

One mom deals with parallel universes

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

The Toddler and the Teenager

ONE OF MY CHILDREN WON'T let me out of her sight; the other can't stand the sight of me.

One will only wear Polo; the other will only wear purple.

One is fighting bedtime; the other is fighting a curfew.

Being the mother of a teenager and a toddler is a little like living in Alice's Wonderland and munching on curious morsels labeled "EAT ME." One minute you're bigger than anyone in sight; the next, you're a diminutive creature looking up at hulking giants.

Sometimes I feel as if my feet are planted uneasily in two parallel universes, and I'm dealing with problems that more or less mirror one another, but in a fun house-mirror sort of way. Last fall, for instance, my son Jake started high school the same week that my daughter Rose started nursery school.

Having one foot in the murky world of adolescence and the other in the brightly colored world of a preschooler sometimes gives me insight, but often causes confusion.

When a refusal to use the potty and a request to stay out until midnight occur simultaneously, I get muddled. Which situation is more pressing? Which requires humor, and which a firm hand? What day is it?

Sometimes, too, the alternately rewarding and hair-raising discoveries I make about my kids leave my head spinning. One day I realize that Rose has added the word *beautiful* to her vocabulary; the next, that Jake is using four-letter words as if they tasted like chocolate in his mouth. One moment I find out that Rose can load *Bambi* into the VCR; the next, that Jake has a tape called *Debbie's Double Date* stashed in his desk drawer. One morning I learn that

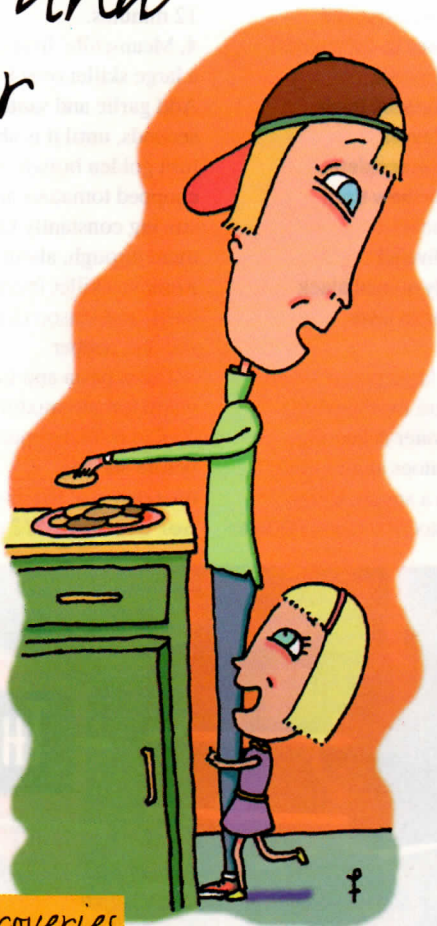
The discoveries

I make

about my kids

leave my

head spinning.



The author with husband Joel, daughter Rose, and son Jake.



from feeding peanut butter to the dog.

My husband and I never meant to have our children so far apart, but all things considered, we're not unhappy about the big age difference between them. For while there are drawbacks—Jake and Rose will never be rainy-day companions, for one thing (not until one of them hits 30, anyway)—there are pluses as well.

My children offer valuable lessons to each other. While Jake teaches his younger sister what it means to worship a living god and how to use the word *butt* for maximum effect, Rose teaches him what it means to nurture another human being. And that's one lesson a teenager can really use. In fact, right now she seems to be the only creature able to tap his mostly hidden well of tenderness. When she puts her arms around his knees to hug him, I can almost see his veneer of adolescent toughness melt away.

And, unlike siblings who are closer in age, Jake and Rose don't get in each other's way much. The roads they travel are so disparate (though oddly reflective of one another). She's engaged in learning how to make friends and present herself to the world while staying securely attached to us; he's trying to figure out how to detach himself from us and go out into the world without actually leaving home. Occasionally, we hear a cry of "Get her out of my room!" but for the most part Jake is away from the house enough of the time to enjoy his sister's in-your-face style of adoration when he deigns to be in residence.

Best of all, having our children so far apart has allowed me and my husband to stretch our nurturing years, to enjoy one more round of zoos and birthday cakes and ungrudging cuddles long after the first round is ended. Of course, we understand this means another round of chicken pox and braces and, ultimately, another round of (shudder) adolescence. But we're prepared to take the awful with the wonderful, knowing that they both come with the territory—a territory we happen to love. ■

Bette-Jane Raphael is a writer and editor, and the mother of 15-year-old Jake and 4-year-old Rose.