See What I'm Saying

What Children Reveal in Their Drawings

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What Children Reveal in Their Drawings

Would you like to know when a child you care about is happy? sad? excited? frustrated? angry? scared? Obviously any concerned parent, or anyone responsible for the care of children, wants to know these things. We are always looking for clues in children's behavior or asking for verbal explanations that can help us understand what they mean when what they do or say is not immediately clear to us. Even discovering clues and hearing verbal explanations may still not make it clear. But there is a whole set of clues that most parents and teachers overlook—the clues in children's drawings.

Creative Expression through Art

Normally, a child will take to paper and crayon like a duck to water. Children seem to have a need to draw and will communicate non-verbally through image making whenever given the opportunity. Most of us have forgotten our earliest years, but those who have been involved in caring for a small child know that each new experience and sensation confronting the child is unsettling, whether the immediate response is one of distress or pleasure. Putting that sensation or experience on paper, changing it, adding to it, crossing it out, and connecting it to known objects and events, all are ways of organizing and reorganizing what is new with what is already known. This is one way of mastering the process of growing up. It involves bringing order to chaos, which is also the work of the artist.

The artist creates order out of disorder. This disorder may be something the artist feels inside or something chaotic perceived in the environment. Whatever the source, the artistic image that emerges is one that is orderly and said to be "universally appealing." This term does not mean that everyone who looks at a given work of art will like it. It simply implies that the final product, the work of art, focuses the viewer's attention on the artist's subject, away from the artist's personal thoughts and feelings. The result is that the viewer will relate to the subject matter and not to the person of the artist.

Not all artists are totally successful in separating their persons from their art. We have all seen famous works of art and wondered what the artist was thinking. The concept of universal appeal is a simplification of the basic criteria for identifying a work of art. The criteria demands that creative

expression must have"universal" rather than specifically "personal" appeal. The work of the artist is to transform, through the creative process, personal chaotic feelings and ideas into a work of art that has universal appeal. If we can understand this basic criterion for looking at works of art, we can begin to understand the significance of children's art. Through creative expression, all children at a very young age naturally begin to use drawings to organize the multitude of new experiences they encounter as they grow and to create a sense of balance within themselves.

I have led you from the artist to the child to remind you that the child in all of us was once a budding artist. The practicing artist is doing professionally what we all did so naturally as children whenever given the opportunity. A few more examples from the world around us might be helpful, but before sharing these with you, I want to dispel a myth. Some time in your life you may have heard someone say something like, "Artists are crazy. " Whether you believed it or not, in order to appreciate the art in art therapy and the role of the creative process in mental health, this myth must be dispelled.

A truly disturbed—even though talented—artist is no more able to make order out chaos and create an image that disguises personal torment than is a mentally disturbed person who is not artistically talented. Consider for example, an artist who many of you know from books and films. Vincent van Gogh has been described by some as"that crazy artist who cut off his ear. " His biographers, however, tell us that when van Gogh experienced serious mental disturbances, he did not want to paint. Although he spent the last year of his life in a mental hospital, most of the paintings produced during that year were created when he was lucid and in touch with reality. Looking at van Gogh's works in chronological order over his last year of life, one can sadly see the deterioration of his artistic ability.

Unlike van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, another famous artist, did not suffer periods of personal torment that prevented him from creating. But we know his art work was influenced and affected by chaotic personal and world events. "Guernica," one of Picasso's most famous paintings, depicts his personal feelings about war. His incredible talent and mental stability turned these feelings about the chaotic nature of war, into an artistic, nonverbal statement that can be understood by anyone who sees this expressive, dramatic painting. Although "Guernica" conveys a sense of war's madness, it does so because it's creator was not mad, but clearly in touch with the reality of war.

Contrast Picasso with the very disturbed mental patient who often has a need to draw. One manifestation of mental illness is that the person feels helpless and longs to be a child again—to be coddled and protected. It is the childlike quality in these disturbed adults that elicits spontaneous drawings. These patients, too, are making order out of chaos, but it is a personal chaos and the images are often childlike, fragmented, and even bizarre. Their meaning is known only to their creator. Unlike the work of a professional artist, the image is personal. It does not hold universal appeal.

The budding artist within each of us as a child was not always allowed to continue to express itself freely and creatively. As healthy adults, we have learned to live without this avenue of expression. We found other ways to express ourselves. It is important, however, that we provide these creative outlets for our children. Children need to organize their feelings and thoughts as they develop, and a natural way to do this is through creative expression.

This chapter contains drawings that have been created by children whose artistic development is within the normal range of their chronological age. It also contains drawings that suggest the children who drew them fall outside their normal range of development. The accompanying explanations will help you to recognize imprints of creative expressions and the difference of these two sets of drawings. Later in this work, you will see examples of children's images which indicate that troubling issues may be surfacing. However, in every instance, you must look with caution. A drawing may tell you what a child is feeling, but a single drawing cannot tell you the whole story. Remember that, although a drawing can clearly tell *what* is happening, it will not necessarily tell *why* it is happening. Later, you will read examples of how the art psychotherapist works to discover the *why*. You will also learn what you can do as a parent, teacher, or a caregiver when troubling issues surface.

Some Common Normal Indicators

The following drawings illustrate some of the skills developed by normal children at different ages.

Gale, 9, shows us very clearly that she knows the difference between men and women (Mommy and Daddy) and the accurate size relationship between adults and children (Fig. 2). At 4 years of age, a child should be connecting different shapes that begin to look like something recognizable. Hal has done just

that (Fig. 3).

Figure 2

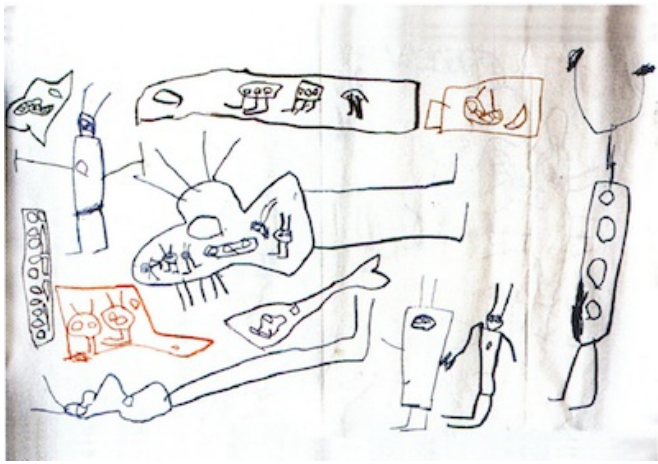

Figure 3

Rae, at 7, has no problem illustrating words in a way that tells us she knows what they mean. At 7 that should be a simple task (Fig. 4). Renee and Lewis, both 6 years old, and in the same school as Rae, are also capable of accomplishing this task, which includes drawing complete figures and recognizable objects, and illustrating feelings and actions, such as crying and jumping. (Figs. 5 & 6).

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Letitia is 8 years old and in the second grade. Her choices of images to illustrate the words that her teacher assigned show how well she can stay within her own boundaries (Fig. 7).

Figure 7

The first thing children do when they learn to hold a pencil or crayon is scribble. Joey and Hal, aged 2 and 3 years, are developing their own styles of nonverbal communication. An example of a typical

scribble for this developmental period is illustrated in Fig. 8.

Figure 8

Making fine line drawings and creating designs takes time. Nina, 9, has been able to do this when drawing her favorite butterfly (Fig. 9).

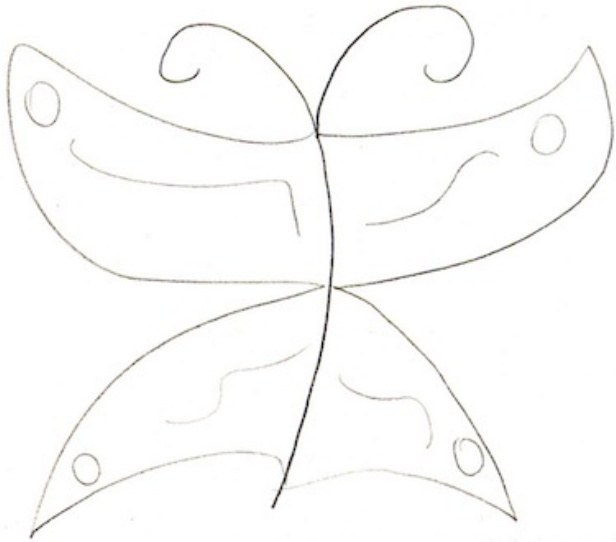

Figure 9

Handling paints takes time too. Hal was just 3 when he started to use them. It is evident from his first efforts that he has not been very adept, but at 3 he is not expected to be (Fig. 10).

Figure 10

Dayna, age 4, is beginning to try to make figures by connecting the lines and circles she mastered when she was doing a lot of scribbling. You can still see some of the scribbles in this picture (Fig. 11).

Figure 11

Becca, at 5½, is trying to tell us a story about a house, a car, the sun, and the sky (Fig. 12). Becca's house is firmly on the ground, telling us she is drawing normally for her age.

Figure 12

Some Common Warning Signals

At this point we will present some common warning signals found in children's drawings. Later, the implications of these signals will be discussed in detail.

There are several reasons for concern in this picture by 7-year-old Rafe (Fig. 13). First, the drawing generally looks like one that normally would be produced by a younger child. Second, Rafe's lines are shaky. He cannot seem to stay within his own boundaries.

Figure 13

Another child, Arthur, at age 6, should be able to draw recognizable objects. He is able to say what he wanted to draw, but his graphic productions show that he is not able to draw single object that resembles his verbal descriptions (Fig. 14).

Figure 14

Bobby, at age 3, drew at every opportunity. Every image of a face has a huge gaping mouth, and it

does not matter whether the face was supposed to be a monster, Mommy or Daddy. A repeated consistent form produced over and over as Bobby does, is a warning signal. An example of this repeated form is seen in Fig. 15.

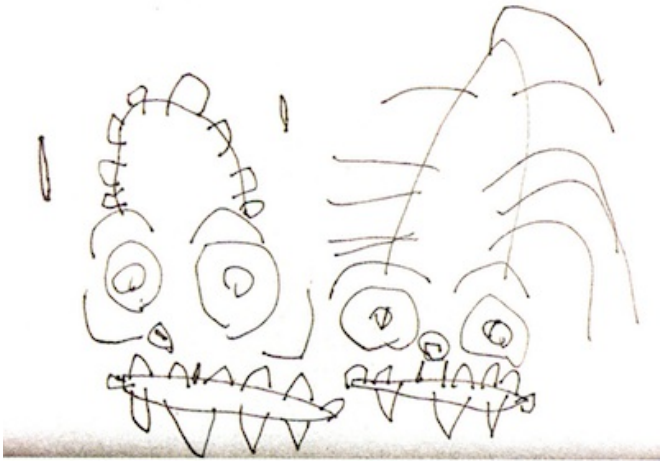

Figure 15

Inconsistencies within the same picture demand our attention and concern. Lori, 10, draws one figure that is typical of a 10-year-old, yet in the same drawing the second figure and the house are so different that they could have been drawn by another child (Fig. 16).

Figure 16

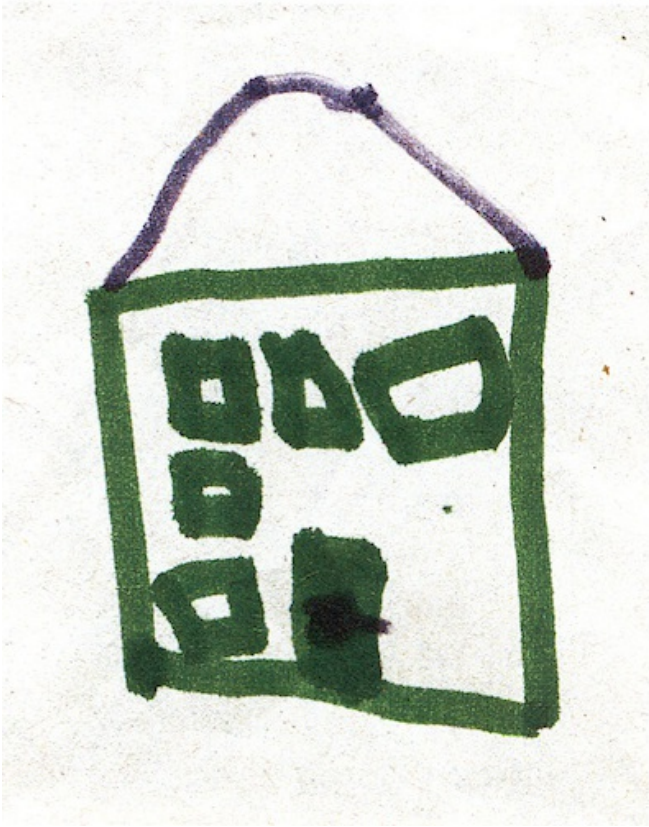

Figure 1

We have already discussed Kim's floating house (Fig. 1), and identified the elements that make it a warning signal. Kitty, 9, draws circles around floating figures (Fig. 17). The figures of the family members are drawn well for a 9-year-old, but isolating each member in a bubble should be viewed as a warning signal.

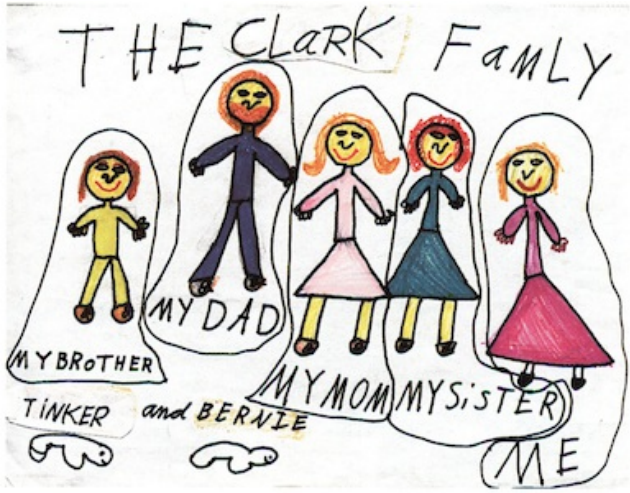

Figure 17

Elaine, at the same age as Kitty, draws the figures of her family members with complete heads and very strange and incomplete bodies. The warning signal flashes when a 9-year-old omits body parts(Fig. 18).

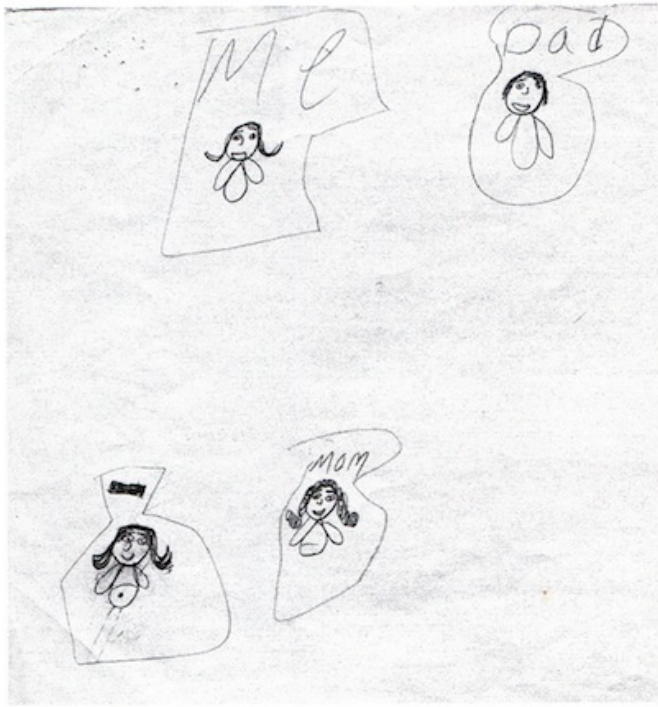

Figure 18

Slanted images at any age need to be investigated. Rafe, 7, has drawn a house that appears to be falling (Fig. 19). Stu, 9 years old, draws himself and his "Mom" (Fig. 20). Like Rafe's house, the figures also look as though they are falling over.

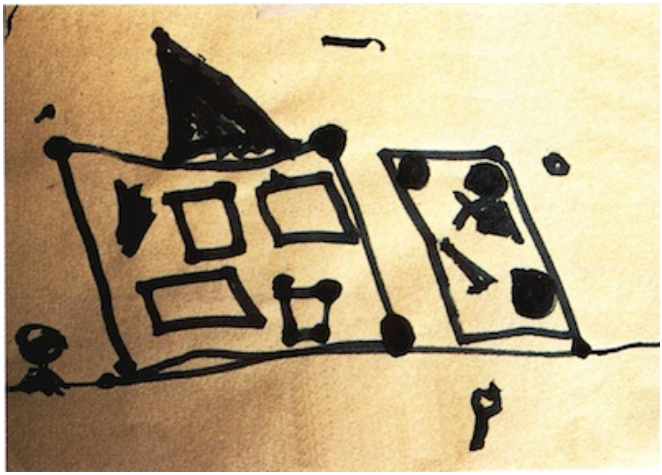

Figure 19

Figure 20

The story a picture tells may be a recognizable symbol of danger. Owen, 9, has drawn a killer whale

dripping blood(Fig. 21). It is possible that he has just seen a TV program or movie involving a killer whale. But, he may have a serious problem.

Figure 21

Once again we must emphasize that what is in a picture does not necessarily tell us why. All of these pictures flashed signals that said "check out this child. " The most skilled and experienced art psychotherapist would not make a judgment based on only a drawing. Much more would need to be learned about each child before the therapist could conclude that there was, or was not, a specific problem. But those working with a young child have a context within which to try to understand the clues seen in drawings. Although these clues are not answers, they can lead us to ask the proper questions. In the chapters discussing the different age groups in depth, we will return to these drawings, reporting more information about each child and, when appropriate, what interventions were implemented.

The Influence of Cultural Changes

Children in all parts of the world begin to draw in the same way; later we will describe this process in detail. For now it is important to know that there are normal ranges of artistic development, allowing us to evaluate whether a drawing is appropriate for a particular child's age level. In making this evaluation we must also be aware of cultural influences and the ages at which children begin to include these influences in their drawings. Finally, we need to remember that our society's changing constantly, resulting in changes in normal developmental images. Television, for example, has impacted on our understanding of normal developmental images.

When I first began practicing art therapy in the 1960s, while television was still enjoying its innocence, I learned that most children draw stick figures at about age 7. This was expected behavior, because children this age usually are not interested in differentiating between the sexes. Between 7 and 10 years, most children are interested primarily in school and playing with their peers. They learn that the stick figure is an accepted representation of the human form.

In the 1970s, changes in the stick figures became noticeable. Children between ages 7 and 9 were beginning to draw sexual characteristics on their figures, differentiating between male and female. I began to question whether these children were precocious or being exposed to adult sexual behavior. To explore this phenomenon, I contacted colleagues in other parts of the country and discovered that they were observing the same changes. We finally concluded that it was becoming natural for children to draw sexual characteristics at an earlier age than in the past because children were seeing an emphasis on female/male characteristics/differences on television—not only in the regular programming, but also in the commercials. As society continues to change, it will be more and more common to see these changes reflected in children's drawings.

Normal Stages/Sequences of Artistic Development

The rest of this chapter will summarize what can be expected from a child at each major stage of artistic development, with examples of typical drawings for each stage/sequence. Then Chapters 3 through 6 will cover these periods of development in greater detail. The relationship among emotional development, intellectual development, and creative expression charted by the growing child through

artworks will become clearer for you as we continue to explore the wonderful world of children's pictures. Before learning how the normal stages of artistic development are typically described, you should be aware that many art psychotherapists and psychologists do not totally accept the concept of "stages" of development.

A stage, in psychological terms, generally implies that a period of development has a definite beginning and ending. When discussing children, however, experience teaches us that not all children develop at the same pace. This does not mean that the slower child is less bright or less skilled, but only that for some reason this child is traveling along the path of development differently than most children. We also know that certain skills must be mastered before a child can learn a new task. This is particularly true in developing skills in drawing, and I believe that it is also true in intellectual development. As children are learning new skills they are still practicing and perfecting skills learned previously. Therefore, rather than use the term "stage, " I will use the term "stage/sequence." Ages given for each period will be meant only as general guidelines. A developmentally normal child may perform the certain skills a little earlier or later with no cause for concern.

Babble-Scribble Stage/Sequence: About 18 months to 2½ years

Between 18 months and 2½ years, children are developing the ability to grasp objects and move them around. Given paper and crayon, they will delight in creating lines of different lengths and seeing them emerge in different directions. There is no apparent rhyme or reason to these early scribblings, just the sheer joy in the movement and the image. As the child gains greater body control, the lines begin to take form. A child may name an object if prompted by an adult.

Doug was 2 years and 1 month old when he drew Fig. 22, and Hal a little past 2 when he did Fig. 23.

Figure 22

Figure 23

Word-Shape Stage/Sequence:About 2 ½ to 4 years

At the Word-Shape Stage/Sequence, the child begins to outline forms within the scribbles. Just as words are expressed randomly at first, shapes appear randomly. Very gradually these shapes become familiar circles and squares. Children begin to draw with a plan in mind. Depending on the amount and

variety of stimulation in the environment and the availability of materials, they will produce drawings that are more or less complex. They will experiment with combining different shapes but often will not know what they are drawing until the work is finished. If asked, they will tell a story about their drawing.

Hal, at 3 years of age, has been experimenting with paints. He also had discovered he could combine circles with lines. When asked, he said one of his creations was a “crawling bug” and another “flowers” (Figs. 24 and 25). Feeling a little more adventurous, Molly is using magic markers, crayons, and paint to create this picture of structured images (Fig. 26).

Figure 24

Figure 25

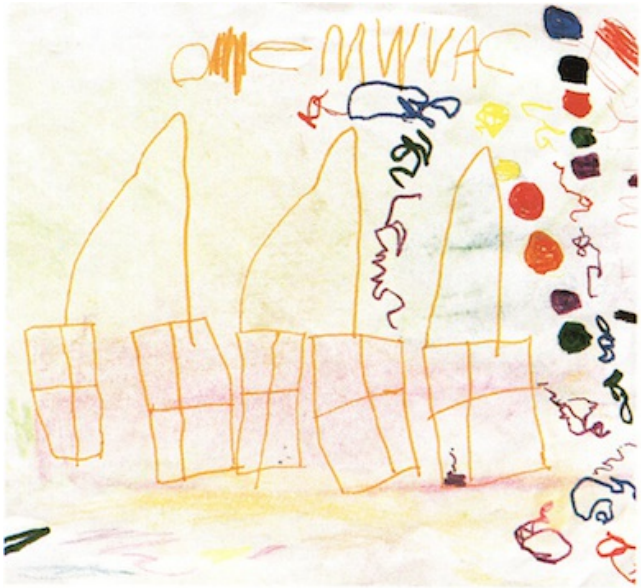

Figure 26

Indira and Gamal, both 3-year-old children from India, experimented with paints in the same way as their American counterparts do (Fig. 27). Although they did not say what they had created, their paintings are very similar to Hal's productions.

Figure 27

Sentence-Picture Stage/Sequence: About 4 to 7 years

At ages 4 to 7, children learn to complete simple sentences and draw pictures that tell a simple story. During this time, they become more aware of and are more influenced by their culture and environment.

Age 4: Scott has mastered the ability to draw a circle and to connect circles and lines to create a face-like image (Fig. 28). Bobby, also 4, has been able to combine lines, scribbles, and circles to create different people-like images (Fig. 29).

Figure 28

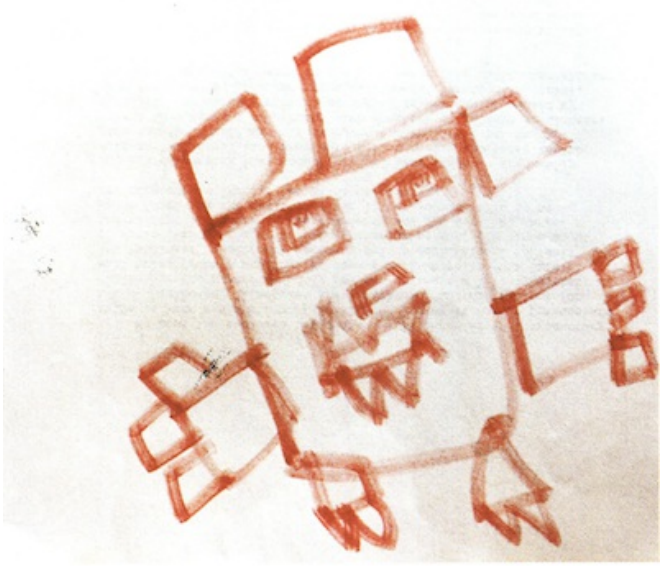

Figure 29

Age 5: Scott's mastery of all the things he has learned before helped him to create more complete

figures with all the body parts and even (scribble) hair. Scott's growing ability is illustrated in Fig. 30.

Figure 30

Age 6: Scott and Lilly have moved into what is known as the pictorial stage. Scott combines his knowledge of shapes and lines to draw a picture of a house, a tree, and a person (Fig. 31). Lilly is more interested in using her knowledge and skill at this time to draw a sun, a huge flower, and a girl with a big bow on her head (Fig. 32). We expect to see all the body parts around this time, but it is not unusual for them to be distorted. One leg bigger than the other is not surprising and may even be expected;

Figure 31

Figure 32

Fact-Fantasy Stage/Sequence: About 7 to 11 years

By about age 7, children have acquired many facts about the important people in their environment, and have developed fantasies about their world. They should be able to draw realistically and to improve on this skill continually. Their drawings should reflect their feelings, thoughts, and fantasies prompted by their surroundings. Drawings provide an appropriate and natural way for children in this age group to deal with the newness of school and peer interactions.

Age 7: Brad's illustrations all show his rich combinations of reality and fantasy, especially his picture of the teacher behind the desk shouting "NO" (Fig. 33).

Figure 33

Age 7½: Scott does not like snowmen, and one way to deal with this is to make the snowman a robot that he can control. He draws a white robot marching down snow covered hills (Fig. 34).

Figure 34

Age 8: Nina and John show the ability to handle pencil and crayon, to draw realistically, and to use imagination to create original responses to a second-grade assignment. Their choices of examples to illustrate the words reflect familiar things in their environment (Figs. 35 and 36).

Figure 35

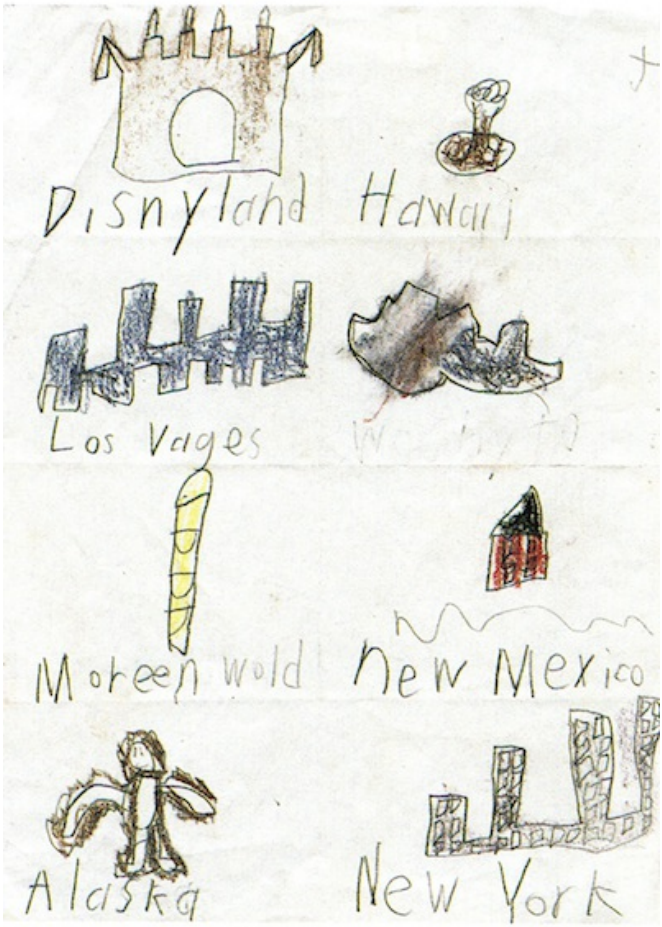

Figure 36

Age 9-10: Randy, age 9, can represent his ideas so well by now that he enjoys drawing fanciful images to illustrate those ideas (Fig. 37). Sue, 10, is able to draw people of all different ages realistically enough for us to recognize everyone in her "nice" family portrait and to make a clear distinction between males and females (Fig. 38). Herb, 9½, has been drawing war scenes, which are very typical for boys this age (Fig. 39).

Figure 37

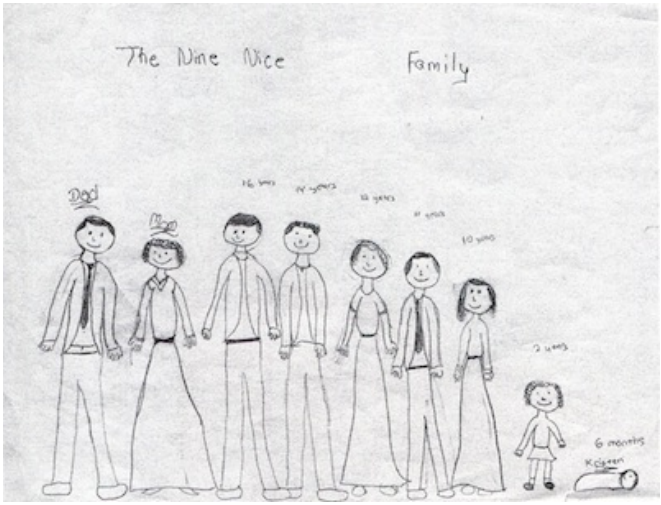

Figure 38

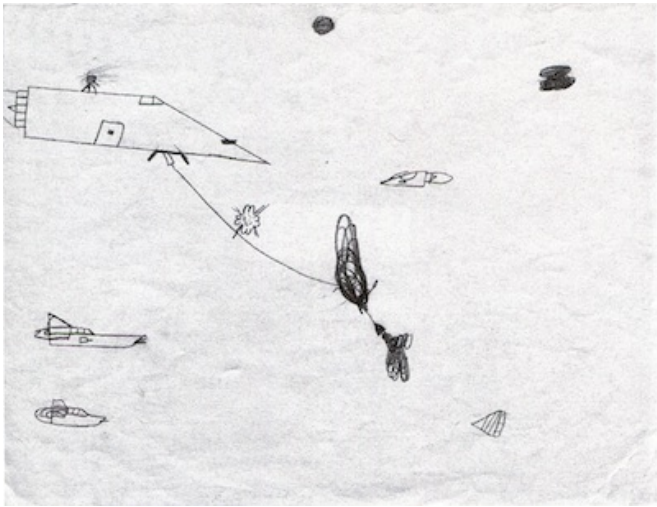

Figure 39

These examples illustrate the most common kinds of images we see sequentially in drawings of children who are growing normally. The children who produced these drawings are all physically well, functioning in the appropriate school grade for their age. This small sampling represents children from different socioeconomic groups, different religions, different races and different parts of the world.

This brief outline of the important stages/sequences of growth includes only normal developmental sequences. Each child is unique and grows at his or her own pace. Manifestations of abnormal development at any stage/sequence cannot be defined easily without considering the child's physical history from birth, in addition to the home and school environment at the time those warning signals appear.

There is a definite relationship between intelligence and artistic expression. A child cannot draw an object before being able to identify it intellectually. Normal intellectual development provides the child with the skills necessary to draw more recognizable objects. As the child learns more, drawings of objects become more detailed. Drawings are one way to measure intellectual development.

The next chapters, which discuss each age group, will demonstrate how a knowledge of normal

stages/sequences of development helps us to determine whether a child is facing developmental stresses normal for that age or whether the danger signals we see suggest far more serious problems.