

How My Grandchildren Keep Me Young

By JACK BENNY



On his birthday, this perennial 39-year-old writes a valentine of appreciation to the three youngsters who give him his bounce and zest

TODAY, FEB. 14, is my birthday. I won't say how old I am—let's just say a little past 39.

But I can tell you that three of the reasons I feel so young are named Michael, Maria, and Robert, Jr. They are nine, seven, and not quite one, respectively. They're my grandchildren.

Take the other day when I was driving them to Hillcrest Country Club for lunch. Suddenly Maria noticed the cuff links I was wearing. George Jessel had given them to me about 10 years ago as a gag. On the cuff links were the words, "Benny and Woods." Maria stared at them, and so I went through a long explanation about when I played the violin and had a partner named Woods, who played the piano. But that was in the old days, I added.

Maria said, "Oh." In a few minutes she added, "Granddaddy, five years from now these will be the old days."

I said, "That's right."

A little later she said, "Do you know, by tomorrow, today will be the old day."

I was waiting to see how much further she could carry this. It came soon enough. "Granddaddy, an hour from now this will be the old hour." And then, "You know, Granddaddy, I like today better than yesterday, and I think I'll like tomorrow better than today."

I thought this made an awful lot

of sense. It reminded me of when my daughter Joannie once appeared on Johnny Carson's tv show, and Johnny said, "We think your dad is very young for his age. We know how old he is. What do you think keeps him so young?"

"I think it's because Dad is not nostalgic," she replied without hesitation. "He doesn't care how good he was in radio or the good old days, and he never says, 'Three years ago I did a great show.' He only wants to know how good the show was last Friday and how good it will be next Friday and from now on through the whole season."

Of course, show business itself keeps people younger than they actually are—unless you take it too seriously. I associate with young people and have an easier time getting along with all age groups (including my two older grandchildren, Michael and Maria).

I'm a little bit more hesitant when it comes to the baby, Robert, Jr. I'm still reluctant to pick him up, and I certainly won't change him or feed him. That's because he looks so fragile.

But both my older grandchildren do pretty well at keeping me involved in activities. We go for walks together, play ball in the back yard, and swim in my pool. And almost every Saturday, we have lunch together, usually at their favorite place, Hillcrest Country Club. They know all the waiters there by their first names.

They also keep me on my toes

by the questions they ask. If I don't know the answers, I look them up. But there is one time I am lost, no matter how much help I get. You know those mechanical-toy sets with all those complicated instructions? Parents could read all day and never figure them out.

Michael asks me to help him, and I try and try—and then give up. Eventually he'll figure it out for himself and make me look pretty silly. He put together the Eiffel Tower in a month; I couldn't have done it in 25 years.

One of Michael's favorite activities is putting on magic and puppet shows. My job is to sit there all alone and watch while he pretends I'm a great big audience. I did the same thing with my grandfather when I was a kid, so, you see, it runs in the family.

Eight-month-old Robert is a rapt audience for Granddad's mugging.



Benny reads to his grandchildren: Michael, Maria, and infant Robert.



My grandchildren began to realize a couple of years ago that a man in show business means something to people. I get quite a kick out of how they behave lately when someone comes over and asks for my autograph. My little grandson has a habit of getting as close to me as possible to show we are associated in some way. Often, he will say, "Granddaddy," just so they will know he is with me.

UNLIKE many grandchildren I see, they don't badger me for money. But once in a while when we are out and they want some little thing, they ask, and, of course, I buy it for them. And by the way, they both know that my tightness about money is just a joke. They get the drift of everything!

An important reason why I manage to be so close to my grandchildren is that I treat them as equals. Kids don't want to be treated like kids. Someone came over to our table in a restaurant the other day and said to Maria: "You're such a cute little girl. How old are you?" She was polite about it, but I could tell she didn't like it.

I only wish that I could be with them more. But my work takes a lot of my time. Still, we always make a point of being together at least once a week. And on holidays and birthdays, such as today, I can always look forward to getting a simple but beautiful card made by Maria and Michael themselves.

So who says I'm not sentimental?

COVER:



In this photo by Doris Pinney, a wistful little girl painstakingly cuts out lacy hearts for her valentine. For a look at another aspect of romance, turn to page 12.

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