



STAY AT HOME DAD

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Outside the lines

Should coloring inside the lines be emphasis for kids?

Snoopy isn't orange, but that's how my 4-year-old son sees him.

Bubba colored a picture of Charlie Brown's dog last week. He took an orange crayon and ran it over Joe Cool's face about a dozen times. He scribbled over a couple other pictures on the page, too, including Snoopy's doghouse. This, he colored purple.

Bubba knows Snoopy isn't orange. We've watched "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and "It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown" dozens of times. He also makes no attempt to color within the lines. These boundaries exist for a reason, yet he chooses to ignore them.

I didn't bother to correct his faulty color choices or his sloppy approach. I'm not that much of a Tiger Mother. However, I wondered if I ought to encourage him to color within the lines and select appropriate colors.

Perhaps coloring within the lines promotes the development of fine motor skills. Or maybe telling Bubba where to color and what colors to use would squelch his creativity. Not every artist is Norman Rockwell, after all.

I presented my dilemma to Dr. Pam Epley, an assistant professor at the Erikson Institute. She specializes in special education at the graduate school in downtown Chicago.

"You shouldn't be worried," Epley said.

She said coloring and writing develop in a sequential, universal pattern for most children. Though the rate often varies, kids start by holding a crayon, pencil or marker in their fist with their thumb in the air. Eventually, kids turn their fist downward. And finally, children learn the traditional, tripod grip they'll use for the rest of their life.

Children in the early stages of this progression often start by holding a pencil at the top (near the eraser) and eventually make their way down. Thus, parents interested in encouraging their child's progress should opt

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for short, fat crayons and markers over long, skinny colored pencils or pens, Epley said.

There's no need to nag kids about coloring within the lines. Most of us figure it out. However, parents can subtly encourage children to take a more traditional approach by using crayons alongside their kids. Children are likely to mirror their parents' behavior and even imitate their grip, Epley said.

Other ways to encourage fine motor development is to allow children to dress themselves. Buttons, zippers and snaps are a good testing ground. The activity also promotes independence, Epley said.

She then said to encourage kids to unscrew the toothpaste container themselves. However, I can't recommend this unless you find minty globs of toothpaste all over your bathroom sink, floor and walls endearing.

As for coloring Snoopy orange, Epley said using appropriate colors is one of those rules that adults naturally apply, whereas children do not.

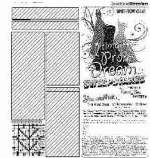
"It might be a good starting point for a discussion. Ask him, 'Why did you color Snoopy orange?'" Epley suggested.

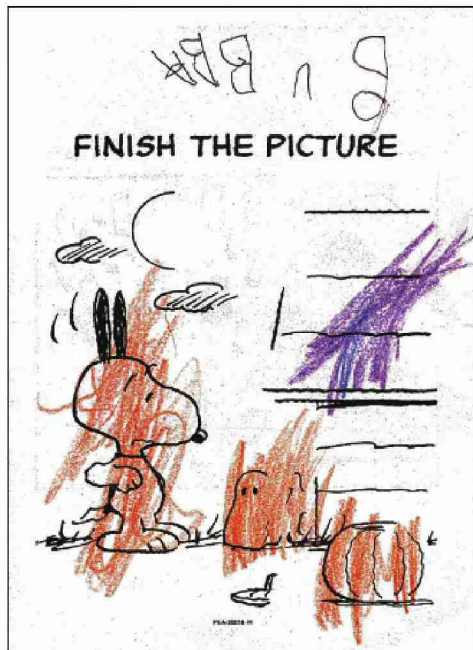
So I did.

"I just wanted to color him orange," Bubba replied.

Perhaps, I gave this whole coloring thing too much thought.

Howard A. Ludwig is a former SouthtownStar business writer who traded his reporter's notebook for a diaper bag, becoming a stay-at-home dad. He can be reached at howardaludwig@yahoo.com.





Colorful characters: Dr. Pam Eley says the Ludwigs “shouldn’t be worried” that 4-year-old Bubba isn’t using proper color choices or staying within the lines. | SUPPLIED PHOTO