

Crayons in the Kindergarten - Block or Stick?
A Call for Research
Joan Almon

Just now, one of the questions actively circulating in the kindergarten movement is whether it is better for young children to use block crayons or stick crayons. The question has primarily been raised by remedial educators in Waldorf schools who see growing numbers of children in the elementary school with writing problems related to poor grip of the pencil or pen. Grip problems are often associated with learning disabilities, which is on the rise in children today. The concern of the remedial educators, is that the use of block crayons rather than stick is interfering with the development of grip, and they have actively encouraged kindergarten teachers to switch to stick crayons. The following article by Monica Ellis makes this point strongly and even passionately. The subsequent article by Kate Gage raises a second concern about crayons as well: is it possible that block crayons make it more difficult for children to draw the basic motifs associated with early childhood?

In the past I have twice examined the crayon question, and both times felt that block crayons were wonderfully appropriate for young children. It is time to open the question again for examination but this time we should do more in-depth research.

My first experience was when I began teaching young children in 1971. At first I did not know about Waldorf education, and gave children traditional art materials including stick crayons, both thin and thick. Again and again I watched children pull off the paper and break the crayons in half. It happened so often I finally accepted that there was a reason for their doing this, and when I later gave them block crayons, the reason seemed apparent: the smaller crayons fit their hand and suited their grip better.

The second opportunity to think through the crayon question came for me in the mid-1980's when I heard about the importance of a healthy grip for children when they begin writing. I began observing how children's grip changed from the fist grip of the three year old to the more refined grip of the first grade ready child. I watched them change grip on crayons, paint brushes and eating utensils. Grip evolved naturally in almost all of the children. The block crayons did not seem to interfere with that, for the grip changed on those crayons as it did on the

brushes and spoons, albeit the change was not quite as easy to see. With a little practice one could see that the older children gripped the crayons differently and had very good control of them. Sometimes the grip on the brush, the spoon and the crayon did not change by itself, and knowing how to intervene would have been most helpful. This is an area where collaboration with the remedial educators or therapeutic eurythmists is necessary and should prove very fruitful.

Now that kindergarten teachers have begun examining the question of block vs. stick, a second and rather different concern with crayoning is also being raised. This relates to the fact that many children today are having more difficulty drawing the archetypal motifs of early childhood than in the past. This was already true in the early 1970s when Michaela Strauss wrote her excellent book, *Understanding Children's Drawings*. In her introduction she says that the pictures she had recently collected were less clear than those collected by her father before World War II. She attributes the problem to the precocious awakening of children. With their more awakened consciousness it is more difficult for them to go deep within to access the basic motifs that are so linked with bodily development. When I read over the anecdotes in this issue, I began to wonder if the change described by Michaela Strauss could have occurred simply because children were using block crayons. I then realized that such an explanation is far too simplistic, for a problem similar to the crayoning is also apparent in the decline in children's play. Many children today

have difficulty playing. They are very awake and cannot seem to find their way inside to their own fantasy forces which are also linked to bodily development. There is a relationship between how play bubbles up from inside the young child and how the drawing motifs rise to the surface. The more awake children are in their conscious mind, the less likely they are to be able to draw upon these deeper realms in an unconscious or dream-state way.

All of this points to the need for serious observation and research on our part. If it is possible for kindergartens in the same school to participate in observation-based research over three or four years, we could gain much insight. If one class uses stick crayons and another uses block crayons, for instance the teachers could record observations about the following:

- The change of grip through the kindergarten years;
- The ability to grip as children enter the grades and begin to write; and
- The ability of the children to draw the basic motifs.

If block crayons are detrimental to children as is now being suggested, the results should be quite clear. On the other hand, we may find definite benefits to the block crayons, and it would be a shame to lose those benefits by too quickly shifting to stick. In addition, further research could identify ways to help children who are developing poor grip and could identify ways to help children who have difficulty drawing the basic motifs. Based on past experiences, it would seem that helping such children engage more deeply in hand related activities as well as large motor movement might be of great help in developing healthy grip as well as bringing children back into childhood, the spirit of drawing and of playing.

It would be wonderful if a group would form to undertake such research, a group comprised of kindergarten teachers, class teachers, remedial educators, therapeutic eurythmists, and school doctors. The remedial courses, especially those for kindergarten teachers being offered this summer in Spring Valley and Boulder, provide an opportunity to explore these questions more fully.