

The Secret of Children's Drawings

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Scientists around the world have tried for decades to find the meaning of pictorial expressions by human beings. In this search, they have discovered that children's drawings, in particular, show the most common features cross-culturally, both in the depiction of life experiences and in the forms of expression. The consistencies are so great that it cannot be merely coincidence that children draw "this way or that."

Whether a picture is quickly drawn in passing or drawn with great effort, whether a child carefully seeks for the right color or just grabs the first pencil that comes to hand—if one is asking about the "meaning" of children's drawings, one thing is certain: Children express their hopes, wishes, dreams, visions, and expectations in their drawings—and also their anxieties, fears, hurts, and worries. Their drawings depict their actual experienced reality—an experience of the present with a connection to the past and the future. Naturally, a child's drawing is not a consciously structured act. For this reason developmental psychologists generally do not say, "The child draws," but rather something like, "Something is being drawn by the child." In this way they refer to the feelings and inner pictures that play into the drawing process.

The "purpose" of children's drawing is simply the joy that children feel and in their wish to "express" themselves. To express themselves means to come out from under some kind of pressure. [In the German, there is a play on the words "Druck"—*pressure, stress*, and "sich ausdrücken"—*to express oneself*.] The perception of stress is not necessarily to be equated with an experience of being burdened! More often it is due to the wish of the person to free himself from feelings or thoughts, to be able to be open for new perceptions and activities. One could also say: Children's drawings enhance and free [the child] from feelings, unburden one from thoughts that have not been worked through, and help create the possibility to be able to confront one's actual living situation with renewed forces.



First of all, one thing that is of the greatest meaning for the drawings of children has to do with the discoveries of developmental psychology: For the pictorial, graphic expression, of children there is no “right or wrong,” “good or bad,” “acceptable or not acceptable,” or “beautiful or less beautiful”! When children subjectively value and appreciate themselves and their environment—judging with emotionally charged values—then their drawings always correspond to their own imagination of what is right. Not without reason does one find in neurobiology, as well,

the concept: “As a person feels, so does he think, and as he thinks, so does he act.” The life of feeling shapes the direction of our thinking and brings about a corresponding pattern of behavior. In this regard there cannot and should not be an “objective correctness” for children’s drawings! As children draw meaningful things larger than other things, then the depiction of a lion might be larger than that of a house or a tree. Children portray in their pictures a felt image of an actual assessment of their lives. In this sense the drawing is a stored bundle of impressions. And this is where the cultural—historical circle is closed: Impression seeks expression. Drawing joins the other five forms of expression* of children as an equally noteworthy form.

How children’s drawings can be “read”

Children’s drawings are always built up of six particular key elements. First of all there are the so-called “20 graphemes”—the basic signs or scribbles which range from a point to the various vertical, diagonal and horizontal lines through curves, zig-zags and wave forms to spirals, circles, and open lines. [*Grapheme* as used here does not seem to have an exact corresponding English word—*sign* or *symbol* would not be quite accurate.] Every sign (grapheme) corresponds to a specific stage of development in the first four years of life. From this, one can draw inferences about the respective developmental stage by observing how often particular signs are chosen.

In the second place we can observe the three levels of personality: competence of action, emotional competence, and cognitive competence. The

drawings can show us how strongly or weakly a given area is developed. As a third step we can observe the three elements: past, present, and future. The drawings give us information about which time period the child lives in most strongly, cognitively and emotionally.

More than ninety percent of the many thousands of children's drawings that I have evaluated over the last twelve years have led me to the conclusion that children between the fourth and seventh years deal with family situations relating to the past with intensively emotional thoughts. This observation stands at cross-purposes to the cognitive, future-oriented learning demands placed on many kindergarten children today. A radical change of perspective is necessary here to prevent further hindrances for children for their long-range personality development.

The fourth element [to observe in children's drawings] arises from the choice of color. Socially-culturally oriented teachers give the highest priority of meaning to four primary and four secondary colors: red, yellow, green, and blue as well as black, white, purple, and brown. These colors play a special role in the history of mankind, and many actual findings in developmental psychology show that children use the same colors over and over again to portray their feeling-charged experiences.

Now for the fifth stage we observe the objects that are drawn, which all have a particular symbolic value assigned—mostly related to the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung. He took as his starting point the idea that every human being has in his subconscious an “enormous reservoir” that he brings with him into the world. This contains a complete set of pictures, signs, and symbols which can be activated and connected with one another through impressions from outside. Whether the drawing has to do with the sun, the stars, the moon, the clouds, a house, a particular animal, a fence, a rainbow, a forest, an explosion, a mountain or something else, these are archetypal pictures standing for particular meaningful content.

To conclude [with the sixth aspect], we would consider certain peculiarities:

- Hovering pictures, in which the people, animals, or other objects have no ground under their feet
- Pictures with a frame, in which all four sides are lined
- Doubling of objects
- The angle of inclination of tree tops or roofs of houses
- The omission of parts of objects that would be considered belonging to it
- Gluing [the picture] together, or rolling it up

Be careful with interpretation. A statement of interpretation is possible only under the following conditions:

- There must be a number of pictures on hand to compare and to check for clusters of distinctive features. Single pictures may be an image of a given day and could lead to chance generalizations.
- The basis for the interpretive work is secure knowledge.
- An overall statement would never be made from the evaluation of a few single features. It must be the result of looking at all six key aspects together.
- These statements are then only relevant when they are consistent with analyses of the other five forms of expression.*

Children's pictures are an extremely valuable document to help enable one to understand the child's environment, to discover the child's inner values, and to infer pedagogical arrangements that might be called for. We should always meet all pictures of a child with appreciation and respect, as he is entrusting us with his "soul diary."

Literature:

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*Translator's note: In an article by Edeltraub Wiebe, "Kinder haben ein Recht darauf, verstanden zu werden! Ausdrucksformen der Kinder—sehen und verstehen" [included in the book edited by Armin Krenz, *Kindorientierte Elementarpädagogik*, Göttingen 2010, page 121], we find the six forms of children's expression: behavior, play, movement, language and speech, painting and drawing, and dreams.