

A Manner of



Speaking

by Bonnie and Jean, with Caroline

Caroline's curls fall across her face as she focuses on the very, very long zigzaggy line she is drawing. Three of us sit around the table with paper and markers, time, and an idea — four-year-old Caroline, her "Mama" (my sister/friend Jean), and me.

"Let's all draw the same thing," we decide.

"I'm going to draw a cat," I suggest, and our heads bend in concentration. Jean's drawing is from the tail end of the cat, mine is just the head — and you can see Caroline's for yourself.

We consider each other's drawings and enjoy the differences and details. "Now it's your turn, Caroline."

"I'm going to draw a flower." Jean and I get sidetracked — as you can see, Caroline has time to add a watering can.

"Mama? Your turn."

"I'm going to draw a window."

"I'm going to draw something in the window."

And so we go, round and round.

We were entertaining Caroline (okay, so it was the other way around, really) with a drawing game. Of course, since Jean and I would talk between turns, about all sorts of things, including who we want to be in the lives of children in general and our grandchildren in particular. At one point I said, "With . . . that's the important word for me. I want to do things *with* children, not for them. I want to play with them and bake cookies with them, and read stories." As we talked and drew, I doodled the word *with*; Jean and I thought we were the only ones multi-tasking. Caroline seemed very absorbed in her drawing and her comments were to that task.

Time passed. Caroline's drawings were posted on Jean's refrigerator. And it wasn't until Jean was reaching for the raspberry jam days later that she noticed the word "WITH" in the corner of Caroline's drawing. "WITH?" And after a while, she remembered our conversation. After all, I had said that WITH was a very important word. Caroline, like Jean and I, had been multi-tasking.

She had been listening as we talked of many things — and she had been watching. She heard that WITH was important, important enough for me to write it down, so she figured that she had better start taking notes!

We so often talk over, under, around children. Just as we live around them. We think they take it — what we want them to, what it is our intention that they see and hear. We think that we are able to control their attention. But we underestimate them. They are making their own choices about what to learn from us. And they are always watching and listening.

Caroline's drawings tell us many things about her and how we spent this time together. They also tell us that while we thought Caroline was attending to her drawing, she was in reality, paying attention to everything. It was time well spent with us.



PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY NEUGEBAUER