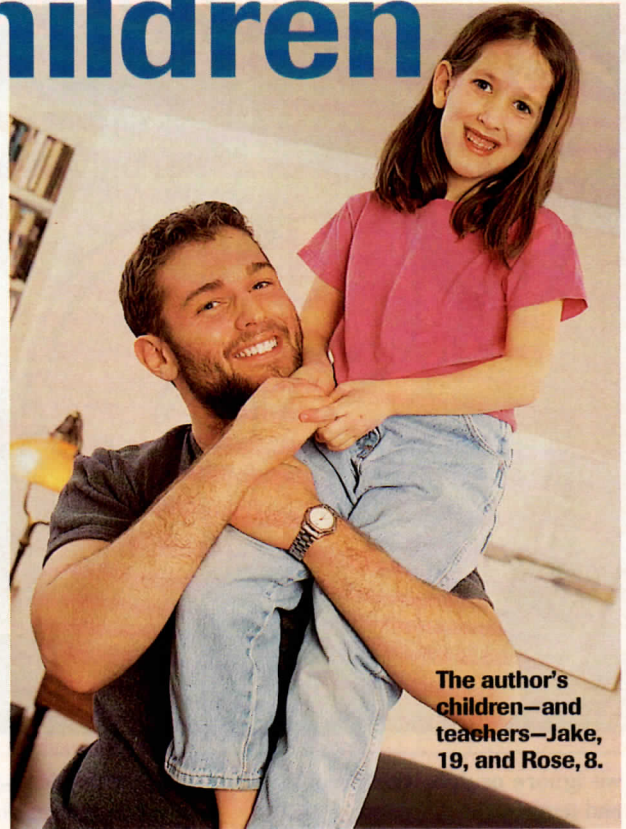
That's when my son, Jake, who was 15 at the time, turned to me with the look of amused perplexity he displays whenever I totally lose it. "Mom," he said as his eyes searched my face for signs of sanity, "it's a dentist appointment!" By which he clearly meant that if we were five minutes late it was No Big Deal. My instinctive reaction was to argue the point, when it suddenly occurred to me that he could, quite possibly, be right. Instantly I felt my panic subside to a manageable level. Then I looked over at Jake, tapping his fingers rhythmically to some unseen beat of his own, and I wondered for perhaps the thousandth time how such an easygoing kid could possibly be related to me or to my purposeful, achievement-oriented husband.

I then turned to my daughter, Rose, who at age four was sitting on the edge of her seat as anxiously as if it were an electric chair. Her distress made it clear once again that while her face may be a girlish replica of my husband's, her personality is all mine. In fact, she seems to have compressed my traits into her little frame so compactly that they appear way more pronounced in her than they do in me.

Certainly her joyousness makes my own seem pitiable in comparison. Nobody can dance around our apartment with such happy abandon. But if my skin is thin, Rose's is phyllo; if I tend not to take criticism well, Rose rejects it flat out, maintaining a pint-size papal infallibility at all costs; if I have trouble being cheerful, Rose can be a miniature Kafka.

So my children aren't carbon copies of me, and if, out of pride or vanity, I ever hoped they would be, I no longer do. In fact, I now consider our dissimilarity a blessing because it's from our differences that I learn.

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The author's children—and teachers—Jake, 19, and Rose, 8.

From Jake I find constant instruction in the disparity of our outlook on, and responses to, daily life. From Rose I find continual edification in the sight of my own magnified characteristics being played out in someone else. From our everyday life together, I garner a wealth of indispensable truths—everything from how O.K. it is to make spaghetti for breakfast, if that's what a four-year-old wants to eat for breakfast, to how important it is to apologize to those who are smaller than you when you are in the wrong.

Taken together, these little epiphanies have given me perspective on life's thornier issues: on the trade-offs between freedom and responsibility, which seem to be equitable indeed; on the essentials of a happy marriage, which seem to be equally divided between romance and its products; even on the cult of celebrity—if you want to be celebrated, two children who love you make a fair-size cult.

I've always adored the macaroni necklaces and glitter Valentines meant to let me know that my kids are glad I'm their mom. But as treasured as these things are, what are even more precious, what leave me in my children's debt, are the lessons they have taught me—lessons about myself, about life and about the odd little jokes of heredity. **FC**

Jenny Acheson

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