

## **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](mailto:info@roshida.com), and I will get back to you ASAP.

Best Regards,  
Michal Wimmer  
Art Therapist, M.A

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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

Having understood the general outlines of the drawing interpretation field, it is time to present several examples for the type of information that may be gleaned from children's drawings. 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 second 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.

**A tip for the road:**

Many parents ask me: Why does my child prefer to draw lying down?

For some children, this is due to a weak shoulder girdle which makes it hard for them to draw while sitting. For others, this is due to difficulty focusing their eyes, so that they prefer drawing when their eyes are as close as possible to the page.

## 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.

For example, a four year-old may still scribble while his friends have already begun drawing human figures, but this does not necessarily indicate a developmental delay. In addition, the development process and the transitions between stages are different for different children, such that we can find drawings of children who have skipped one of the stages or regressed to earlier stages, only to move on from there.

Due to space limitations, this e-book covers the first three development stages, as follows. The entire developmental process may be found in 'The Complete Guide to Children's Drawings'.

### Stage 1 – Spontaneous Scribbling – Ages 1½ - 2½

To the untrained eye, this stage would appear to be a never-ending string of meaningless doodles. Nevertheless, even non-practitioners can clearly see how children have unique scribbling styles. At this stage, children attach great importance to the sensorimotor aspect of the drawing act – they enjoy the sensation of moving the drawing tool over the page. Lines start and end at random, and when geometric forms appear, they are usually inconsistent and disorderly.



In 22 month-old Theresa's drawing, we can see lines spilling over the page, lines with various lengths and directions without any regularity or personal preference. According to Freud, in terms of their psychological development children at these ages are in the *oral stage*, and indeed they tend to taste the paints or crayons as an integral part of the creative process. Only once a child feels that he has acquired the motor skill developed at this stage and we can see initial indications of brain-eye-hand coordination, will he move on to the next stage.

### Stage 2 – Structured Scribbling – Ages 2½ - 3½

At this stage, the child starts planning the drawing before executing it. The child would often fill entire pages with repetitive attempts to draw the same form. By this point, you can see children assessing their work while it is still in progress, or even reflecting on it before starting. Hazel (31 months) drew short and intermittent lines, and while doing so said, "This is a barking dog, woof-woof".



Once they can draw circles, children begin to draw human figures (called "tadpoles"). To do so, they use the lines acquired in the previous stage to represent limbs.



Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget defined that period as the beginning of the preoperational stage, when children solve problems by trial and error. Indeed, during the

structured scribbling stage, children tend to use objects around them and their drawings as inner representations of their experiences, using anthropomorphic thinking (animating inanimate objects).

### Stage 3 – Pre-Schematic Stage – Ages 3½ - 4½

At this stage, the child begins to methodically plan the artwork, and tends to give it a name at the end of the process. Drawings begin to include objects familiar to adults, such as flowers, trees or cars, but the child still does not attach any importance to the *relations* between the various objects in the drawing. Consequently, the overall impression may appear to lack any sense, but as far as the child is concerned the drawing is satisfactory as it accurately depicts the characteristics and functions of the individual objects. For example, Ethan (45 months) drew this three-wheeled car, from a perspective that would seem unreasonable in reality.



This stage is followed by the schematic stage, in which the child begins to adopt realistic choices in his drawings, also in terms of color selection, and attempts to draw objects of various sizes and locations on the page. This stage is followed by the pre-realistic and realistic stages during adolescence, characterized by light-and-shadow games, depictions of complex situations, perspectives and caricatures. Since children at these ages are not required to go on drawing on a daily basis (as opposed to writing), many adolescents give up drawing altogether and do not progress further than a level typical at 13 year-olds even as adults.

## 7 Colors

Children's drawings are not culture-dependent. Some basketball fans, for example, will not dare wear yellow because they hate the Lakers. With children, it is different, however. When a child uses only black, it doesn't necessarily mean he is depressed. Sometimes they like it simply because it is "the strongest color", able to "erase" all colors underneath it.

Here are three short steps to understanding the meaning of colors in children's drawings;

1. The meanings of colors are multiple and diverse. With older children, you can simply ask what qualities they like in each to gain a glimpse of their inner world.
2. Excessive use of a certain color should, in most cases, be interpreted in terms of the negative emotional qualities of that color.
3. Balanced use of a certain color usually indicates its positive emotional qualities.

### **How can you tell the reason for recurring use of a certain color?**

First of all, I recommend checking if this was the only paint or crayon left on the table, after all the other kids in class took the rest. This may sound simplistic, but kindergartners or schoolchildren often draw with whatever is available.

In addition, some kindergarten teachers choose to expose children to colors gradually, so that it may be that all kindergartners were simply given the same color to use. I do not recommend this educational approach, by the way, because the language of drawing in general – and of colors in particular – is replete with meanings, and the more the child is allowed to express himself through drawing in a free and unhindered way, the more his drawings will genuinely reflect experiences from his inner world.

The location is also important: you should check whether your child draws differently at home than at kindergarten, whether he uses different colors when drawing at his grandparents' house, and of course, whether the dominant use of a certain color is a recurring phenomenon.

If the child continues to use the same color in different contexts, try making other colors available. Notice his reaction: does he ignore them completely or try them out and then reverts to his favorite color? Notice also the duration of use: the pink-red



period, when the page is swamped with hearts, for example, usually does not last long.

Beyond colors, you should look at the overall style. If the child uses black and applies such a strong pressure that he pierces through the page, a black drawing would suggest emotional blocks, internalized anxieties and fear of criticism.

When a child likes a certain color, he will tend to use it in most of his drawings. In this case, we can elicit additional meanings from the *way* he uses his favorite color, as in the following examples.

**Red** is one of the most favorite colors among both girls and boys. In fact, it is the first that comes to mind when even adults discuss colors. In children's drawings, it has a strong presence. It is the color of the blood in our veins and as such, it connotes enthusiasm and energy. Children who use it consistently are usually dominant and extroverted, and like to be at the center of attention. These kids like challenges and competitions and want to be winners.



Excessive use of this color is common among aggressive children.

**Blue** signifies calm and peaceful behavior. "Blue" children are characterized by peaceful and harmonious social relations and their communication with others is pleasant and calm. They demand rational explanations and refuse to hear answers such as "cause I told you so". They have a rich inner world, but it is important for them to express their wishes and desires.

**Green** is a favorite among nature-lovers, who like animals and outdoor play. It is commonly used by children who have a different and fresh outlook on situations, who are quick learners and need freedom and space.

Colors in children's drawings are often directly related to detecting their talents and strengths. The most common question parents have in this regard is which afternoon activity would optimally enhance the child's talents.

## 8 Talents

### How to choose the right afternoon activity?

First, some ground rules – they contradict each other, and this is no coincidence...

1. An afternoon activity is designed to enhance an area where the child feels weak and unconfident.
2. An afternoon activity is designed to enhance an area where the child feels strong and confident.

Of course there are also other pertinent considerations, such as "this is the only way to keep him away from the computer"...

Second, armed with these two ground rules, we narrow the choice. If the child is strong enough in other areas, we can choose an activity that enhances a skill in which he is weak, and vice versa.

And now for the next step: this is the opportunity to look at your children's drawings and use them to understand what your child truly needs. Children's drawings are a reflection of their inner world, and as such can be used to evaluate talents, feelings, fears, needs, etc.

When a child holds a pencil for the first time, he starts out on a new, long and exciting journey. Like a little researcher, he comes back to the drawing table again and again, excitedly examining what he has managed to do. This is his own private creation, and through it he expresses the most important thing to him – his inner world.

When interpreting children's drawings, the emphasis would be not on *what* the child drew, but on *how* he drew it. Since drawing analysis relies on developmental psychology theories, we may expect children of the same age to draw similar elements.

**Age appropriateness.** The first thing you must check is whether the drawing is age appropriate. If the level of drawing does not match the age, such that a six year-old is scribbling like a two year-old, you should perhaps not send him to an afternoon activity for first-graders. Perhaps you would do better to have him diagnosed by an occupational therapist. Another possibility is that his drawing level has regressed due to a particular fear or distress. In this case, perhaps an afternoon activity is not a good idea. Perhaps it would be better to spend more quality time with the family.

**Colors.** Next, check for a dominant color. Colors have different meanings in various cultures. In some parts of China, for example, it is recommended not to write names in red (the color used by Buddhists to write the names of the dead). In Rome, purple gifts are considered bad luck. In many parts of Asia, white is associated with mourning. As we have seen, however, the use of color in young ages is culture-independent, free and intuitive.

When I analyze children's drawings I give a lot of weight to color choice and combination. I consider a certain color dominant when it is clearly preferred to another. For example, red connotes movement, so that sports or dancing activities are more suitable for "red" children. Note, however, that I never analyze a drawing based exclusively on color use, but also on other important parameters such as line quality, design of elements, etc.

The next drawing was sent to me (with 20 others) by a reader of my column in a well-known parental magazine. It was made by her 4½ year-old daughter Dana. She told me her child was in a Judo class and she wanted to know if that was appropriate to her, and what other activities could best develop her talents. In addition, she told me that when she had asked Dana about her favorite color, the child answered, "All the colors in the world!"



"What is your favorite color?" This is a significant question, particularly with kids for whom color is a key means of expression. Can you adults say which color you like best? It is difficult to draw an analytic comparison here, because the tendency to love a certain color, as opposed to handwriting style, is intuitive and subjective. Some children will say they like red, and others will name other colors. When asked to name any color, most adults will also say red. Red is a primary color, related to self-expression: red flagging, drawing a red line...

Let us understand what Dana meant when she said she liked all the colors in the world.

**Seeing the talent through the drawings.** Dana's drawings show me she is a creative and curious child, because she uses original design variations when making her artistic choices. It is important for her to be involved and up-to-date. She likes to be part of what's going on around her and has a presence you cannot ignore – this I have deduced from the full and high-quality spread over the entire page.

From a young age, Dana is a curious child, and therefore does not take rules for granted but demands explanations – this is evident mainly in some of her other drawings, where you can see true inquisitiveness. In terms of fine motor skills, she is exceptionally mature for her age.

Motor maturity also has to do with cognitive maturity, from which I deduce that Dana is highly intelligent and needs well-reasoned explanations because she doesn't "buy" anything... She has a great talent for writing, which will be evident in the future, in school. But already she likes making up and telling stories, as evident from the combination of high motor and cognitive skills.

And now to the parents' question. I can understand their choice of Judo because the drawings indicate that Dana is something of a tomboy – she does not draw hearts and is not enamored in pink like most girls her age.

In addition, although she has a great sense of rhythm and likes to sing, dancing, and in particular ballet, does not suit her at all. By the way, since I am constantly asked that question, suitability for ballet requires a different style of drawing than the one evident in the example attached here.

This girl moves freely with the color and invents something new each time. She is her own choreographer. A strict ballet class with recurring, stereotypical movements may not suit her. But then, based on my personal acquaintance with the area, I would qualify that statement by saying that it all depends on the teacher.

If the ballet teacher stresses having each girl learn about her own body, and more importantly, being at ease with her body image rather than stick to the lesson plan, then girls such as Dana will definitely benefit from a ballet class. Having said that, I believe Dana could also enjoy and benefit from a capoeira class. A sculpture or pottery class could also attract her.

To conclude, Dana is highly intelligent so I would recommend her parents to enroll her in integrative classes that combine several arts. She grasps things quickly and could be easily bored in a class which would not enable her to express herself in her unique way. After all, she likes "All the colors in the world!"

## 9 Social skills

I will now discuss a topic that can be an emotionally complex and charged memory for many adults. Few of us remember school as a wonderful time rich with empowering social experiences. Most of us recall problematic and uneasy interactions. How do you remember school? And of course, the key question is, how does the drawing child experience the social interactions around him, and how can we help him improve his social status?

The definition of social popularity differs from culture to culture, as evident in the way the child draws interactions between various figures.

A fascinating study compared drawings by two groups from the same culture and found differences in the very definition of friendship and the degree of similarity between the various figures. Children from the first group drew figures very different from each other in terms of their clothing items and colors, representing the fashion freedom in that culture. The kids from the second group, on the other hand, drew figures in similar clothing representing the uniformity customary in their culture. In addition, their figures express more interactivity, probably because of the high importance attached in that culture to intra-community activity.

Another study compared drawings by popular versus unpopular children and found that the latter attach greater importance to their family, and tend to draw themselves close to one of their parents.

The following are three tips on how to identify good social performance in children's drawings:

1. The figures are drawn close to each other
2. The figures have a common denominator, such as similar clothes or colors
3. The various elements on the page interact with one another in unique ways

Naturally, some children give adults the feeling that they are not interested in being popular or in taking part in social play. Psychologically, it is customary to view this as an indication of their fear of social contact, which prevents them from daring to take the plunge and become better integrated socially. They have been known to be shy from a young age, and they fear strangers more than others. They would rather not experience anything new, and often this would also mean doing new things in drawings or other artwork. They may tend to draw using weak lines with little pressure, but this would be only in cases where they are shy and find it difficult to express themselves in other areas in life, beyond their peer society.

When a child feels socially rejected or finds it difficult to adjust to his friends and communicate with them, there could be many reasons for that – from learning of physical disabilities, through emotional reasons such as low self-esteem or difficulty expressing oneself with other children, to complex family backgrounds.

The child's appearance is another key factor. A child who looks unkempt or neglected will be unpopular. Children can also be affected by various behaviors that developed in the family system, such as overindulgence, which could make social interactions difficult and could be reprimanded by the kindergarten teachers.

In drawings, we can find signs that will indicate difficulty in dealing with unwanted realities. Moreover, we will find indicators of complex emotional coping, mainly in terms of certain color combinations and disrupted line qualities (trembling, discontinuous or meandering line).

Social rejection is liable to undermine a child's self-confidence and dissuade him from drawing at all. The child may feel nothing he does produces any results, and lose all interest in any activity, to the point of losing faith in any of his talents.

Based on countless children's drawings I have examined in the course of my career, I have come to realize that when a child feels rejected he tends to emphasize the difference between him and other figures in the drawing. The popular child, on the other hand, tends to emphasize common denominators.

This drawing by Harry (7½) is an example for social rejection. His drawings were referred to me by his therapist after the therapy got stuck due to lack of cooperation on Harry's part.

The various drawings revealed a complex and difficult inner world, as evident in this example: the flowers do not bloom, the sun is too distant for its warmth to be felt, and there is no relation between any of the objects in the drawing.



Based on this and the other drawings, I became aware of a significant trauma to which Harry had been exposed at a young age, causing him to lose trust in the adults around him. At the same time, I saw signs of dramatic talent, and using drama therapy combining dolls, the therapy process could proceed. Later on, Harry began expressing himself once more through drawings as well.

To conclude, here are three tips for identifying social rejection in children's drawings:

1. Emphasis of the difference between the self and other figures
2. Using low-quality lines (weak pressure, hesitant movement, etc.)
3. Leaving large empty spaces on the page and drawing tiny figures

Since children use drawings as a second language, drawings shed light on their inner world. Their social life, which is key to their world, is reflected in their drawings in different ways, and parents and practitioners will do well to analyze them in order to gain better understandings of dynamics they cannot participate in directly.

# 10 Fears and Distress

This subject is naturally quite complex, and I will address it from the points of view of the child, the parent and the mental health professional. The moment when a child encounters difficulty can be a moment when he discovers his strengths and manages to confront and overcome obstacles, but it can also be a painful moment, when he discovers his limitations and has to come to terms with the implications of this discovery.

Drawings, in this case, can be invaluable diagnostic tools, particularly when the child finds it impossible to articulate his thoughts. Being nonverbal, drawings can be used to express the child's deepest, innermost feelings.

We observe our children every day, trying to follow their progress and choices. They often invite us to take part in their development, but quite often we are asked or forced not to intervene. As a result, we have many unanswerable questions: Do we really know how our child is doing? Will he turn to us for help? Will we discover the source of difficulty on time, or will it be too late?

Drawings analysis is even broader and more diverse than handwriting analysis. Here, the child's expression is more spontaneous, relatively free of limitations and rules. Each choice the child makes in a drawing is affected by his physical, cognitive and emotional state, more than by the need to imitate and carry out a task dictated from above. By the way, this is also why we may attribute meaning to the scribbles that will adorn the child's notebooks in his early school years.

Below I discuss several indicators that require particular attention when detected in drawings. Again, remember that no single indicator is sufficient to suggest an unequivocal conclusion regarding fear or distress, or any other conclusion for that matter – you must detect several indicators over a long period of time.

## **Sudden regression to an earlier drawing stage**

For example, a six year-old, who has hitherto drawn formally and symbolically, suddenly reverts to the scribbling stage. To make such a judgment, you should be familiar with the normative stages of development and your child's own. The sudden regression reflected in the drawings protects the child, as he returns to a familiar and "safer" stage. As parents and practitioners, it is our duty to be aware of that phenomenon to be able to treat it in a timely manner.



### Applying very weak pressure

In this case, you must check whether the reason is physiological (e.g. low muscle tone). If this is not the case, you may conclude that weak pressure on the drawing tool suggests lack of confidence and a sense of helplessness coping with the outside world.

### Locating elements at the edge of the page

Many children who experience difficulty in social interaction or feel their presence is not meaningful for those around them will locate elements such as houses, flowers or human figures at the edge of the page, leaving large spaces empty at the center.

### Overly rigid and stereotypical drawings

When the drawing is clearly not the result of free expression, the child may be experiencing some difficulty. When the child is too careful not to spill over the page, extremely fastidious about the drawing frame, applies so much pressure that the page is torn and mainly loses his temper when failing to complete the task, he may have difficulty coping with unexpected/anxiety situations, particularly performance anxiety and perfectionism issues.

### Shading of human figures/organs

When a child chooses to draw an entire face shaded, or alternatively only the genital area, this could suggest sexual abuse and a sense of rejection.

These are only few examples for the diagnostic potential of drawing analysis. There are unique characteristics in drawings by physically sick children, children who have undergone various traumatic experiences, children who have experienced or witness abuse and children scarred by wars, terrorist attacks and other crisis situations.

To give you one example, this is a drawing by a 5½ year-old, that articulates a specific type of fear. Danny's mother suffered from postpartum depression. At the point when this drawing was made, she was not yet treated with psychiatric medication, and her condition was deteriorating by the day. She stopped functioning and would just lie in bed all day. Danny's father described a difficult and complicated reality at home, and made it clear that Danny was aware of the problem and deeply concerned.



Indeed, Danny's drawing level regressed significantly from the moment his mother returned from the hospital. He reverted to the "tadpole" figures that characterized his drawings when two years before.

Such regression is typical of anxious children, and is often accompanied by behavioral regression such as bedwetting, using the pacifier, etc. To them, it is an effective defense mechanism as it allows them to return to an earlier, more familiar and less threatening stage of development.

The figure's sad expression is even more troublesome, as it expresses his inner feelings. In a certain sense, it is also a true-to-life record of the reality he sees around him. Danny adds tears to the figure and presses hard on the marker in this area, indicating the frustration he is experiencing.

# 11 House Drawings

Your boy is withdrawn? Your girl will not share her feelings? How important it is to know, if only just a little, about how your child experiences his immediate social environment!

Naturally, home is one of the most common elements in children's drawings – you do not have to ask the child to draw a house, but just look for a house drawing in his collection.

## What do we look for in house drawings?

1. You may find a house in every drawing. That house could be at the center or in the margins of the page.
2. Houses can be drawn in all tools – crayons, pastels or markers.
3. The various parts of the house stand for the patterns of attachment and confidence experienced by the child vis-à-vis his close family members.

We are all familiar with the "classic" house drawing: a square with a triangle on top – representing the main structure and the roof. Sometimes, we find a tree or an animal at the entrance to the house, and almost always the sky and/or sun up above. But when the word "house" or "home" becomes more emotionally charged, children's drawings change.

House drawings may indicate emotional upheaval due to the following reasons, among others:

1. The child may be using the drawing to emotionally work through a recent relocation.
2. The child may be working through issues related to family relations.
3. The child may be working through issues related to his relations with his immediate social environment.

## The door

In children's house drawings, the door may have many meanings, but it chiefly signifies the entrance, or in emotional terms, the gateway to the child's inner world. In other words, various ways of drawing the door can indicate the child's degree of emotional accessibility or openness to emotional dialogue with others: Is the child willing to be exposed? How much? How emotionally available is he right now? What

defense mechanisms is he using to avoid exposure? And even – What is the best way to hold an emotional dialogue with him?

Importantly, like other drawing subjects, house drawings can shed light on the child's emotional situation as it unfolds in time. Often, interventions such as family counseling, parental guidance or individual emotional therapy for the child himself affect his degree of openness to dialogue in varying ways. For example, sometimes the emotional door is shut, not only when mental health professionals intervene, but also right before going into first grade. Conversely, it may open after a process of parental guidance or emotional therapy.

The drawings shown below have been made by children who had undergone an emotionally difficult relocation. Analyzing such drawings is important as it can tell the parent or practitioner what emotional issue is preoccupying the child at the moment.

Here are two heuristics that will help you analyze the drawings attached:

### **Excessive attention to the door area**

The drawing has many parts. If the child focuses and spends a long time on drawing a certain part, this means he devotes particular emotional attention to it. Studies found that when children linger on the door area they are preoccupied (around the time the drawing is made) with the emotional meanings it signifies, including issues such as exposure, interacting with others, and access to one's intimate world.

### **Smaller elements in the door area**

Elements such as locks or peepholes also deserve particular attention, particularly in terms of their drawing style.



Children often use art to articulate their feelings about the reality that is outside the limits of the page. Moreover, they sometimes use the drawing as an opportunity to create an alternate reality, compensating for their inability to change their actual lived experience.

The drawings presented here are characterized by protections of different kinds. In one case, these are massive animals that appear near the entrance to "protect" the house". In the other, we can see the more common element of fences around the house. Fences are particularly laden with meaning when the children invest considerable energy in drawing them, and linger for a long time over this part of the drawing. We may find thickened, massive fences as well as fences drawn with thick crisscrossed lines.

Children are mindful of events around them, whether adults choose to share with them or not. They are aware of emotional storms and can register emotional complications, even if they find it difficult to express them in words. House drawings are very common and appear very early on – right after the scribbling stage, around age three when human figures begin to appear in drawings. The children acquire the requisite graphic tools and after several months the "house" begins to appear in their drawings.

The conclusion is obvious – whether children agree to relocate or not, they are forced to deal with the uncertainties involved. These inevitably affect their behavior and are articulated in their drawings. Leaving home and moving to a new house – whether or not it is emotionally charged as in the drawings above – is a significant issue for any child, and drawings can be used as an additional and significant source of information about the child's emotional readiness for the expected move, thus orienting his parents to issues they should emphasize when referring to the relocation, to make it easier for the child.

# 12 Tree Drawings

"Please draw a tree" – many of you have heard this odd request during a job interview. Why tree? As you may have realized by now, every drawing can tell us a lot about the artist. Many prospective employers use the tree drawing because this subject has been heavily researched. Nevertheless, drawing a flower, urban landscape or abstract shapes could also provide the same information.

Nowadays, when hardly anyone uses a pen or a pencil to write, one of the most common questions I'm asked is, "How can you diagnose my handwriting if I hardly ever write?"

This is why I also ask adults to draw. Drawing is inherently less structured than writing, offering the opportunity to express the creativeness that lies within each and every one of us. Moreover, the power of drawing lies in its colorfulness that carries us into the sensory experience and invites us to think less and do more.

This is true also for the drawings shown below. When I ask people to draw a tree, I always offer them a large stack of colors. I believe drawing a tree with a pen does not allow for sufficient creative expression. To maximize the experience, I also offer large pages, larger than the standard writing block size. When drawing is part of a group experience, I start with several minutes of guided imagery with music. All these elements help each participant draw her "dream tree" (see below for a wonderful example).

The tree stands for the artist and the way she expresses herself in various areas in her life. Here are the first three steps to unlocking the meaning of tree drawings:

1. Roots symbolize the past and the person's relationship with her family
2. The trunk signifies the person's personality and ability to withstand the rigors of life
3. The treetop is indicative of the person's ability to realize her potential through her various life activities

The fabulous cypress shown here fascinates everyone who sees it. By its very shape, the cypress stands for cognitive development, which is indeed relevant for the woman who drew it. She is curious and open to new interests and activities – this period of her life is characterized by diverse experiences each of which, I must say, is more "colorful" than the other. This richness is clearly evident in the tree itself. Although this cypress is not realistic at first glance, but the artist's choice to paint its top in so many colors suggests that diversity is completely realized in her life (remember, the treetop stands for how we realize our inherent potential).



When looking at a tree drawing, you should also refer to the size ratio between the trunk and treetop. In this example, the treetop seems to be exceptionally large, but when you refer to the size ratio, you must see whether the final result is a treetop that does not have a strong enough foundation to lean on. In this cypress, you can clearly see that the trunk provides a strong foundation.

In addition, the connection between the trunk and canopy is strong and reliable. This is also true in reality. Based on my impression, the woman who made this drawing can balance the various areas in her life in a harmonious way, and can grow out of the rich information she has absorbed in her life into new experiences and fresh beginnings.

The next tree is very different from the cypress shown above, but is just as informative about the artist's personality. The tree represents a more common choice, and the style in which it is rendered is also quite ordinary. The treetop – representing realization, performance and cognition – is made of several shades, but its boundaries are strictly adhered to, and as such it signifies structured, well-organized and systematic thinking.



People who draw this way prefer to maintain structures and routine of family, career and habits that provide a sense of security and stability. Nevertheless, it is important to notice the degree in which children who draw trees are careful with the canopy's boundaries. When they are overly fastidious, this could suggest difficulty and stress in school or other social contexts.

## The Complete Guide to Children's Drawings

This practical book elaborates on a broad range of issues in children's lives, as articulated in their drawings. Clinicians, educators and parents will find it helpful for evaluating children's strengths and weaknesses, as well as understanding the reasons for their behaviors.

The book is accompanied by a wide collection of colorful drawings and explanations, in order to clearly illustrate the material learned.

### Variety of issues

The book presents cases of children and adolescents who have experienced a variety of problems and life events, such as divorce, ADHD, adoption, eating disorders, social problems, fears, power struggles in the family and at school, learning disabilities, the birth of a little brother or sister, lies, disease in the family, relocations, and temper tantrums.

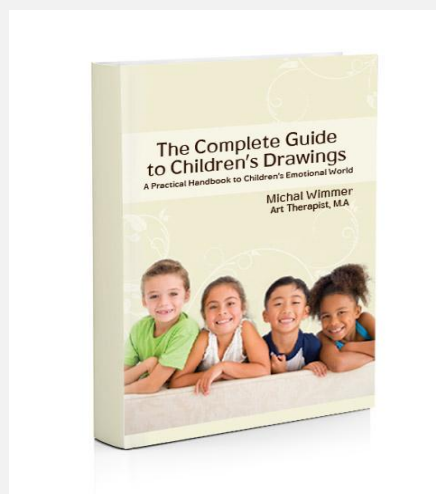
Beyond this list and additional parenthood problems, the book also discusses how to identify talents in children's drawings, which will enable you to choose the optimal afternoon activity for your child, most appropriate for his abilities and personality traits.

### Practical tools

In addition to hundreds of examples of children's drawings and explanations, the book offers many effective tools for coping with children's difficulties, based on extensive clinical experience. These tools will help you help your child cope with his difficulties, enhance his self-confidence and improve his family relations.

In this book you will find answers to important questions such as:

- How to identify artistic talent in areas such as music, painting or drama?
- Why do children use mainly black, and what do colors mean in drawings?
- Why do children draw human figures without arms?
- Do monster drawings indicate fears?
- What happens to a child at kindergarten or school? Is he happy there?
- What are some of the indicators of distress in children's drawings and handwritings?
- How can you better understand the way a child will cope with significant changes in the family, such as the birth of a new sibling or divorce?
- What is the truth behind some of the common myths associated with children's drawings?





### **Train yourself**

At the end of the book you'll find exercises and detailed answers that will give you a chance to experience drawing analysis firsthand, using real-life original drawings.

### **Delivery**

This book is available on Amazon.com

Paperback: 272 pages

List Price: **\$12.95**

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### **Want to know more?**

If you would rather find out right away how we might help you learn to interpret children's drawings or get more details about an individual review, just [get in touch with us](#) for a friendly e-mail correspondence.

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