



Hangin' with the kids

For some adults, the best way to connect with a child is to be the grown-up friend their parent can't be, as Josephine Brouard reports.

It was when Rachael slept over one Saturday night, after we had visited the circus together the night before, that I knew something magical was happening. The next morning, I had barely opened my eyes when a figure in lilac pyjamas with pale face, big eyes and soft, dimpled smile was breathing softly on my cheeks. "Josephine," Rachael said, eyes fastened on me, "wake up! It's time for us to have breakfast."

I duly got out of bed and asked the rest of the sleepover crowd – my friend Sharon and her daughter, Cloudy – to join us. After a big, rowdy breakfast where I learned how important it was to have warm milk for the Coco Pops; eggs boiled just right, served with the requisite slivers of toast; and fruit

yoghurts to finish it all off, we settled down in our PJs on my big double bed to chat. I was a tad wrung out from coordinating a breakfast for four people with disparate tastes, a salutary reminder that I was a rank novice when it came to 'playing mum', but these thoughts evaporated as Rachael began regaling us with stories of her not-so-wicked stepmother.

We all hung on Rachael's every word as she imparted the importance, gleaned from same stepmother, of impeccable table manners: how to sit straight-backed at the table, in what order to pass the food, how to wipe one's lips on a linen napkin, and so on. I was gob-smacked as I lay there, taking it all in. And once again, I was reminded how much I enjoy the

company of children.

I am well into my forties, you see, and Rachael is nine, but the age gap doesn't diminish our friendship. We keep in touch; share confidences; call each other from time to time; and so on. I ask Rachael favours sometimes, and she of me... and like all good friends, we do our best to help each other out. I love this perky, intelligent little girl and have photographs of her around the house to remind me how much I love watching her grow up.

It's funny, you know, how life turns out. For some reason, much as I love children, I never had children of my own. When I hit 40 and realised I had not yet met the right man, let alone a father for my children, I accepted my fate quite philosophically. Instead, I

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concentrated with gusto on what people might consider second best, but which I, personally, consider first-rate. I call it 'being Auntie Mame'.

Ever since I can remember, I've been hanging out with kids half my age. They love me, and I adore them! I don't know why we connect – my friends reckon it's because my young friends get so much special attention.

It helps too, of course, if the parents of these children are happy with the arrangement – to be honest, I think it begins with the implicit love and trust the parents have in me keeping company with their child.

As early as 13 years of age, I was blessed with my first godchild, Annabel, and what a cutie she was. She used to trail behind me as I went through my own adolescence years and we struck a bargain that when I married, naturally she would be my numero uno bridesmaid. Darling Annabel waited forever and eventually married before me.

Now my curly-haired godchild is in her 30s and recently gave birth, after many mishaps, to twins. Though we now live on separate continents I was there with her in the maternity

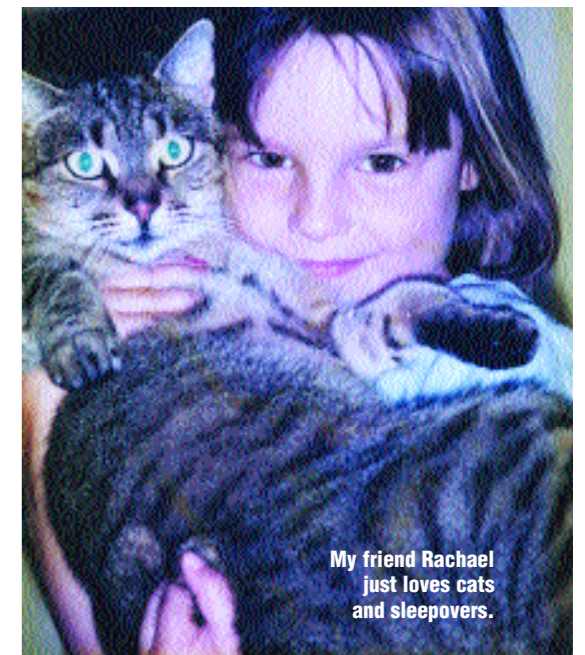
hospital and we cried together in relief at the happy event. I consider her still very close to my heart – she is one of a small circle of people who can, with uncanny understanding, complete my half-finished sentences.

These days, I have another godchild... five-year-old Max, an intense, intelligent little bloke who calls from time to time to summon me to his house. He tells me that he feels he hasn't seen me for a while; when am I coming to sleep over? And did I know that his dog, Ziggy, had to see the vet that week?

I have a cupboard at home filled with toys that Max seeks out the minute he walks in through my front door. He is quite annoyed if anything has moved; and woe betide if I have eaten any of the lollies he has hidden for himself in a special hiding place. (Alas, being the very grown-up child that I am, I usually have eaten them all, and have had to replace them before Max arrives).

Again, this relationship is nurtured by Max's parents, my friends, who paid me an extraordinary compliment when they asked me to be their firstborn's godparent. It is a gift I will always appreciate; I always feel lucky to share so many of life's milestones with this handsome, blond boy.

All in all, I tend to take the whole business of providing a special time for my kiddie pals so seriously that parents are often slack-jawed as I recount our jam-packed days together. Not ever having been a parent, I am convinced that 'a good time' must include time in the park feeding ducks; a Harry Potter, Shrek or Spiderman movie; time out swinging on swings and sliding down slides; a nap à deux where we sleep in each others' arms; lots of walks, talks and drawings; shopping for toys and treats; and, of



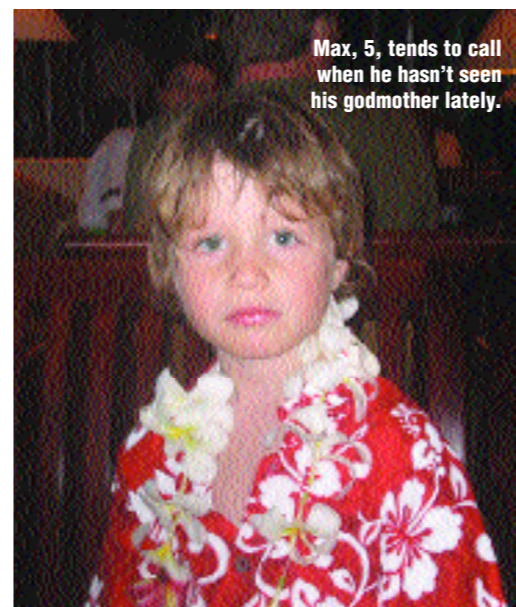
My friend Rachael just loves cats and sleepovers.

course, the obligatory romp in a fast-food outlet (which we never discuss with the parents). It's fun, dare I say it, to hang out with me!

Look, I wouldn't have it any other way. I just feel fortunate to have so many gorgeous children in my life. Take Danielle, now 24, who is currently living with my husband and I (yes, I did eventually get married)!

I have known my cousin's daughter since she was six, and she has been my very special friend ever since we connected 18 years ago. We are brilliant shoppers together, though I must admit I have always valued her services more than I think she has needed mine. Since she was a tiny tot, she's been picking out groovy garments for me to wear; and she hugs and loves me more than anyone I know, always convincing me that I am special, much as she is to me.

In many ways, Danielle is the prize following the many investments in the younger generation that I've made. Childless people fear an old age with no one to love them – well, at least I did – but, like all things in life, I find that the more you put into people... the more you get back. Now I have dozens of kids in my life that keep me connected. And I have to say, it feels better than good, it feels great! **YF**



Max, 5, tends to call when he hasn't seen his godmother lately.



Josephine (left) and Annabel.