Every Child Is an Artist[1]
The Beginnings of Drawing

Van James

The real study of an art student is more a development of that sensitive nature and appreciative imagination with which he was so fully endowed when a child, and which, unfortunately in almost all cases, the contact with the grown-ups shames out of him before he has passed into what is understood as real life.
– Robert Henri (1865–1929)

Every child is an artist; the challenge is to remain an artist even as an adult.
– Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)

If you want to be creative, stay in part a child with the creativity and invention that characterizes children before they are deformed by adult society.
– Jean Piaget (1896–1980)

Who is man, the artist? He is the unspoiled core of everyman, before he is choked by schooling, training, conditioning until the artist within shrivels up and is forgotten. And yet, that core is never destroyed completely. At times it responds to nature, to beauty, to life, suddenly aware again of being in the presence of a Mystery that baffles understanding. – Frederick Franck (1910–2006)

The 20th century artist Pablo Picasso was fascinated with children's drawings and believed that every child is a creative artist. It doesn't take much convincing to understand why this is so; just observe any young child. The child lives in a rich, imaginative inner world that comes to expression in the state of being we call play. Everything at the child's fingertips becomes the raw material for free artistic expression, a storyboard and dramatic production, spontaneously designed and orchestrated by the wondrous faculty of childhood imagination. For the child it is not important what this creation ends up looking like; it is only important to be engaged in the activity of the moment.

Robert Fulghum, in his best selling book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*,[2] pointed out that when one asks any group of kindergarten children if they can draw, paint, sing, or dance, they will unanimously answer yes to all of these questions. Without self-consciousness, even the shyest of healthy children feels at home in the creative process, the playful condition of artistic creation. Every child is an artist, for creativity is one of the most characteristic traits that define us as being human. Everything we learn as an infant is essentially the result of creative processes: the drinking in of sense impressions shapes and forms our organs and faculties of understanding. We play with these sense impressions—color, sound, texture, taste, aroma—and they teach us what the world is about. As children, we imitate all that we see and hear, and playfully, creatively we give it back to the world.

Ernst Beuhler, in an essay *From Play to Work*, says: "Learning must never be limited to an outwardly reflective, merely rational activity. It must become a formative process that works out of the same center that provides the creative forces in play. We do not here refer to the questionable 'playful learning.' Learning must not be allowed to turn into playing: rather, the energies active in the full earnestness of children's play should become the basis for learning."[3] Clearly play and the creative process are the foundation and first stages in the learning process. They are key to becoming artistic, and being artistic is key to developing one's full cognitive capacities.

What's more, creativity has been shown to contribute to our staying young, healthy, and playful even as we grow older.

Scribbles: Initial Drawing Experiments

In the case of the visual arts, young individuals participate in drawing activities, as creators and perceivers, from an early age, manifesting the intuitive first-order symbolic forms of knowing. That is, they begin with sensori-motor activities by looking at and creating pictures, and they soon become able to "read" pictures in terms of their representational meanings and to create pictorial works that symbolize the referents and experiences of their world. – Howard Gardner[4]

Fig. 1a/b. Two types of scribbles become apparent around age one-and-a-half or two: curved, circular lines and straight, back-and-forth lines. These often appear together in the same drawing.

When children first realize that a crayon, a piece of chalk, or a colored pencil is not just something to stick in their mouths and try to eat but can be used to make marks on the surface of a piece of paper, a floor, or a wall, their careers begins as visual artists, as creators of drawn images. This momentous occasion usually starts around the age of one-and-a-half or two years and is characterized by the rendering of loosely controlled looping and back-and-forth scribbles (Fig. 1a/b). These first drawings are the initial display of the child's will impulses, instinctual drives and urges, projected out into three-dimensional space but oriented on to the two-dimensional plane of the paper. The rounded, circular scribble is combined and contrasted with the straight-line scribble. In her classic study, *Understanding Children's Drawings*, Michaela Strauss observes with regard to the first type of scribble: "Is it misleading if, in considering these first loops drawn by children, associations with the rhythmic movements in the cosmos force themselves upon us? Do not these curves remind us of the looping orbits of the planets, and don't we find a form relationship with the flowing rhythms of fluids?"[5] Indeed, the curved and looping linear lines in the drawings of young children may be seen as an expression of the streaming life forces coursing through their organism.

Within a short time the child begins to contract and concentrate the circular scribbled movements into a central focal point, while the straight-line scribbles form into distinctly vertical and horizontal pendulum strokes. This phase eventually gives way to the discovery and challenge of completing the single, curved, closed line, creating a circle; and the straight, intersecting star or cross form; as well as both impulses brought together in the same image (Fig. 2). This occurs around the time the child begins to refer to herself as "I." "Around a child's third birthday," observes Ingun Schneider, "a physiological change is taking place in the bones of the skull, as

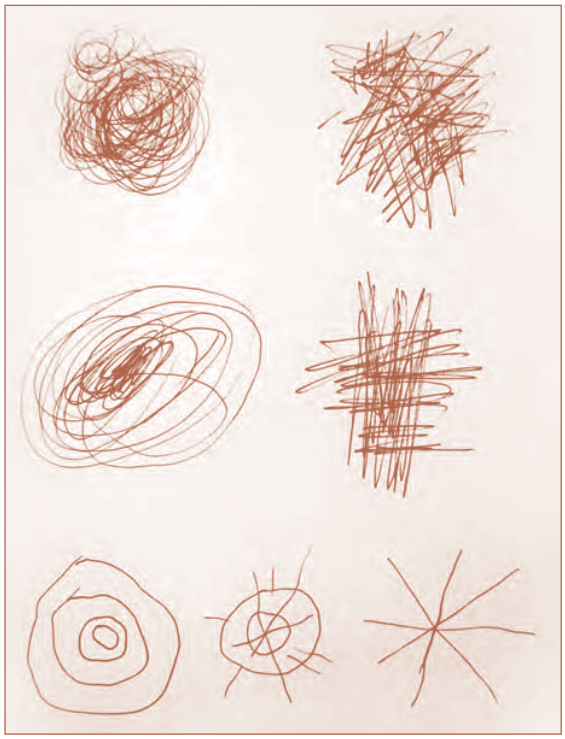

Fig. 2. Circular scribbles are contracted to a gathered center and pendulum strokes find a more regular vertical and horizontal orientation (middle). These forms lead on to the circle, the star or cross figures, and the combination of the two (bottom).

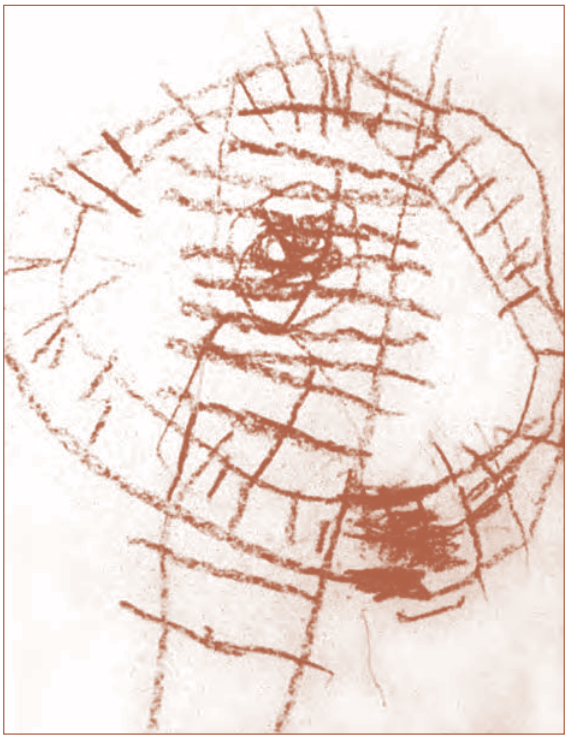

Fig. 3. Children's drawings, around the age of three, bring together the straight line and curve, the cross or ladder and the circle before human figures become recognizable.

the frontal or forehead bones become firmly fused. It is as if the three-year-old closes the circle to show that she is experiencing her separateness."[6] The intersecting cross form, or sometimes a dot drawn in the center of the circle, further underlines this expression of early independence and confirmation of self development (Fig. 3).

Clearly, the entire language of form explored by the child arises out of the archetypes of curved and straight lines—the twofold alphabet of all forms. Even if the child begins to draw at a later age, these same phases of scribbling will take place to some extent.[7] Ultimately the exploration of these basic form gestures, expressions of formative impulses in the child, culminates in the varied and numerous figurative images of plants, animals, people, landscapes, and buildings, the most prominent of which is the human figure. From the simple Head and Limb Man to the Ladder Man and Tree Person (Fig. 4), these elementary drawings are pictorial expressions of the natural growth-forces and developmental processes taking place in the child but now related to outer experiences of the external, visible world. Formation of the cerebral spinal column and the central nervous system (Ladder Person), and the driving will impulses streaming through the metabolic organization and limb activities (Tree Man) are clearly articulated in the child's drawings of people at this stage. Drawing is essentially a pictorial demonstration of the child's living, physical maturation, a visual picture or snapshot of the incarnation and growth process. As Rebecca Burrill points out, "Prior to the age of seven, given the chance, children are still immersed in natural, intuitive, contextual, and implicit learning. This can be seen in children's art. Until around the

Fig. 4. Children's drawings often present the archetypal shape of the Tree Man, the Head and Limb Man, and/or the Ladder Person.

age of seven, the art of children universally has the same developmental expressions and patterns of scribbling, shape, form, color, and design. After the age of seven, specific cultural influences begin to take form, displacing the universality of their expression."[8]

Once the circle drawings occur, face, arms, and legs follow, radiating out from the circle. Simple hands and feet are then added. Around age four the trunk appears—round, oval, triangular, or rectangular in shape. Then, the school-ready child, about six or seven years old, begins to include the neck and waist, as well as other details such as hands that can grasp things. Every stage of the child's drawing indicates how the young "artist" experiences her own bodily development. As the child is created, so she creates.

Before Instruction

Intuitive and first-order ways of knowing will operate without the need for anything except rich opportunities. – Howard Gardner[9]

It is important to let very young children draw freely, with no systematic program of instruction, no teaching of style or technique in the early years. The healthiest approach for pre-nursery through kindergarten age children, who live almost entirely out of their own world of imagination and imitation, is to let them render freely what they experience in the world around them—that is, what is within them. No instruction beyond the practical matters of how to grip the crayon, how to draw on the paper (not on the floor or wall), how to put materials neatly away, and so forth, are enough for the young child. In fact, to interrupt this natural expression of the creative faculties and the formative, life processes active at this time by directing them toward outwardly imposed techniques can thwart a healthy, self-learning process that may not be entirely recovered later on in life. If parents draw alongside their children, this is "instruction" enough, for youngsters will pick up themes, imagery, and techniques by way of imitation. This indirect approach to drawing is the most appropriate for young children. Accelerated learning programs at this early age generally have only short-term results and can actually derail a natural learning process and become a disadvantage to later skills development.

What is most important at this stage of the child's development is the process. Once the process of a drawing is complete, the picture is no longer important to the child. Although the appearance of a finished picture is of the utmost importance to an adult, the final product is of minimal significance to the child. "It is also true that children's view of their works is, on the whole, more accepting and less critical than that of adults," says Gardner, "that often they are interested chiefly in the processes of production and not in the final products. …"[10] This relationship to process is clearly a key to successful, creative artistry in both children and adult drawing. The final product one simply accepts, and appreciates as much as one can.

Coloring Books

Coloring books are a very strong instructional tool and are therefore often used not just at home but also in many school settings. They provide a ready-made, prefabricated image in strong black outline, which the child is invited to fill in with color. Coloring books present the world as a fixed phenomenon, finished and unable to be adjusted apart from how one colors (feels) it in. The fixity and stability of the image can provide a certain security and reassurance, and children often spend many hours quietly working in coloring books.

However, what do coloring books teach children? They dictate that one must stay within the lines and not go "outside the box." In this way, coloring books are instructional in the sense that they limit a child's imagination and promote, too soon, the conceptualizing and intellectualizing of experience (Fig. 5). The educational message of coloring books is to accept the authority of the given form and follow the provided picture of reality without exploring one's own inner picture-forming options. The coloring book can even be seen as an early childhood textbook and indoctrination manual for accepting someone else's picture of the world before discovering it for oneself. Isn't it a first generation preparation for television, movies, and computer games, all scripted and designed by an unknown someone else, resulting in the distraction from building up one's own powerful capacities of imagination for picture-making? (Fig. 6a-d)[11] Doesn't the coloring book become "fast food" instruction

Fig. 5. A coloring book presents a finished form, a fixed concept, and only offers the child the possibility of coloring it out, filling it in. Creating one's own forms and figures is not possible in a coloring book, unless one is the illustrator. This coloring book picture was drawn by an eleventh grade student interested in cartooning.

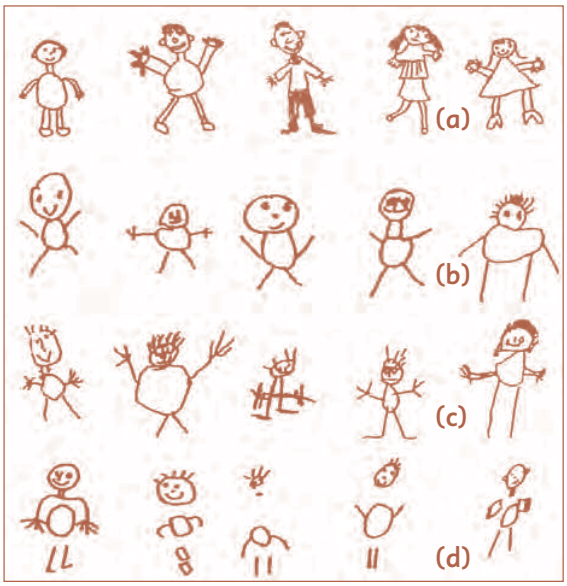

Fig. 6a-d. Consider the negative effects of frequent television viewing, which has been well documented in case studies with over two thousand preschool children, ages five and six. (a) Drawings by children who watch little or no television have been compared with (b) drawings by children who watch more than three hours of television a day, (c) drawings by children who watch more than three hours of TV per day and are in a "passive smoking" environment, and (d) drawings by children (not a part of this study) who suffer from severe psychological disturbances, traumatic experiences, family conflict, and abuse. Note the progressive inability to picture reality.

for on-the-go parents and teachers looking for a substitute babysitter and the beginning stages of a fill-in-the-blank education? Certainly this wasn't the intended purpose of coloring books, but they have become a part of the quantifying and categorizing process in contemporary education. They promote the same kind of thinking that is behind multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank teaching in which there is only one correct answer to a problem. Real-life problems do not have one right answer. Coloring books do not inspire innovative problem solving, creativity, or imagination, those faculties that go beyond data collection to genuine learning and original thinking. Coloring books are undeniably, in the minds of many adults, standard fare as the 21st-century primer in a schooling of young children. But to what end?

Such visual textbooks rob children of free, imaginative play in the development of their own pictorial thinking, their own visual intelligence. They train children to accept the formulations of "clip art" concepts and the visual opinions of others as fact before they have developed their own capacity to discriminate for themselves. Isn't it better to give children blank sheets of paper so they can develop their own visual worldview? The child needs time simply to practice its own facility for expressive line and color, creating its own vocabulary of meaningful form and imagery, its own visual understanding. Visual content is a powerful factor in the education of the child, in the work of the teacher, and in the transformation of the adult learner. Visual meaning is essential for all later learning.

Materials

Crayons are a good medium for this age, better than colored pencils that have a sharp point (unnecessarily awakening a too-early awareness of precise attention to detail) or felt markers (that can't blend or mix colors well and often have an unpleasant odor). Beeswax crayons, by contrast, have a smooth texture, a pleasing aroma, and are entirely natural. An assortment of up to a dozen colors is perfectly adequate for this early age; 1001 varieties of color are not necessary. The principle of "less is more" holds true for this age. Limit the palette of colors to what is essential. Don't give too much choice at first. This age group needs to feel that there are certain "givens," certain established essentials and not endless possibilities. As the findings of modern resilience research have shown, people perform with greater confidence and ability later in life, particularly in the face of adversity, if as children they were given fewer choices with regard to basic life needs (for instance, when to get up or go to sleep, what to eat, what to wear, which behaviors are allowed, and so forth.)[12]

Make sure the seven spectrum colors or the three primary and three secondary colors (red, yellow, blue, orange, green, and violet) are available. Include brown and even black (see below a discussion of black). Avoid day-glow, "electric," dissonant colors. Use your own sense for natural colors in your selection. If children repeatedly use one color for everything, let that color disappear for a while.

This being said, it is also possible simply to provide the three primary colors red, blue, and yellow. Often with great success, this may be done right through to third grade. Children discover in this way how to mix all of their secondary and tertiary colors by overlapping the primaries. Brown and a pseudo-black can also be achieved in this way. It depends on what the teacher wishes to accomplish by means of color and imagery whether one provides or restricts certain colors from the child's palette.

Every material possesses distinctive characteristics, and these characteristics affect the choices that children make in their drawings. Therefore, deliberate selection of materials is important in influencing the type of pictures that will be produced and the kind of thinking children are likely to engage in. Elliot Eisner, professor emeritus of art and education at Stanford University, notes: "A pointed pencil makes images possible that could not be easily

rendered in paint. Conversely, the spontaneous expressiveness possible in the act of painting is more difficult to achieve with a pointed pencil. The pencil invites delineation; a wide brush and thick paint foster expressiveness. Thus, materials matter because they influence what children can think about and how they are likely to engage the work."[13] For this reason, avoid letting young children use sharp, graphite pencils that are more appropriate for older students. The pointed lines that pencils and related drawing tools create focus attention on narrow edges and acute incisions. They delineate a very precise, thin form: a sharp, wiry, caged figure. Remember the expresssion: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail." If the only tool you have is a pencil, everything begins to look linear, thin, and contracted. The gray of graphite emphasizes a dull, colorless world, giving everything the same emotion-neutral value. This in turn influences the thinking and emotional life of the artist/child. With this age group try to stick to crayons for drawing and brushed watercolor for painting.

The Use of Black as a Color

Black represents the spiritual image of the lifeless.
– Rudolf Steiner[14]

The use of black has been a question of great interest and debate amongst Waldorf teachers and parents of young children, and a tradition has developed in many Waldorf kindergartens to exclude the color black from the array of crayons offered to this age group. Although there is no direct indication that Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf school, suggested such a policy, it is worthwhile considering the nature of this color.

Because black (considered by some theorists not to be a color at all but the very absence of light) is the most lifeless of the colors, it is one of the most powerful of hues. Together with red ochers it was the first color used in prehistoric visual art, and children often gravitate towards it because of its strong character. Some teachers feel black is too strong for this early age group and exclude its use from drawing and painting. There is justification for this as the color specialist Faber Birren points out that children will be more inclined to draw inanimate objects—vehicles and buildings—when given black crayons. "When the same children were given colored crayons, their fancies were more inspired to attempt human beings, animals, and plants."[15]

Steiner's color research led him to state: "Black shows itself alien to life, hostile to life. …But the spirit flourishes; the spirit can penetrate the blackness and assert itself within it."[16] In other words, although black is a quality devoid of life, it nevertheless allows the individuality to thrive. This is why adolescents often choose this color above all others. The "I" of the teenager experiences a sense of freedom within the lifelessness of black and therefore it is a natural color choice at this age of pre-egohood. In one of his notebooks, Steiner wrote, "Black = Freedom."

As an "image of the lifeless," black is related to the inanimate mineral kingdom and the carbon-based element in the human being. In us, the "dead" element is the solid, mineral nature of our physical body. If a child draws with black it may be an expression of the physical body's hardening process. Joep Eikenboom notes: "Black can indicate that the child perceives areas in his physical body that he needs to work on, which he has not yet penetrated sufficiently. …A teacher can notice the use of this color and can observe whether the work she is doing with that child is bearing fruit. After a while the use of the black crayon will disappear. Children will then be able to apply black in the right proportions and in the right place (for instance, a black cat, crow, or chimney)."[17]

Black is important to the child's color palette, just as the witch in the fairy tale is necessary to the further development of the other characters and the outcome of the entire story. The lessons that black can teach are too important to be excluded from even the young child. Although restricting black during

the first seven-year period of the child's life may be considered an appropriate choice by kindergarten teachers, teachers and parents of first-grade children should carefully consider whether to limit this and any other color after the onset of first grade, particularly from the standpoint of the needs of individual children.

The House, Tree, and Person Drawing

Our aim…is to see if the fundamental stages of the first seven years of development have been completed so that spatial orientation and body schema (body geography) have been attained.

– Audrey McAllen[18]

By the age of five or six, pictorial elements in the child's drawings are no longer arbitrarily strewn about the page but find an orientation within the context of skyline, ground, and other constricting features. "By this age," according to Gardner, "it seems not unreasonable to conclude that the young child has a 'first draft' understanding of how to make—and to compose—a picture."[19] A freeform sense of composition is beginning to be established.

A favorite drawing exercise given by Waldorf teachers to children of this age (up to eight years old) is the house, tree, and person theme. After some warm-up movement exercises, necessary to get the children fully connected with their body, they are asked to draw a picture of a house, a tree, and a person. It can be any house, tree, and person, and the drawing is not limited to one person or one tree. In fact, anything the children feel should be in the picture may be drawn in, but at least these three elements should be included. The children are encouraged to put in everything they feel is important to make a complete picture including the use of as many colors as desired, the more colors and, to some extent, the more objects, the better. In such a picture children often reveal many of their characteristic strengths and weaknesses, simply by the size, shape, gesture, and color of the features they choose to include or not include in their drawing. Essentially, the house, tree, person picture provides an illustration of where the child is in his or her development at that particular moment in time. Often developmental irregularities and potential learning differences can be discerned in such drawings. However, one needs to be very careful not to jump to conclusions or label children based on a single drawing, since it provides only a momentary snapshot glimpse

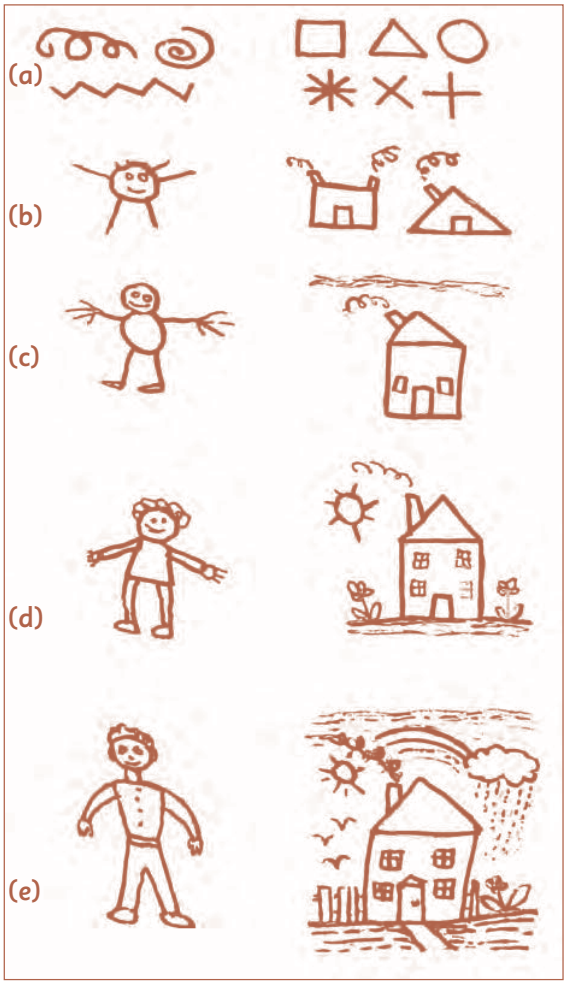

Fig. 7a-e. According to Audrey McAllen, the archetypal image of House, indicating structural (formative) changes, and Person, suggesting constitutional (functional) growth, are pictures of the child's own stages of physiological and psychological development. Structural development (a. left-hand column) of the child can be seen in drawings of basic geometric forms before the age of two years, while the constitutional development (a. right-hand column) is suggested in drawings of dynamic forms. At two years of age (b), three to four (c), five years old (d), and six to seven (e), drawings demonstrate a general maturation and development of the child.

of the child and must be seen within a larger profile or child study.

Ideally, through such a drawing exercise, one wants to see whether the life functions and organic processes of the child have reached a certain maturation and whether growth forces that have been shaping physiological development are now ready to be used for learning in a more directed and guided manner, toward more psychological, soul development. In her book, *Reading Children's Drawings: The Person, House and Tree Motif*, Audrey McAllen describes the healthy stages of this development and points to the relevance of the house, tree, and person as important archetypal images.

According to McAllen, the archetypal image of house, indicating structural (formative) changes, and person, suggesting constitutional (functional) growth, are pictures of the child's own stages of physiological and psychological development (Fig. 7a-e). Structural development can be seen in drawings of basic geometric forms of the early years, while the constitutional development is suggested in drawings of dynamic forms, expressive of movement. Drawings at older ages demonstrate a general maturation and development of the child. "Delicate observation suggests that when the triangle house is drawn, the soul and ether [or vital, formative] forces preponderate," states McAllen. "When the square house is drawn, the ego's physical forces are strongly engaged."[20] (Fig. 8a-b) One can in this way "read" something of the structural development of the child.

The person drawings, according to McAllen, indicate the capacity of the soul to deal with personal heredity and individual destiny, and in this way give a picture of the constitutional development of the child. The tree drawings are pictures of the breathing process, in the broadest sense, especially in terms of sense perception as a breathing-experience of the world. When all of these archetypes, plus additional elements spontaneously introduced by the child, are brought together in a single composition a revealing portrait is disclosed (Fig. 9a-c).

One looks for things in the house, tree, and person picture like a full or limited range of colors. Is there a substantial experience of the earth under foot, indicated by ground drawn into the picture, rather than the bottom of the page serving as the ground line? Is the sky just at the top of the page or is it colored all the way down to the ground? Is there a sun? Is the tree devoid of foliage or full of leaves and even fruit? Is there one small person, a large person, or a group of people? Does the person appear happy? Does the house have a clear façade, a face, with windows (eyes) and a big or little door? Do the windows have crossbeams, indicating the ability to filter out unwanted sense impressions, to discriminate? Is there a pitched roof, a chimney (metabolic activity) and is there smoke coming out of the chimney? The combined features of the house, tree, person picture can offer insights into the child's vital signs and dawning soul landscape and help to indicate grade-level readiness.

Such a drawing exercise is good to try as the child begins to lose her milk teeth, replacing them with the second dentition. This is when a major change in consciousness (thinking, memory, feeling, regulation of will impulses and drives) occurs, and drawing can be a very helpful indicator of some of these developmental changes in the child.

Steiner described this time in the following way: "What does the child really do when, up to the change of teeth, up to the seventh or eighth year, he draws pictures in a playful way? He is actually developing something which, later on in his twenties, will mature into faculties of intelligence. ...These qualities are being developed through the ever-changing forms of his drawing activities. The child's drawing is a kind of play, but while engaged in it, he is also communicating. We shall gain a real understanding of the child's drawing if we look upon it as a means of his communicating

Fig. 8a-b. The drawing of a triangular (a) or a square house (b) can indicate the structural (physiological) development of a child. The formative life and soul forces (triangular) or the individualizing forces within the physical (square) come to expression by means of drawing them out.

Fig. 9a-b. The House, Tree, Person drawing provides an indication of where the child is in his or her development at any given time, between three and eight years of age. Often developmental irregularities and potential learning differences can be observed from such drawings, but also strengths and stages of healthy maturation.

Fig. 10a-b. Color and form find creative and unique formulations at this early stage in children's drawings. Both free form and color (a) and figurative drawing (b) are done at this age.

with the world. The child wants to tell us something about himself."[21] It is important for the teacher to learn to read children's drawings in order to "see" what the child has to say in visual terms. This will aid the teacher in knowing how to better teach the individual child.

Provide Drawing Opportunities

Up to the age of seven or eight, themes may be casually suggested to the children, but they will find many of their own if simply given paper and crayons (Fig. 10a-b). No formal instruction needs to be given about how to draw. Children should have regular opportunities to sit down with teachers, parents, or caregivers and peers in order to see and imitate others' drawings, but no instruction should be necessary until first grade. (Parents and teachers can provide good models for young children by drawing simple, colorful pictures.) Children at this age need to be freelance artists guided by their own imagination. Every child is indeed an artist.

I once heard the wonderful story of a little girl who was busily coloring a picture at her desk in school when her teacher came over and asked her what she was drawing. The girl replied, "I am drawing a picture of God." Momentarily taken aback, the teacher said, "But no one knows what God looks like." The girl promptly responded, "They will in a minute!"

Endnotes

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