

Hands off!

BY LISA BRAVER MOSS

"I am so a bad artist!"

For the last half hour, Reuben and his older brother, Evan, have been engaged in their favorite after-dinner activity: drawing decapitated, dismembered beings with blood gushing out of every wound. Now Reuben's voice is cracking with frustration, and I hear paper being crumpled up and thrown on the kitchen floor.

"Everything I try doesn't turn out," Reuben whines as I come back into the kitchen.

"Reuben," 9-year-old Evan says. "You are a really good artist, for a 6-year-old."

"No, I'm *not*!" Reuben is all the more enraged by what he perceives as brotherly conde-

scension. "I ruin everything. I am a really *bad* artist for a 6-year-old!"

I put my arms around Reuben, stroking his soft hair. At the age of 4, after deciding he wanted to play the guitar, he was annoyed when we offered him a ukulele. At 5, he denounced cartoons as dumb, pointing out that animals don't really talk. This is a child who refuses to be patronized.

"What are you trying to draw?" I ask. Then, though I have no artistic talent: "Maybe I can help."

"You can't," Reuben says. "I'm trying to draw the T-shirt of a bloody punk-rock guitar player,

and the T-shirt—you know how a T-shirt isn't all flat?"

"Do you mean how the fabric wrinkles up?"

"Yeah," Reuben nods, relief spreading across his face at being understood right away. "Yeah, the wrinkles. I was trying to draw those and"—his voice rises again—"I wrecked my whole picture!"

I hold Reuben, murmuring, "You must be very upset." I'm stalling. How am I going to show him how to draw folds in fabric? I can barely make a stick figure. I glance over at Evan's work, hoping to get a clue, but he has drawn all his clothing flat.

Thinking it might calm Reuben to see that I can't draw folds either, I grab a pen and a piece of scratch paper and clear a place among the pictures strewn across the kitchen table. A flicker of hope crosses his teary face as I begin, but sure enough, what I end up making is shirts with lines on them, curtains with lines on them, blankets with lines on them. Fortunately, Reuben finds my failure amusing, and we giggle together with Evan.

"I know what," I say. "We can look in books for fabric folds to copy or trace." Soon we find a picture of curtains, and another one of a little girl's dress.

Copying what I see—tiny horizontal lines at the edges of the fabric to create shadow, plus vertical lines to give a drapery effect—I am impressed with the results. But

**Sometimes,
it doesn't help
to help.**

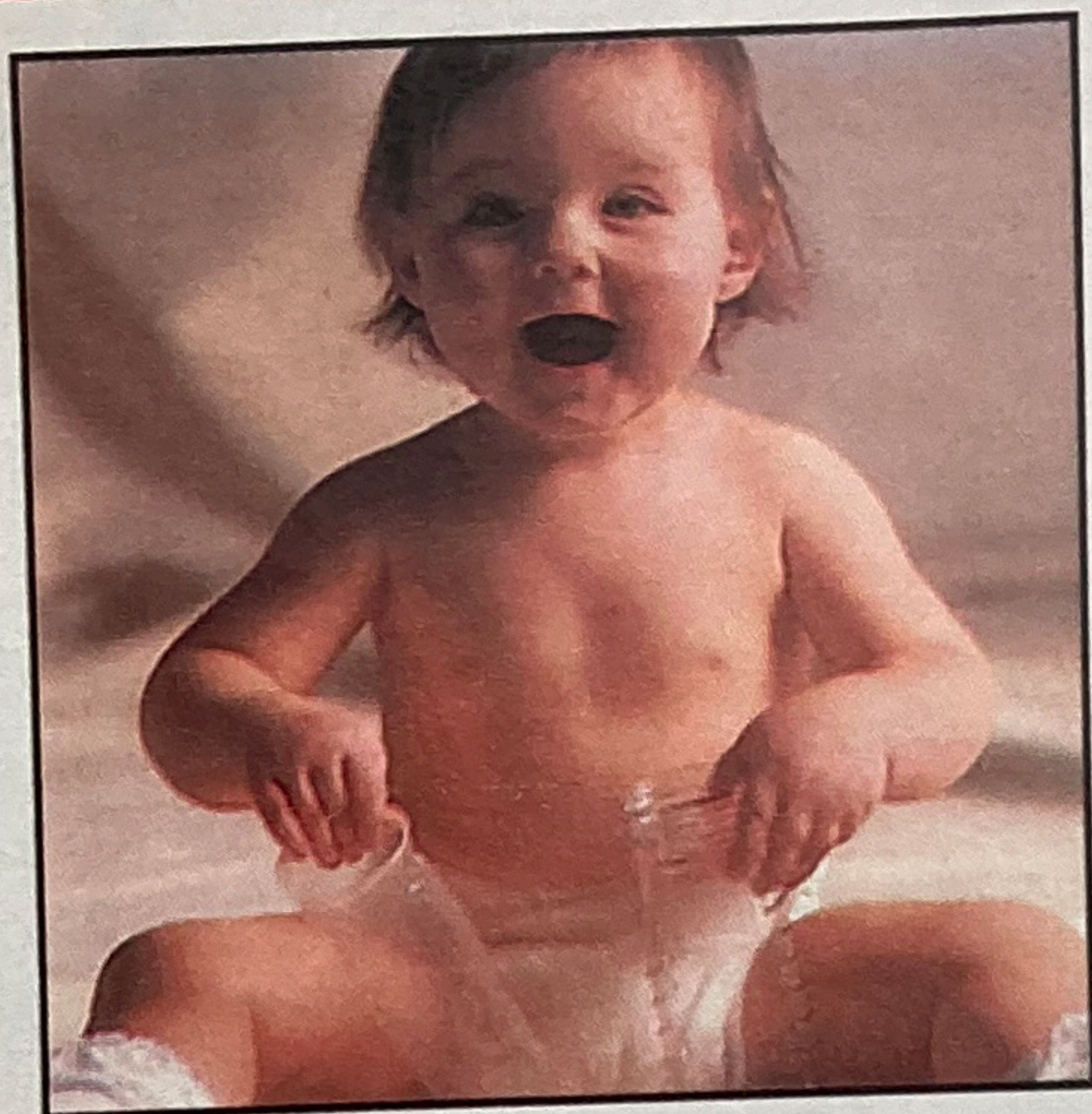


The obvious answer to an adult is often the wrong one for a child.

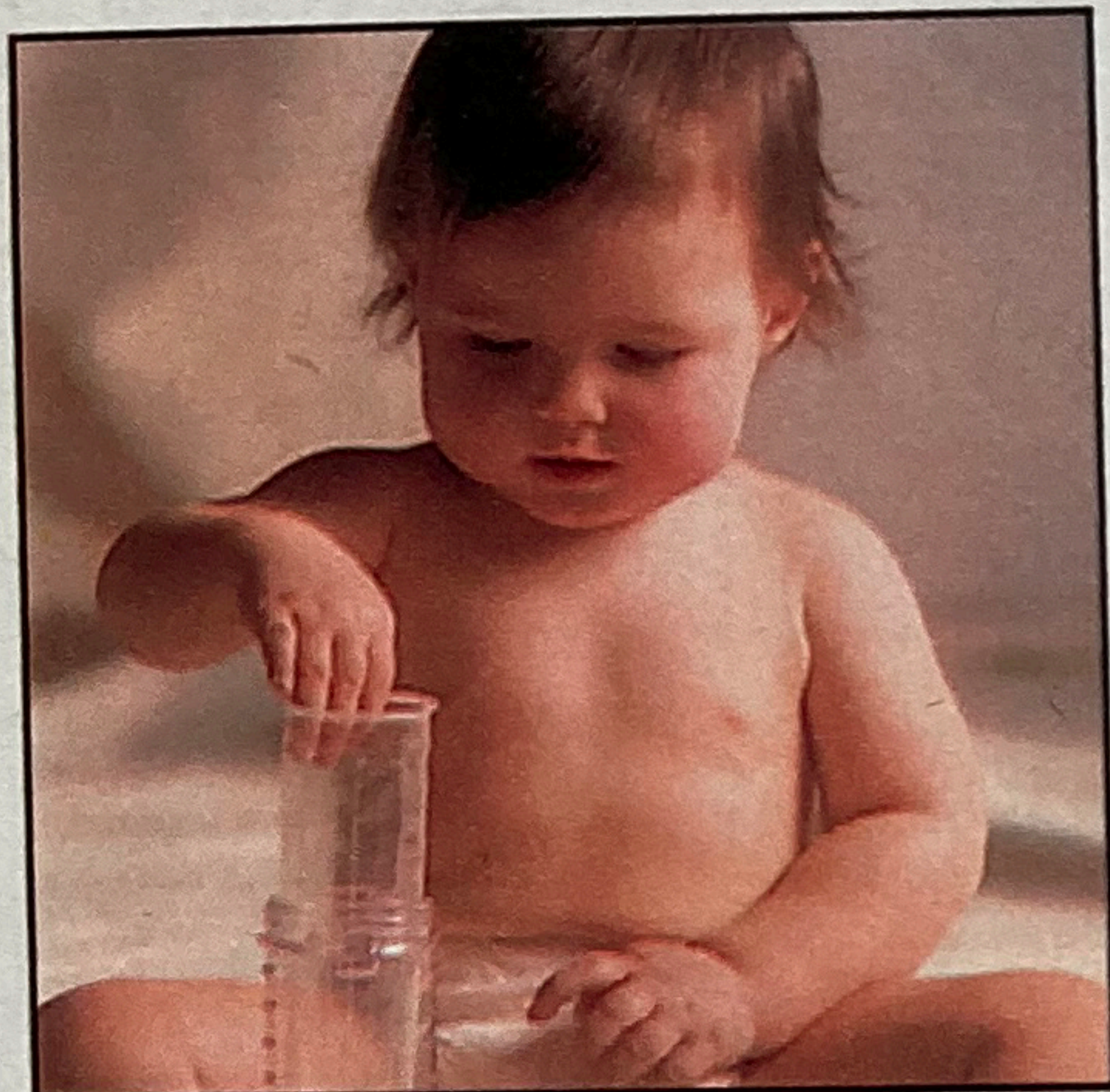


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Solutions

(Continued)

for some reason, this isn't the way Reuben envisions wrinkles. I have succeeded in calming him down, but I haven't helped him accomplish what he has in mind. I am relieved when he moves on to his next bloody creation.

But I like to follow up on my children's pursuits, and a few days later, when we visit my father, a talented artist, I ask him in front of Reuben if he knows how to draw folds in fabric. Reuben seems pleased that I have remembered, and my father is happy to be consulted. But when he pulls out his charcoal pencils to demonstrate a few techniques, Reuben is more interested in starting his own drawing—one that does not include fabric—than in any kind of tutorial.

Months go by and wrinkle drawing is forgotten. Soon it is time for Reuben to start first grade, with the same terrific teacher Evan had. "You'll love Mrs. Morrison," I tell Reuben. "You'll be doing a lot of writing and math. And Mrs. Morrison is an artist, so I'm sure you'll do some great art projects." He breaks into a wide grin.

A couple of weeks into the school year, when I go to pick Reuben up at dismissal time, my greeting is interrupted by his breathless announcement: "Guess what, Mom?"

"What is it, honey?"

He pulls a drawing out of his backpack and hands it to me. "I got to draw the wrinkles!"

"Great!" I reply, examining his masterpiece and trying not to

look confused. It is an abstract design, nothing I could recognize as fabric folds—it looks like a rubbing done over a randomly bumpy surface—and it's entirely in crayon, a medium long since disdained in our household in favor of fine-tipped markers. Thinking the other side might have the real drawing on it, I flip the paper over, but the back is blank. I return to the front, where reds blend with oranges and purples in an irregular, though not unpleasing, arrangement.

"Wow!" I smile. "Did Mrs. Morrison show you how to draw these folds?"

"Nope," he chirps. "I figured it out myself."

"How did you do it?"

"Easy. I just turned the crayon sideways and drew with it that way. See? Folds."

My son smiles confidently. I think of the stash of crayons at the back of the kitchen drawer, and how much grief it might have saved Reuben if I had thought to pull them out that evening many months ago. But then I realize the fallacy of this hindsight. We cannot presume to solve our children's problems, nor to predict their solutions.

What will become of the wrinkle picture? Judging from the unceremonious way Reuben dumps it out of his backpack when we get home, it is no longer a treasure to him. It is up to me to fish it out and put it on the kitchen bulletin board, if not to remind Reuben, then to remind myself. □

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