

What's Wrong with Coloring Books?

by Christine McLean

One of the first questions that parents (and sometimes Early Childhood Educators) ask when confronted with the concept of developmentally appropriate practice, especially as it relates to the promotion of children's creativity is "What's wrong with coloring books?" People have some difficulty with imagining why these would not be considered appropriate activities to present to children. After all, they reason, "Children love coloring books!" or "I loved coloring when I was little."

This is true - we all have fond memories of opening a brand new package of crayons and using them to color in our latest Barbie or Disney coloring book or that adorable picture of a group of farmyard animals. What could possibly be wrong with that? The answer is...there is nothing wrong with that. Just like there is nothing wrong with our memories of going to the store to buy a big bag of BBQ chips and wolfing the whole bag down with a can of Pepsi, or our memories of sitting in front of the TV for an entire Saturday afternoon watching cartoons. The point is, that although coloring books, like chips, do nothing to promote children's healthy growth or development and, if used to excess, they can actually have a negative effect on children's overall development.

The fact is that early childhood educators know so much more about how to promote children's creativity, critical thinking and problem solving abilities and would no more consider coloring books an acceptable activity as they would consider potato chips an acceptable substitute for a vegetable at lunch. ECEs know that children need to be able to express themselves in many ways, with art being on of them, and to provide them with the pre-drawn shapes found in coloring books would be the same as providing them with a pre-written script that the children would need to use whenever they wanted to talk.

When children have access to crayons, markers, paint, pens, pencils, chalk and lots of blank paper in all shapes, sizes and textures, then miraculous images start to emerge. Children become immersed in the process of art - they experiment with the paint on a brush, they try all kinds of different hand movements with the markers, they experiment with making shapes, they begin to assign meaning to their drawings and they begin to use drawing and sketching as a means to communicate. To rob them of these opportunities of discovery and expression is to deny them the chance to realize their full potential as artists, writers, readers and critical thinkers. Freedom of expression in art leads to creative expression in other areas as well . It is an essential foundation for reading, writing, mathematics and scientific reasoning. Fostering creative expression is an integral component of all high quality early childhood programs.

So, knowing all this, what are the reasons why we still see coloring books in some early childhood programs? Let's have a look at some of the common reasons along with a counter argument that can be used to dispel each of the following coloring book myths:

1. *Coloring in coloring books helps to promote fine motor development and eye-hand coordination.* Most activities in an early childhood program help to promote these two areas of development...putting pegs in pegboards, stringing wooden beads, putting together puzzles, building with blocks, using crayons, markers and paintbrushes, drawing, sketching, writing and the list goes on. Children will engage in many constructive and developmentally appropriate activities that will promote eye-hand coordination and fine-motor development. They don't need coloring sheets.
2. *Parents send them in with the children and I don't want to take them away.* This one is a little tougher. It calls upon the need for good communication between the program and the home. ECEs need to recognize that parents are the experts when it comes to

their particular child, but the ECEs are the experts when it comes to child development and developmentally appropriate programming. It is a good idea to talk about the philosophy of the program, including the importance that is placed on creative expression, upfront with the parents so they know what types of activities the children will be involved in while they are in the program. Providing parents with all kinds of concrete evidence of the wonderfully creative work that is happening at the program by displaying documentation of the children's work will also help parents to see how creative and expressive their children can be when they are provided the time, the materials, and the encouragement to communicate using the "many languages" of childhood. Just as a program would discourage parents from sending in junk food on a regular basis, the program should be able to discourage parents from sending in toys and materials with their child which would not be in keeping with the philosophy of the program.

3. *But the children love them...* Of course the children love them because the manufacturers of these products know exactly how to attract the attention of the children by using bright colors on the cover and/or featuring popular children's characters such as Dora the Explorer or well loved Sesame Street friends. Children also love BBQ chips and Pepsi but that doesn't mean there is a place for these things in a well run, high quality early childhood program.
4. *I colored with coloring books and I turned out OK.* Well, that's true enough - you turned out fine. But imagine how wonderful you'd be if you were provided with lots of opportunities to create, imagine, problem solve, think, explore and discover with a wide array of creative arts materials. Perhaps you had these opportunities as well and you've been able to reach your full creative potential. But, if your childhood was like mine and so many others, we turned out fine despite some of the educational practices that we experienced, not because of them. But now, for the most part, we know better - we've learned more about the pedagogy of early childhood education and we are able to share best practices from high quality programs from around the world. We are constantly discovering more about how children learn and about the importance of the early years. Times change and we need to keep up with the times.

And, while we are comparing our childhoods with the childhood of today, we also look to the freedom that a lot of us had as children, compared with today's child. Without the lure of video games, computers, DVDs 'designed' for infants and toddlers and 100 channel TV with 24 hour children's programming, we were able to spend lots of time playing. We were able to make up our own rules, use our imaginations, negotiate the terms of our play with our friends, and mostly without adult assistance or intervention. Today's child does not have the same luxury. Their world is dominated, in large part, by adult imposed expectations. Any chance we give them to use their imaginations and creativity will help to offset the 24/7 pressure that they have to conform to the rules, ideas and expectations of others.

So - where does that leave us with coloring books and coloring sheets? Should they be eliminated from children's lives? Absolutely not. Just as I wouldn't advocate the elimination of occasional instances of chocolate for breakfast or Saturday morning cartoons, coloring books are bound to be a regular part of children's lives. Should coloring book be a regular part of an early childhood program? Again, the answer is absolutely no. Coloring books represent inadequate practice. They are simply not good enough for what our children need in order to reach their optimal potential.