



The Secret of Children's Pictures

by
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translated by Nina Kuettel

For many decades scientists from all over the world have tried to decipher the meaning behind human beings' pictorial art. They have found that children's pictures, especially, have commonalities that transcend culture. These commonalities include the experiences represented, as well as the forms of their expression. The consistencies are so pervasive that it can be no coincidence when children just draw "something or other."

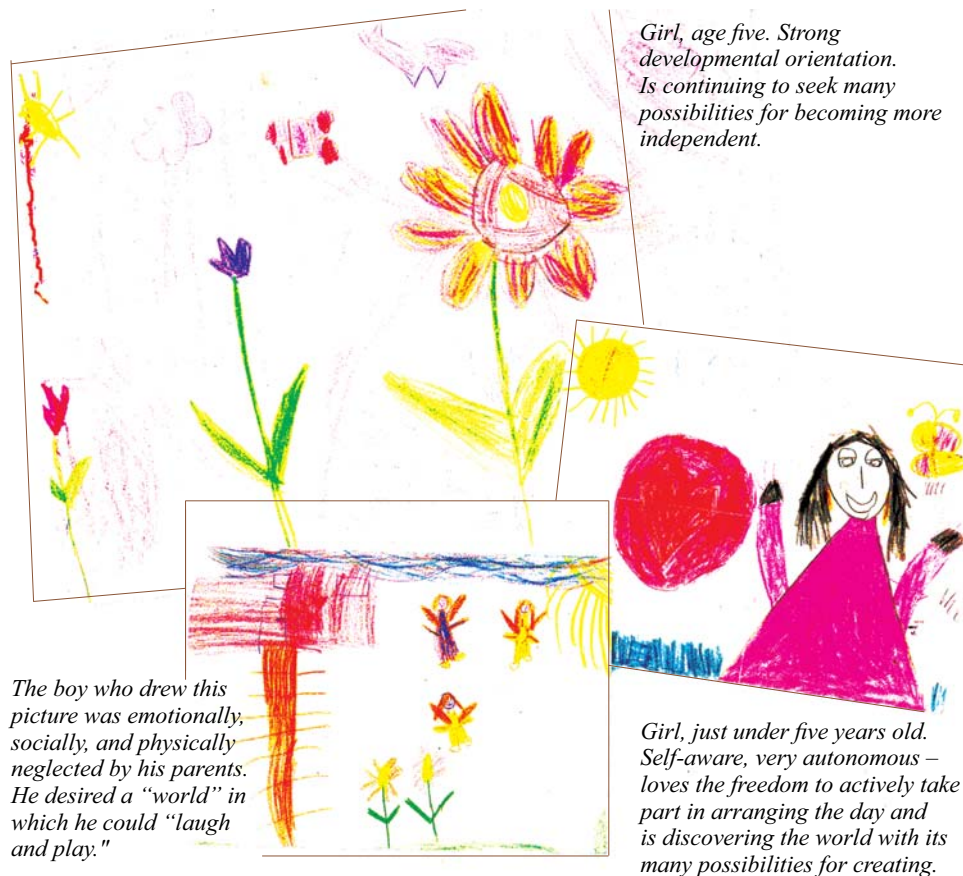
No matter if a child paints something quickly in passing or makes a big effort, whether the best colored pencil is carefully chosen, or the first one that comes to hand is used, if one investigates the "meaning" of children's pictures, it can be established that children always express their hopes, wishes, dreams, visions, and expectations, and also their anxieties, fears, hurts, and cares with their pictures. The pictures portray their current, experienced reality; an experience in the present that has a connection to the past and the future. Of course, children's pictures are not conscious acts of creation. That is why developmental psychologists do not say: "The child is painting," but rather, "painting has overtaken the child." By "overtaken" they are referring to the feelings and internal pictures that play into the painting process.

The "purpose" of children's pictures simply lies in the joy the children have in painting and drawing and their desire for "self expression." Self expression connotes wanting to bring out something that is pressing on one. This feeling of pressure should not be compared to a burdensome experience! It is much more that a person's desire to free himself of feelings or thoughts in order to be open to new perceptions and experiences gives rise to this sort of pressure. One could say: Children's pictures enhance and free them from feelings, relieve them from unassimilated thoughts and concerns, so there is the possibility of moving forward in life's present situations.

A principle of developmental psychology helps us understand something that is of the highest importance in children's painting and drawing: There is no "right or wrong," "good or bad," "acceptable or unacceptable," "pretty or less pretty" in the pictorial-graphic expressions of children! When children subjectively appraise and evaluate themselves and their whole environment, that is, judge with value measurements that are coated in emotion, then their pictures always equal their own idea of rightness. It is not without reason that in neurobiology it is said: How a person feels is how they think, and how they think is how they act. Emotions are impressed upon our thoughts and influence their direction, releasing corresponding patterns of behavior. In this respect, there cannot and may not be any "objective correctness" applied to children's pictures!

When children paint and draw significant things especially large, then it may be that a lion will appear larger than a house or a tree. Their picture expressions give an emotion-laden image of their current assessment of their lives. In this respect, the picture is a stored bundle of impressions. And here, something cultural-historical comes full circle: Im-pression seeks out expression. Children's pictures are equally ordered among the other five forms of expression.

How to "read" children's pictures



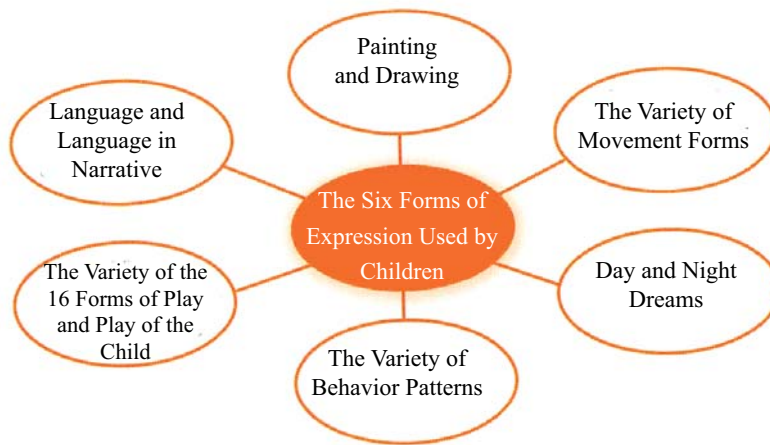
Children's pictures are composed of six major elements. First, there are the so-called twenty graphemes; the basic marks or scribbles that range from the dot, various vertical, diagonal, or horizontal lines, and curved, zigzag, or wavy lines, to the spiral and circle, all the way to open lines. Each grapheme corresponds to a certain phase of development in the first four years of a child's life. How often a certain grapheme is chosen can be concluded from the particular developmental focus at the time.

Secondly, we look at the three personality elements: capacity for decision-making and responsibility, emotional capacity, and cognitive capacity. The pictures show us how strongly each particular area is developed or not. In the third step the elements of time are considered: past, present, and future. The pictures inform us as to what aspect of time the child is most strongly living in with respect to emotions and cognition.

Of the many thousands of children's pictures that I have evaluated in the last twelve years, more than ninety percent lead me to the conclusion that children between the ages of four and seven grapple with family situations with intensively emotional thoughts that are drawn from the past. This observation is contrary to the cognitive, future-oriented learning methods promoted among many kindergarten-aged children at the present time. A radical change in perspective is necessary here in order to not further hinder a child's lasting personality development.

The fourth element involves the child's choice of color. Socio-cultural oriented educators place the highest priority of significance on the 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 human history and many current findings in developmental psychology show that children again and again attach the same colors to their emotionally packed experiences.

Now, in the fifth step, the finished picture is viewed, whereby a certain symbolic value is assigned, usually based on the work of Carl Gustav Jung. He worked from the assumption that every person comes into the world with an "enormous repository" of complete sets of pictures, drawings, and symbols in their subconscious mind that, through impressions and their assessment, are activated and networked with each other. Whether it is the sun, stars, the moon, clouds, a house, certain animals, a fence, a fire, a rainbow, a forest, an explosion, a mountain, or something else, here are archetypical pictures that have particular meanings.



Template coloring, in the sense of having a concept of “this is how a child draws or paints” is, from an individual-educational perspective, detrimental to development considering that children’s pictures bring to expression experiences and impressions from the past, document present assessment impulses, and reveal subjectively embossed hopes and ideas, constituting an act of liberation. For this reason children’s pictures should not be measured by objective criteria. Otherwise children will lose the connection to themselves and their internal pictures. They will become insecure, and irritation between them and the adult attachment figure will ensue.

Finally, specific characteristics are taken into consideration:

- Floating pictures in which people, animals, or objects have no floor or ground under their feet.
- Framed pictures in which the four sides of the page are outlined.
- Doubling of objects.
- The angle of incline for crowns of trees or roofs of houses.
- Leaving out parts or pieces of objects that belong together.
- Sealing or rolling up pictures.

Exercise caution in the analysis.

A conclusion about the interpretation of a picture is possible only under the following conditions:

- Several pictures must be available in order to discover the frequency of characteristics. Single pictures are seen as reflections of the day and would lead to haphazard generalizations.
- The basis for the work of analysis is verified knowledge.
- A complete conclusion is never achieved by evaluating single characteristics. It is the result of a combined look at all six focus points.
- Conclusions are only relevant if they concur with the analyses of the other five forms of expression. Children's pictures are extremely valuable documents in helping to understand the child's world, discover internal values and priorities, and convey educational measures. We should encounter all children's pictures with a sense of value and respect because they are entrusting to us the "diary of their soul."

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