

Home & Design

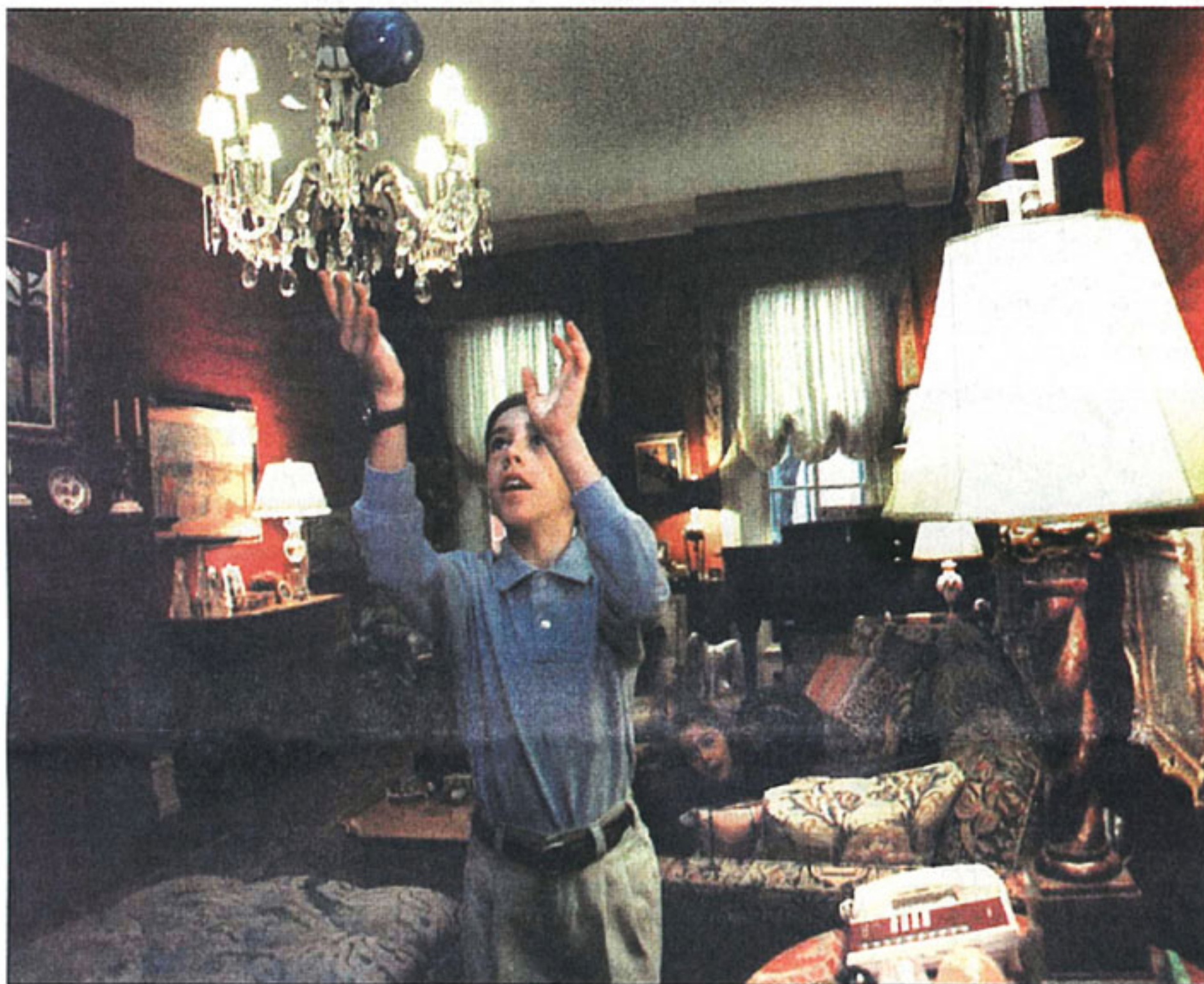
SECTION E

FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2000

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BREAKING POINTS

Parents who appreciate fine antiques and young children are finding ways to live happily with both.



Tossing a ball amid his mother's collections, Peter Dilsheimer, 10, amuses himself while sister Caroline, 7, sprawls on the sofa.

APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

By Diane Goldsmith
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Charlene Mayer was talking on the phone when she spied her toddler son, standing on the dining room table.

"He's swatting at the chandelier!" she said, moving quickly to remove him from his perch.

Noah has done this before, she said. By now, her response has become routine:

"Noah, you're such a strong boy. You can break that, and Mommy doesn't want you to get hurt. You shouldn't climb up onto the table."

Such scenes are not uncommon as parents in the post-slipcover era try to balance a desire for nice furnishings with the realities of family life.

Some simply banish nice things until the kids are grown and out of the house. Other parents — especially those having children later in life, who have already decorated a home to their taste — may be less willing to forsake their surroundings just because they now have children.

"It's OK to have nice things if you're willing to deal with what it takes to raise a child" around them, says Denise Rowe, co-director of Parenting Services for Families in East Falls.

What's important is to adopt a realistic approach given a child's development, she said. "If you've got an antique vase from your great-great-grandmother, put it in the china cabinet until the child is 5 or 6."

A young hand reaches into a collection of crystal obelisks. "Nothing is off-limits," says Barbara Eberlein, mother of Peter and Caroline.



But, she added, there are valuable lessons to be learned in respecting others' property.

There are also lessons for children in learning to appreciate fine things and how they can help us connect to history, said interior designer Barbara Eberlein of Eberlein Design Consultants in Philadelphia.

Through smart decorating decisions and a realistic approach to family wear and tear, you can strike a balance, noted Eberlein, who is raising two children with her husband, Richard Dilsheimer, in a superbly appointed city townhouse.

In the suburbs, Mayer and her husband, Nathaniel, have reconciled themselves to a middle ground they knew would put some wear on their nice vintage furnishings.

"We made a decision that we like the furniture and [that] it will last through the years with the children," recalled Mayer, a former health-care executive. "We didn't think, 'If it got scratched, we'd go bonkers.'"

"The furniture is replaceable. The kids are not."

Noah, 27 months, and his sister, Hannah, 18 months, were first intrigued with a deco sofa's fringe that met them at eye level. Noah has since used the sofa's top edge as a track for his little toy cars.

"I hate to tell you about the buffet," Charlene went on. "We have a picture above it with a light and a plug that comes down behind the buffet" and connects with a cord.

See **BREAK** on E4

Caroline plays with a valuable collection of boxes in the living room. Looking on are mother Barbara Eberlein, and Caroline's brother Peter.

How to live with children, antiques

◊ **BREAK** from E1

"Who would think a kid would take a plug and scratch the side of the buffet?"

But that was exactly what Noah was doing when his mother approached the other day.

"What does Mommy say about that?" Mayer asked the child.

"Nah, nah, nah," replied Noah.

"Mess," he added.

"Uh, oh."

■
"It may take 2,000 times of you saying, 'Don't touch the vase. It's Mommy's. Here's your toy tea set,' for children to understand the difference between what's a toy and what is real," Rowe said. "The problem is, young kids can't reason cognitively until they're 4, 5 or 6.

"By age 7, they know cause and effect. 'If you pick up my vase and drop it and break it, I'll be really mad.' A 1-year-old won't understand that.

"After age 2, they begin to understand some boundaries, but it's like a pyramid — they're little boundaries. So it's, 'Don't touch my coffee. It's hot,'" she said.

"A 2- or 3-year-old is driven to do things in part by the learning process. They're seeing such gorgeous colors and know you said 'no' 2,000 times, but the inner control is not there."

Of course, it takes vigilance to keep kids on track. "Some days I think I'm too old for this stuff," observed Mayer, 41, as she diverted her son from the buffet. "Others, I think I wouldn't have had the patience for it when I was younger."

However, Rowe finds that older parents can sometimes be less patient.

"They're used to having things done and being successful," she said. "Then they run into a 2-year-old."

Being successful in child-rearing means taking the time with the child to understand him or her and "get a feeling for what they're capable of," Rowe said.

John and Dana Levitties thought they knew what little Sophie was capable of until she grabbed for an antique Dutch plate she had never paid attention to before.

"As the bid for attention has ramped up, she's finding new ways to get it," her mother surmised. A younger brother arrived a few months ago.

"We went flying over furniture to gently take it out of her hands," recalled Dana, a former marketing chief for a sportswear manufacturer. "We didn't want to startle the child."

Nor did they want to convey to Sophie, who will soon be 3, that antiques are more important than she is. John Levitties owns a Chestnut Hill shop that carries English Arts and Crafts furnishings — John Alexander Limited — but the couple have a healthy appreciation for the needs of children.

"I don't mind as long as she doesn't bump into anything," said Dana, 32, watching her daughter tear around the living room carpet on her trike.

Almost as if on cue, Sophie jumped off the three-wheeler, adorable and smiling in her red Mary Janes and blue dress, and proceeded to lift a side table, waving it around but hitting nothing.

"I've never seen her do that before," said her mother, unruffled.

Actually, the only real damage in the house was done not by Sophie but by a cleaning crew pre-children, Dana said.

"We have some ceramics — some George Ohr — which is incredibly fragile, on the mantel. It was the first time my husband's 'if-you-can't-bear-to-break-it, you-can't-bear-to-have-it' rule was tested." Half of the collection was broken.

"John was pretty ashen for the first four hours. I'm surprised at how well he took it."

■
"Telling a child, 'You may come into this room but don't touch anything,' is a mixed message," Barbara Eberlein was saying as she entered her sumptuous living room with Caroline, 7, and Peter, 10.

"You say, 'This is how you touch this object,'" said the interior designer, whose collections of crystal and rock-crystal obelisks, fascinating mineral and crystal balls, and boxes ranging from mother-of-pearl to chinoiserie red lacquer are just some of the intriguing objects on view.

"Nothing is off-limits," she said. But when the children were younger, they were given their own boxes. "They could play with their own and touch the others. The ones I gave them were not so breakable, but perhaps more visually interesting."

Caroline brought over a pair of Victorian doll's boots, obviously a favorite piece.

"I can't touch up there," the child noted, pointing to the mantel where antique Chinese dishes share space with a bronze gilt clock.

"That's because when you reach above your head, it's hard to touch something safely," Eberlein reminded her daughter.

This evening, Caroline was also taken with one of the mineral balls, trying to balance it atop her foot before breaking into a little tap dance in a corner of the room.

Surely, something must have broken through the years.

"I broke a dog's paws when I was about 3," Caroline said, referring to a porcelain dog.

The lacquer surface of the dining room table "has taken a beating," said Eberlein, but has been buffed. "An extremely fragile chinoiserie table" has been moved to a less-trafficked spot and will be repaired.

"As much as people bemoan that there are no more craftsmen, you can have practically anything restored," she said.

Of course, the children don't roughhouse with friends in the living room or dining room. They take them upstairs to their bedrooms, or downstairs to the playroom, filled with their art, Peter's 3-D puzzles, a TV and VCR, and a closet that houses their sports equipment.

So, has Eberlein seen attitudes change in the way we deal with children and nice furnishings?

"In the old days, children didn't go into the living room. Nobody does that anymore. The tendency now is not to use the room if [you] can't interact with children in it.

"But I find people then compromise in what they do live with."

Eberlein believes you don't have to sacrifice visual interest or luxury if you use sturdier, patterned fabrics in high-traffic areas and more fragile ones elsewhere.

Furniture with a variegated finish, she says, often withstands use better than something with a highly-polished mirror finish, which "shows every smudge, fingerprint, nick and scratch."

Everyday wear actually enhances the patina of some wood furniture, she adds, such as her Italian satinwood chest.

Eberlein contends that fine furnishings can offer the best of both worlds "and introduce children to the history of the world, the history of their family, as well as the geography of the world.

"This is from India," she began. "Let's get the globe and see where it is.' You can also talk about how hard it was to get certain products here. 'Going from England to America 200 years ago was a huge effort.' Or I'll ask the children to think of who might have sat in this chair."

And what if all this spells damage?

"You can't put your life on hold and not have the visual enjoyment and miss the chance to educate your children," she said, "just because something might get broken."

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MICHAEL MALLY / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Noah Mayer, 2, is too young to know what he should not touch.