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Faith Today

Love and life down under

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Until their oldest daughter became a teen-ager, family life for the O'Neils meant that their three children "did their thing and we did ours," explained John O'Neil of Perth, Western Australia. I met O'Neil and his wife JoAnn in Jerusalem during a recent trip there.

O'Neil, who teaches computer science to college-age students, had been an enthusiastic glider pilot in his leisure hours. Now a teacher-librarian, Mrs. O'Neil's pet project back then was Scouting.

"The other two children were almost beyond our reach," O'Neil said. Their daughter, now 25, felt she "couldn't be open with us or trust us."

Their older son, now 22, was insecure, possibly because "we built an inferiority complex into him," Mrs. O'Neil suggested. "We always told him how he could do better and never told him that what he did was good."

Ruefully, O'Neil said that he and his wife ran their family "like the army."

Mrs. O'Neil added, "We had communication problems" with each other and with the children.

Then, in the mid-1970s, the couple made their first Marriage Encounter. This experience was a turning point.

Marriage Encounter impelled the O'Neils to take a close look at their relationship as husband and wife and at their role as parents. The experience became a catalyst for changing the way family members related to each other.

"At Marriage Encounter we learned the best thing we could do for our children was to love each other and show it. This solidifies a family and gives children a better example of what marriage is than preaching," O'Neil said.

The couple also decided to be more openly affectionate with their children, O'Neil said. But it wasn't easy for him: "I'm not a demonstrative person. Kissing teen-age sons was hard."

Mrs. O'Neil agreed, explaining: "The first time I ever saw John cry was at Marriage Encounter — he was so much a man in control. I didn't know if he was happy or sad."

We learned "to show children it's OK to cry, to show feelings," O'Neil said. For Mrs. O'Neil, learning to listen was the difficult part.

"I'm not a good listener so it was significant for me to learn to listen to John," she explained, "and for us to listen to the children, to treat them as human beings" worthy of respect.

Setting up guidelines for family life, the O'Neils said they tried "to work out boundaries together" as much as possible with the children.

The O'Neils also worked at presenting a unified approach to their children. "Previously I'd say, 'Ask your mother,'" O'Neil said. "Now our normal response is to deal with the children together."

And that decision brought an unexpected fringe benefit. As parents, he reported, "we're not played off each other" any more.

Part of the reason the O'Neils emigrated from the San Francisco Bay area to Western Australia in

1968 was "because we were looking for a climate conducive to raising our three children."

It was a time of flower children and drug experimentation.

But, O'Neil explained, "We always said we weren't running from something; we were going to a new life that was a bit slower. We went from two cars and 20 credit cards to no credit cards and for six months no car," he said. "Now we're back to two cars and three credit cards."

The O'Neils, parishioners at St. Joseph Pignatelli Parish in Attadale, Western Australia, have been actively involved as leaders in presenting Marriage Encounter in their country.

In 1980, they brought Engaged Encounter to Australia and today serve as the National Contact Couple for it.

Over the years the O'Neils

discovered how valuable a supportive Christian community can be.

Mrs. O'Neil remarked that she and her husband found a "tremendous support system" working as Encounter movement leaders. They also are part of a parish group "where we get together and talk things out," she said.

Such support is vital today, they said, because so much threatens family life.

"More things pull children away from the family today," O'Neil said. Children can "run around all the time, taking lessons every night."

But spending time together is essential for family members who care about each other and the quality of their relationship, the O'Neils believe.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

FAMILY

The O'Neil family of Western Australia had more than its share of problems. Then, writes Katharine Bird, John and JoAnn O'Neil spent a weekend away. What they discovered had profound consequences for their marriage and their role as parents.

