

INTERPRETING CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS

DRAWINGS AS WINDOWS INTO THE INNER WORLD OF CHILDREN



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12 Must-Know Facts about Children's Drawing Interpretation



Children's drawings open windows shedding light on the child's inner mental world. Each drawing is the beginning of a journey, at the end of which await revelations about the child's personality and the reasons for his behavior.

Children's drawings and handwritings are your opportunity to understand what they are really going through, and obtain clear answers to questions that preoccupy you as a professional or parent, as they provide you with a variety of new tools that can help you enhance your relationship with the child and the atmosphere in the family, as well as improve the child's social status performance in various areas.

The drawings paint a broad and profound picture of how children experience the world around them. What exactly can they tell us? Here are some examples:

- Social interactions at kindergarten and school
- Underlying reasons for fears, angry outbursts and adjustments difficulties
- Relationships between siblings and with parents
- Spoiled, independent, willful, or insolent behavior
- Sleeping, eating, or toilet training habits
- Talents, intelligence, self-confidence and personal growth engines
- Academic performance and areas of interest

And, most importantly – unique, original solutions tailored to your child's character.

This e-book is designed to acquaint you with the area of children's drawings' interpretation, and give you a first glimpse into the various areas, through which you can learn about the child's inner world. The knowledge we offer is rich and diverse, and each subject is introduced together with theoretical background, drawings and explanations.

If you have any questions, I will be more than happy to answer. You can contact me directly at info@roshida.com, and I will get back to you ASAP.

Best Regards,
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Drawings are a powerful tool, but most people don't know how interpreting them can benefit their child

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1 Children's second language

Drawings are a second language children use to express their inner world. Their interpretation relies on developmental psychology theory – indeed, it is immediately apparent that children of the same age draw similar elements. Nevertheless, each child has his own personal style, which sheds light on his character and critical events in his life.

Drawing interpretation is designed to do more than answer whether the drawing is appropriate for the child's chronological age in terms of its elements. Rather, it analyzes the child's style to answer such diverse questions as why the child chose to draw in this particular manner – in terms of drawing tools, choice of objects, their spatial distribution on the page – why he chose these particular colors, etc. Together, the answers to all those questions are combined to provide a broad personality profile covering the child's performance in various areas in his life.

Children's drawings offer a reliable projective tool that can be used to understand children's minds, talents, feelings and difficulties. Studying it, however, requires systematic guidance and practice, relying on valid scientific knowledge and clear "evidence", or indications in the drawings. This is particularly true given the fact that throughout the years many myths have grown around the meanings of certain aspects in children's drawings, which have been proven false. Finally, arriving at significant conclusions regarding a child's personality requires the ability to analyze and cross-reference multiple elements appearing in a large number of drawings.

2 How to Examine Children's Drawings?

Professional analysis of drawings is a complex process that requires profound understanding of various aspects and combining them to form insights into the child's psyche. Generally speaking, the first step in such an analysis involves looking into graphic characteristics such as the intensity of pressure applied to the drawing tool, the location and size of elements on the page and the type of line produced.

The second step involves a comparative developmental assessment: comparing the child's drawings with those of his peers. For example, a human figure typical of three year-olds' drawings is different than five year-olds'. The third step looks into the color selection and the way they are combined.

This comprehensive analysis paints a broad and profound picture of the child's inner world, serving as a solid foundation for further, specific analyses in areas such as talents, behavior patterns, fears and adjustment difficulties, physiological issues, first-grade preparedness, or social skills.

3 When to Examine Children's Drawings?

You should contact a professional whenever you seek further information about the way your child experiences the world around him. Drawings are particularly conducive to that purpose since they represent a natural and uninhibited means of communication.

Parents, educators and mental health professionals do not seek to analyze children's drawings with the sole purpose of identifying fears and distresses or bring about significant behavioral change. Drawings are an additional, easily available tool for understanding daily behavior. Drawing analysis is thus used when the people who care about the child need more answers to questions such as the following:

- Why do I need to tell her everything a hundred times before she listens?
- Which afternoon activity will build up her confidence?
- How does she feel about her little brother?
- How can I help her become more popular?
- How can we strengthen the family bond?
- Is she socially and emotionally ready for first grade?

Everyone who raises and works with children knows that every child is a universe, and there is no readymade formula applicable to all. Drawings are in fact the blueprints for each child's unique formula, and you can use them to understand the most effective way to communicate with him.

4 Scribbles

Simple comparison of scribbles made by several children from the same kindergarten will show that they do have some distinct characteristics: some children prefer certain colors and refuse to use all crayons. Some children apply strong pressure, while others do not. Some scribbles are composed mainly of round and spiral movements spread over the entire page area, while others are dominated by broken lines in a limited area.

In order to properly interpret a scribble and explore how the child translates from the sensory modality to the drawing modality, you must gather a considerable amount of information about the child's graphic language. Most studies on emotional interpretation of children's drawings begin from that starting point. When we study graphic language we focus on the quality of the pressure produced by the child on the drawing tool and the way the child conducts it on the surface. For example, weak pressure that is not the result of physiological problem may indicate certain inhibitions. Other indicators include the style of the lines (fragile, disjointed, thin or wavy lines, etc.) and the way they cross each other; the general planning of the page; the child's ability to compose and combine various geometric forms; how he colors and fills in the forms; his attention to detail, etc. The key point of graphic expression is that the pattern of the drawing on the page is affected by the muscular pressure applied to the drawing tool, which is in turn affected by cerebral activity and the child's inner emotional world.

Scribbling is the first step in the graphic expression process, and in that it is akin to the babbling which precedes speech among infants. Although scribbling is a preliminary experience, children who scribble soon begin to develop personal preferences and show a clear desire to produce diverse and interesting artwork. Some children start scribbling already at age one, and soon proceed to draw familiar geometric forms, followed by realistic objects (house, tree, etc.). At school age you will still find evidence of scribbling, for example beside the written lines in the notebook. Writing letters, of course, requires prior knowledge in scribbling and drawing.

During this stage, the child begins to develop his spatial orientation and ability to experience the world kinesthetically as well as through the senses. The scribbling process also provides sensory stimulation, and children at this tender age often taste their crayons. At this stage, children understand the world actively and creatively, so that they affect the information rather than

receive it passively. In my opinion, older children will also do well to understand the world in this active approach. During this period, it is important to allow the child to experience a broad range of nontoxic materials such as gouache, markers, finger paints, and pastel crayons, as well as a broad range of surfaces such as rough paper, papers of various sizes and colors, wooden boards, Bristol papers and newspapers.

Some children actively seek these surfaces, ignoring the fact that the surfaces may already be written over. It is also important for children to experience a wide variety of kneading materials: dough and other foodstuffs, modeling clay, etc. to stimulate their senses.

At this stage, the edges of the surface are not absolute boundaries for the child, who tends to "stray" to nearby surfaces. When the child first starts to draw, he does it accidentally and admires the product. His fascination and that of others around him challenge him to continue exploring this dimension. However, only when you begin identifying recurring trends in the drawing will you be able to start talking about deliberate drawing that represents conscious intervention by the child.

Drawing is fundamentally a muscular activity and as such, it attests to the child's temperament and adjustment to his environment.

When the child draws, he is required to balance between movements away from the body (executed by relieving pressure) and movements towards the body (executed by contraction and applying pressure). Internalizing this pressure is evidence to the maturation of certain brain and nervous system mechanisms and helps the child refine his equilibrium system. By way of drawing, the child enhances his control over various bodily organs and adjusts his bodily posture to the type of drawing he wishes to produce.

It is time to present several examples for the type of information that may be gleaned from children's scribbles. The first example was drawn by 33 month-

old Natalie, who had just moved to a new kindergarten, which resulted in a significant change in her behavior. Since her drawings were collected over a period of one year, drawings from the previous and new kindergarten could be compared to identify the causes for her crisis.

Natalie's scribbles show signs of her characteristic willfulness and rebelliousness. She wants to do everything on her own and enjoys dictating her rules to the environment. This is indicated, among other things, by the strong pressure she applies to the page. Her scribbling style indicates high



awareness of everything that is going on around her. She likes to look at geographical maps, she remembers every little detail, and despite her quick thinking weighs her moves with great care and accuracy.

Thanks to her extraordinary musical hearing she notices the tiniest fluctuations in speech tones, intuitively grasps hidden messages, and immediately gives them her own personal interpretations. Her scribbles clearly

indicate the period when everything becomes shrunk (the brown scribble), when Natalie began her social withdrawal which caused her parents so much concern. During that period, she was



apparently more attentive to external demands than to her own desires, and was quick to please others. Her drawings also show indications of extreme fears that caused sleeping disorders, constipations and changes in eating patterns. Socially, she experienced adjustment difficulties – her behavior at home changed and she tended to cling to her parents. Following parental guidance it was decided to move Natalie to a smaller kindergarten. The

change for the better was evident in her scribbles – the line and scribbling style were once more flowing and open as they had been in the past, indicating stronger presence and confidence in Natalie's conduct.

Another example is a drawing by 30 month-old Tom. Tom insists on doing some things his own way, no matter what. If his wishes are not met, he becomes extremely agitated, so his parents say.



In such situations they feel a bit lost – every time they explain to me that he is not the only one who makes the decisions and they cannot follow his every whim. Nevertheless, this behavior recurs each time things do not go his way. How can you cope with such rebelliousness, they ask?

Tom's drawings are very impressive, suggesting high cognitive skills for his age. Nevertheless, the strong pressure he uses and the density of the various scribbles reflect the willfulness described by his parents. Everybody knows about the Terrible Twos, with many parents struggling with a tiny toddler willing to fight to the bitter end over things that may appear utterly trivial to adults.

Tom fights for his position – he wants to be noticed and is willing to pay a dear price for it – such as an angry rebuke by his parents. He is prepared to pay this price because for him, being at the center of attention is the goal, and even if it is achieved in a negative way, it is still achieved.

The drawings indicate another issue which deserves further attention and analysis: Tom has a well-developed verbal skill, but some of the drawings appear to suggest that certain issues are sometimes "over-discussed" at home. My recommendation to his parents was, therefore, to check how they

draw the line, and see whether they do not add excessive words and explanations to the original refusal.

Sometimes, explanations may confuse children like Tom precisely because of their relatively high cognitive ability. I am not suggesting, of course that the parents should dictate arbitrary rules to the child, ones that he cannot understand. Nevertheless they must be careful not to obscure their clear "No" with excessive explanations.

The best approach is to have the child take part in the decision-making process. It is better to do so when the proverbial iron is cold and not right at the moment when the child wants something he cannot have. That is, after things have cooled down, I recommend talking about what happened and arriving at a decision together. This way, there is cooperation in discussing the matter, combined with assertiveness in action. The parents should maintain their position until the rule is internalized by the child, and have some patience – usually, by the time the toddler is three, his stubbornness subsides...

5 Common myths

The next step in our journey is an important one: dispelling some common myths. As in many other knowledge areas, in children's drawing analysis we must also filter out information that is not founded on research studies, but only on intuitive conjectures. It is essential to be aware of myths related to children's drawings, such as those described below, because these are liable to cause undue concern and in extreme cases give the wrong impression about the child.

Before enumerating some of these myths, it is important to note several basic assumptions. As you have seen above, interpreting children's drawings, and understanding their inner world in general, cannot rely on a single indicator or phenomenon. This means that when we analyze a child's drawings to get a glimpse of his world, several conditions must be met:

- First, we must analyze dozens of drawings made over a period of at least six months, and in different contexts. The reason for that is that only over such a time period can we detect clear, long-term behavioral trends rather than isolated behaviors.
- Second, to reiterate, one indicator is never enough to suggest a broad pattern. To arrive at valid conclusions we must cross-reference several indicators and follow their consistent appearance in drawings. Only repeated phenomena and cross-referenced indicators can reliably support conclusions regarding the child's skills and performance.
- Finally, we must talk to the parents. This talk should follow the interpretation and conclusion stages, and is critical because the parents are the most important partners in the process. My experience has shown that processes in which the parents are true partners lead to optimal and quicker results, and also allow all family members to share in the feeling of satisfaction and success.

The drawings presented below have been analyzed in line with these recommendations, that is, they are part of much larger collections of drawings examined over a long period of time to provide conclusions based on cross-referenced data from several sources.

Myth #1

When a child uses black he has a problem or is depressed



FALSE. The use of colors in children's drawings indicates only to some extent their mental state or mood. Sometimes children use black only because it is available. Many children like black because it creates a strong contrast with the white page. Children's



drawings from Ghetto Theresienstadt show a clear preference of bright colors, despite their terrible living conditions and the horrors they were forced to witness. I will discuss more valid indicators of fear and distress in detail below.

Myth #2

Scribbles cannot be interpreted – they mean absolutely nothing

FALSE. As you have already noticed from the discussion above and quick comparisons between scribbles made by children from the same kindergarten, you can clearly see differences in the intensity of pressure applied by different children, or the shapes of scribbles, with some children preferring spiral, round lines, while other prefer straight lines and angles. Moreover, some kids refuse to use a certain color, while others tend to occupy the entire page, as opposed to those focusing on a smaller area.

The differences between scribbles are many and diverse, indicating differences in children's character and temperament. To interpret a scribble, you must examine a large number of scribbles made over a period of at least four months after the child has started drawing.

After this period, the drawings may be expected to indicate the child's character and suggest information about how he experiences his inner and outer world.

Myth #3

If the child doesn't like to draw, he probably has a motor problem

PARTLY TRUE. Fine motor skills are clearly a prerequisite for drawing, but not all children who refuse to draw suffer from a motor problem. Many of them dislike drawing because they clearly prefer gross motor activities – they *will* draw, write and also do homework in the future, but will tend to do so quickly and move on. Another reason for stopping to draw may have to do with an intervention experience that has obstructed the natural process of drawing development. For example, when the child is still in the scribbling stage, one family member starts teaching him how to draw forms and figures – this kind of learning actually requires a developmental "leap" to a more advanced stage, and such an intervention could cause the child to give up on drawing altogether. Other causes can be too many admonitions that have to do with orderliness and cleanliness, that spoil the creative atmosphere, inappropriate artistic criticism by adults and other children (particularly older brothers). Finally, there are simply cases where children simply do not like to draw, and that is perfectly alright.

Myth #4

Birds in the sky and bars on the windows indicate distress

FALSE. Identifying indicators of distress in drawings is a complex issue with grave consequences. As such, practitioners must be extremely careful not to jump to any conclusions based on a single phenomenon. Studies found the

birds and bars in children's drawings to be non-significant correlates of abuse or distress. Moreover, participants not included in the study's "at-risk" group (children with a history of mental, physical or sexual abuse and emotional neglect) actually tended to draw bars on windows quite frequently.

Myth #5

The drawing's subject indicates the child's inner feelings

FALSE. The subject of the drawing does not necessarily indicate the child's inner feelings. Monsters, for example, do not necessarily suggest fear or distress, indicators for which may be found also in drawings of flowers and butterflies. At first glance, this drawing by a 13 year-old includes quite explicit contents, but the quality of the line used suggests a healthy, strong personality. This drawing is actually quite typical of adolescents who often produce defiant and provocative drawings. In this example, although one should not ignore the pools of blood, they do not necessarily suggest distress.



To conclude, new myths such as these are bound to crop up from time to time, but we must always bear in mind that as a rule, a single indicator in a drawing must never be relied upon to inform conclusions regarding children's behavior patterns. I believe that the more parents and educators are aware of the approach outlined here, such myths will be abandoned for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the children under their care, and maybe also of the children within us adults.

6 Drawing Development Stages

Observing the child as he moves through the stages of drawing development is critical as it often determines the entire opinion formed by the practitioner. Stages of development are usually referred to when the child is expected to draw in an age-appropriate way. This is important of course, but for me this is not the most important application of developmental insights.

When I assess drawings in terms of developmental sequence, my main concern is to match the given drawing against the child's own developmental sequence. In other words, when a child diverges from his individual developmental sequence, this concerns me more than when he develops more slowly than other children.

Such divergence could be manifested, for example, in sudden regression to an earlier developmental phase, as indicated by comparing a recent drawing with earlier examples. Such regression may be a clear indicator of fear or distress.

When you observe a child's drawings over a prolonged period, you can detect trends of change and development. For many years, children's drawings were evaluated in terms of matching normative standards, but studies conducted over the past five decades showed us that drawings express the children's inner worlds, and not only their technical ability. They provide significant information that helps parents make various decisions about their educational approach and improve family relations, the child's social relations, and more.

I do not recommend judging your child's creative work in rigid terms of matching norms. When I evaluate a child's drawings, I tend to compare them less to his friends' drawings, and more to his own. Therefore, I must qualify the age ranges appearing below in the title of each developmental stage.

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