See What I'm Saying

The End of the Beginning

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By the time children reach age 11, they are approaching the end of those developmental stages/sequences that must prepare them for the bumpy road of adolescence and eventual adulthood. Childhood is behind them. Most appropriately for this land of book, the critical first decade of a child's life can be described very well through a child's picture.

I am fairly certain that Brent, 11, was not thinking of either childhood or adolescence when he produced a Halloween picture for a school competition—he was thinking of winning the competition and having his drawing hung in the hallway of his school (Fig. 148). Brent has drawn a ghost orchestra. The conductor, with his back to the viewer, stands inside an open gate facing the musicians who are sitting on tombstones and playing their instruments. Skeletons dance in the background, and tree stumps have smiling faces. Brent has woven his name above the clouds. We do not know whether the ghosts represent the past or the future, but Brent has drawn himself on a threshold, not looking behind but facing the unknown. On the back of the picture Brent explained that his inspiration for this was a musical composition, "Dance Macabre" by Saint-Saens.

Figure 148

You have met Brent many times before and know that he has now acquired many of the skills needed to orchestrate his way through his gate and his dance.

We think of another child who was not so fortunate as Brent and many of the other normal children presented in these pages. Pat was a 17-year-old "child" when I met her in a state hospital many years ago. She had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, and the staff considered her a problem patient because she was uncooperative. She did like to draw flowers and figures and to fill in squares. One of my students brought Pat's drawings to my attention because they did not seem to be typical of those produced by other schizophrenic patients. They were not. They were, in fact, like those frequently produced by mentally retarded adults. An example of Pat's work is a drawing of a little girl with outstretched arms, standing in the middle of a number of blocks (Fig. 149). Pat cannot write her name correctly, nor can she stay within the lines of her blocks. Psychological testing confirmed that Pat was brain damaged and that her "uncooperativeness" was a manifestation of both her inability to learn and her frustration. At 17, Pat did not have the skills to "orchestrate" her future.

Figure 149

These examples help to remind us about the point of this book. Seeing what your children are telling you in their creative expressions will help you lead them in their early years, so they can learn how to lead themselves.

We have stated several times that adolescence is a turbulent period and have also said that this phase of development would require another book. Fortunately, most of us have forgotten the difficult times we experienced between 11 and 17 years. A brief explanation of why these years are naturally so difficult may help you, parents, teachers, and caregivers, to appreciate fully the importance of mastering developmental tasks in the earlier years.

Normal physical development of male and female characteristics makes girls and boys aware of their bodies and those of their peers. They also realize that they can now fulfill sexual fantasies and that they must reestablish values that were taken for granted when they were younger. It is a time for children to test limits, to find new role models to help them become independent, to define their own identity, and to separate from their parents. We call this the "second" separation-individuation period, the "first" having occurred around the age of 2 ½ to 3 years. This separation- individuation is a major task that must be confronted and mastered so that adulthood can be achieved. Adolescence is normally chaotic, but without the mastery of the first ten years, the adolescent cannot make order out of this chaos.

Every intellectual advance of children must be mastered before they can move to the next level. This is not necessarily true of emotional development. Children are able to move from the infant stage to the toddler stage, and so on, without having mastered the previous stage emotionally. We have said that artistic skills parallel learning skills, and if the child is progressing normally, these advances will be evident in their creative expressions. If these normal advances are impeded for any reason, children's drawings will tell us that something is wrong. So long as a child is physically able to handle an art medium and is encouraged to use it, drawing and painting will be done naturally, regardless of whether these skills are developmentally appropriate.

Picture an army of soldiers traveling through a war zone. They win some battles and they lose some —and some of the soldiers never get through. Now think of an infant born with normal biological and emotional attributes needed to master the developmental tasks of each stage/sequence of development. If problems encountered along the way are not resolved, these attributes will be unable to mature and strengthen. Let us look, for example, at the stage/sequence of 18 months to 3 years of age. During this time the toddler is struggling with learning to control bodily functions. If those responsible for guiding the child through this difficult period are themselves ambivalent and/or inconsistent in their approach

to the child, some of the normal biological and emotional attributes will be impaired—like wounded soldiers, unable to move on to the next battle. Each new stage/sequence is an arena in which the normally growing child must confront and master new tasks before moving on to the next.

Let us review what children tell us in their art.

Understanding children's drawings is one method for assessing developmental progress. Drawings can be a powerful and efficient source of clues to the intellectual and emotional life of children that may not be immediately apparent in behavior. In some cases artistic productions will provide information to support some observable behavior. If that behavior is abnormal, images produced in any medium can direct the art psychotherapist to search for the apparent sources of a problem. Identifying these sources may require input from several specialists before the problem can be diagnosed, and resolution of the problem may require the collaboration of other professional therapists.

Whether you are the parent, teacher, or designated caregiver, recognizing the normal indicators of intellectual and emotional growth in a child's imagery can tell you whether the child is thinking, learning, and feeling in the same way as normal children around that age. The danger signals you can recognize are a message telling you to ask for help. This next section will review briefly the indicators and danger signals noted in detail in Chapters 3 through 6.

We know that children cannot even begin to scribble until they can grasp a crayon, and this does not occur until they are at least 18 months of age. Nor can this occur if Mommy or Daddy or a significant adult does not provide crayon and paper for them. Their behavior tells us that children at this age need to be supervised, for they are still likely to put whatever they can into their mouths, or scribble on any surface available.

If a child between 18 months to 2½ years does not show any signs of interest in scribbling, or seems to be unable to pursue it, you should be warned that something may be wrong physically or mentally and have your child evaluated.

Initially, scribbles are produced for the pure joy of moving the arms. Gradually the toddler begins to delight in colors and lines and begins to combine them to make shapes within shapes. This usually

happens around age 3.

The scribble continues to take form, and shapes are outlined and placed within other shapes by around 2½ to 4 years of age. During this period of growth, children will begin to draw more complex images, and they will experiment with paint and clay if these materials are offered. Even though the child is now learning words and parts of sentences, children rarely have a plan in mind when they begin to create an image. However, if you ask, they may tell you what they have drawn.

Around 4, children are able to draw circles, squares, and triangles. Recognizable forms take shape, sometimes by accident and sometimes by design. They connect circles with lines to create a face, arms, and legs, or a sun with lines extending from it.

As intellectual and artistic skills improve around ages 5 and 6, children's drawings will tell us about the objects they know and see in their environment. Naturally, children will try to reproduce favorite toys, special belongings, and important people. Their ability to recall is sufficiently developed by now, and they can create these images even when the objects are out of sight. Figures will have bodies and become more and more complete. A figure with one arm or leg larger than the other is not unusual. Big hats on big heads are seen frequently; and more than one object will appear in the same picture. However, the proportions of these objects in relation to each other may remain unrealistic for a while longer. There probably will not be very much movement in the figures, and colors will be chosen more often because they are pleasing rather than because they are realistic.

Artistic skills develop dramatically around the ages of 4 to 7 years. Drawings become more detailed and more realistic. Graphic images progress from telling a simple story about one object at a time to combining several objects in one picture, telling a more elaborate story. Differentiation of male and female, completion of figures, ground lines, more realistic colors, and the influence of culture and environment should be evident by the end of this stage/sequence and before the child can move on to the next level of development.

The ages between 4 and 7 are a critical period of development for children. During this time they finally master their bodily functions and begin to realize the differences between girls and boys. Learning how to relate to more than one adult at a time now occurs, as little girls naturally want to be

"Daddy's girl" and little boys want Mommy for themselves. These are normal wishes that will be reflected first in drawings that differentiate between the sexes. Drawing themselves as "big" as a parent is another way for children to fulfill their fantasies through creative expression. Artistic expressions showing three forms, whether objects or people, are produced over and over by children everywhere around these ages. This is one of many ways they begin to work through the normal process of imitating, and then identifying with, a parent of the same sex. It is believed that this identification must be accomplished successfully in order for children to adapt to school and new adult authority figures (teachers), and to form peer relationships.

From ages 7 to 11, children's artwork will tell us how successful they have been in their developmental tasks. Regardless of artistic talent, creative expressions will be rich with fantasies and facts these child artists are accumulating about the world around them. Cultural and ethnic influences will be depicted realistically or symbolically. Such emotions as love, hate, anger, and compassion will be seen through subject matter and the stories children tell in their art productions. Feelings of security and self-confidence will be manifested in the growing awareness and progressive illustrations of realistic proportions of objects in relation to each other, realistic colors, baselines, and horizon lines.

As the child's knowledge of the world expands around the ages of 7 to 11 years, objects in the surroundings are depicted more realistically in art productions, regardless of media. Subject matter may be influenced by interactions with family peers, exciting movies, television shows, and books.

Attending to Danger Signals

Graphic images produced by children during this time also will tell us if they are having problems. We can "see" whether these problems are due to learning disabilities, which may have resulted from a physical impairment or an emotional trauma. If a child has mastered developmental tasks and is progressing normally, drawings will show this normal progression. However, if these developmental tasks have not been mastered, warning signals can be identified in drawings.

Danger signals in children's art work appear in many different forms. For example, if a drawing appears to have been made by a 4-year-old child, and we know that child is 7, we should be concerned.

Any indication that a child is functioning intellectually or emotionally at an age younger than the chronological age should be explored further.

Shaky lines may indicate a learning problem or anxiety. When these are seen in a number of drawings by the same child, it is time to call for help.

A form repeated over and over suggests that the child is preoccupied with whatever that form symbolizes. This kind of repetition warns us to examine the source of this preoccupation.

We should be aware that a child is under some stress if objects in the same drawing indicate glaringly different age levels of the artist. The same would be true if we saw consecutive drawings in the same medium, produced by the same child, that reflected different age levels.

The presence of floating objects, produced at a time when that child should be aware of ground lines and should be able to tell a story in pictures, alerts us to the need for further evaluation of that child.

Images that are consistently slanted are warning signals that the child could have a learning disability resulting from a perceptual problem.

A child's spontaneous illustration of a particularly violent or tragic event should warn us (Fig. 8). It is important to explore why the child feels the need to illustrate such extraordinary subject matter.

Finally, we should question both the intellectual and emotional development of any child past the age of 4 who cannot stay within the boundaries of the paper, or within boundaries created on the paper.

Now that you are able to identify some of the warning signals, how do you use this knowledge? Let us assume that your daughter is in first grade. Based on report cards and written comments by the teacher you are pleased to know that your child is doing well in her venture into grade school. Shortly after the second semester begins, you receive a call from the teacher asking you to meet with her. Every interested parent or caregiver would arrange for this meeting as soon as possible. When our eldest daughter, Bonnie, was in first grade I received such a call. Curious, I immediately arranged for a meeting. This young, sensitive, and caring teacher told me she was very troubled about our child. Although Bonnie was doing well in her schoolwork, the teacher noticed that she spent considerable time gazing into space

and seemed inattentive. The teacher thought this indicated some distress, reflecting a lack of attention from her parents. The teacher knew that there were two younger sisters at home.

I was devastated by the teacher's comments—and furious. I did not believe that we were any less attentive to our eldest daughter than to the two younger girls. When I reported the meeting to my husband, a physician, his first response was to arrange for a physical examination. The medical report showed that Bonnie had a sixty percent hearing loss in one ear, apparently due to the development of excess tissue after a tonsillectomy performed a year earlier. Medical treatment corrected the hearing loss in a few months, and Bonnie's gazing into space and inattentiveness naturally stopped.

I recount this incident because it was an important lesson for me as a parent and for our daughter's teacher. The teacher's observation of behavior that seemed inconsistent with school performance told me that she was very much aware of the children—how they did in their school-work and how they acted in the classroom. However, it was presumptuous of her to assume that she knew the reason for our daughter's behavior without gathering more information. At the time this happened, I was not a professional in the mental health field. Today, however, as I instruct mental-health workers and medical personnel, I constantly remind students that normal physical development is fundamental to normal intellectual and emotional growth. Physical traumas must be considered because they, too, will interfere with learning.

Today there are many resources to help us handle problems, but the availability of these resources is not fully known to the public. Parents and teachers alike feel frustrated when they know there is a need for consultation but are not sure which consultant to contact. Neighbors and friends can be helpful only if they have had personal experience with the same problem. Very often the nature of the problem is difficult to determine. Pediatricians and family physicians are qualified professionals, but their role is limited to exploring whether the problem is medical or something that requires the attention of another professional in the field of mental health and education. If the problem is a physical abnormality, the pediatrician or family physician may be your best guide. In all situations, assessing physical well-being is the first step in dealing with any problem.

Once it has been determined that the child has no physical impairments, what is next? How can

parents and teachers find the right people to evaluate the problem further and make recommendations to help the child?

We can illustrate some points about the kind of therapist to choose by analyzing the different danger signals and identifying the professionals most qualified to evaluate the suspected problem, other than an art psychotherapist. In the next chapter we will demonstrate how the art psychotherapist can be most helpful in pinpointing specific areas of concern that would require more discriminating test procedures.

Let us suppose that we feel certain a child is drawing on a level lower than the chronological age. A psychologist trained in testing methods could determine whether this child's level of intelligence is compatible with the chronological age. A clinical psychologist or a psychiatrist might be consulted to assess the behavior, and might recommend additional psychological testing to determine whether there are certain emotional disorders.

This same process could be followed for children whose images float in space, show violent content, or are inconsistent within one picture or from one drawing to the next. These danger signals suggest that the child is very likely to be manifesting some emotional stress or disorder. Intellectual functioning should be evaluated to be sure that the child is not mentally retarded to any degree that would impede normal creative expression.

A child who continually draws slanted images, or ignores page or line boundaries, or repeats the same line or shape in all artistic creations, or cannot draw a line that is sure and direct, should be tested for a perceptual problem and a possible learning disorder. Some psychologists specialize in these areas and are professionally qualified to detect such problems.

In Chapter 8 we will discuss Bobby, who repeatedly drew the image of a "gaping mouth" to master his real trauma of a cleft lip and palate. Often there are similar situations in which a repeated image and lack of attention to boundaries does not mean the child has a learning disorder. The art psychotherapist and psychologist trained in testing measures can confirm that the child is normal developmentally and may recommend further examination of the child's behavior by a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist.

When we have information that defines the problem, we are faced with seeking help to provide some form of intervention or treatment. The questions now are where to find professional help and how do we judge whether those professionals are qualified to handle the problem. In the next chapter we will address finding a qualified therapist.

But it is not enough to know what children communicate in their artwork. It is only useful if they are invited and encouraged to continue to express themselves.

In the previous chapters, we offered suggestions for providing an atmosphere that will encourage children to express themselves creatively. Parents and teachers who are sensitive to this natural creative urge in all children can encourage children by providing simple, inexpensive art supplies and a place in which to use them. Most important of all is accepting the art works children produce and displaying these creative efforts. What children produce is an extension of themselves. Rejection of a child's artwork is a rejection of the child.

Providing art materials and a place to use them is not enough to guarantee that children will feel free to express themselves. All of us at one time or another have given our children "double messages." Unwittingly, we will say one thing but convey another in our actions. In Chapter 2 we gave examples of these possible instances, such as saying yes to painting in an inappropriate place, then getting angry over the "mess." It is important to be aware of these responses in all of us. While limit-setting is necessary for mature development, inconsistencies in adult behavior confuses children of all ages.

Parents and teachers alike must remember that small children draw initially to please themselves. Urging them to draw realistically before they are ready inhibits creativity, as does making judgments about their pictures from an adult viewpoint. Encouragement and appreciation of children's artwork should continue beyond the early years, because it is such a natural form of free expression and a socially acceptable way to express feelings that cannot always be acted out in society. Art expression provides a way for growing children to "picture" themselves in different roles—to fantasize about themselves in adult situations. It is also one way to express and sometimes even "contain" feelings that cannot be expressed easily through words.

It is an unfortunate reality that because teachers may be responsible for large numbers of children

in a classroom, they may not always be able to allow for individual creative expression. Art materials and space for creative activities traditionally are low-priority items in the budget. We have no immediate answers for this problem, and share the frustrations of preschool, special education, elementary school, and art teachers. Many tell us that they are continually hampered by these barriers to fostering this natural expression—an expression that gives children pleasure and a means to work through problems, while also letting us know how they are growing, intellectually and emotionally. Perhaps parents who are more aware of the importance of creative expression to their children's mental health will be able to make a greater effort to support art expression in the home and also support the efforts of teachers to obtain more resources for creative expression.

Part of this book has addressed the problem of how to attend to warning signals; but parents, teachers, and caregivers must not assume that recognizing a warning signal means that they will be able to interpret the signal's meaning. When a warning signal is recognized, parents and teachers should consult professionals who can evaluate the child to determine whether there is a problem, and if necessary, what kind of intervention or treatment should be considered.

Earlier in this book we discussed the enormous impact of changes in society as a whole. Any creative expression should be viewed as a reflection of the society in which the expression was produced. We mentioned the effect of television on children's earlier awareness of male and female differences. The "stick figure, " traditionally learned by most children around age 7, is rarely seen today in children's drawings. In the past, sexual characteristics did not appear in children's images of figures until around age 9 or 10. Today, these characteristics appear as early as 6 or 7 years, stimulated, we believe by exposure to television. The next generation of clinicians will have the opportunity to evaluate the impact of the V Chip being considered for censorship of inappropriate programs for children. They will also learn more about how access to the Internet impacts on children.

Another issue focusing around changing societal norms is what will be the effect of role reversals on the identification process of boys and girls. Today more and more mothers are working outside the home, and there continues to be an enormous increase in the number of single-parent families. Mothers and fathers are assuming roles traditionally assigned to one or the other. It is not surprising today to hear that Daddy cooks and cleans or Mommy changes the tire on the family car. This is a transition period in

society, and it is difficult to predict the eventual effects of this role reversal on children. Personally, I do not believe that this change will cause a major global problem. Role reversals have certainly existed in individual family situations many times in the past. How this was perceived by the children depended entirely on how naturally or unnaturally this was accepted by the parents and communicated to the children. There is considerable evidence that this is still true and will be true in the future. As a family therapist, I have learned that the parent who is personally comfortable with taking on the tasks that in the past were performed by a parent of the opposite sex, and who communicates that comfort to the children, remains an appropriate role model for children of the same sex.

Little girls will identify with Mommies who may change car tires, and little boys will identify with Daddies who cook and clean. What will probably change is society's views of what a man or a woman, a "Mommy" or a "Daddy, " is supposed to do. We must try to put aside old beliefs and realize that these kinds of role reversals do not change Mommy into Daddy, or vice-versa.

A form of "cancer" in our society confronts and distresses us daily. The physical and sexual abuse of children is a topic that cannot be properly addressed within the scope of this book. However, we know that sometimes children's drawings can provide us with information about these horrible incidents.

First, it must be said that physical and sexual abuse of children is not a new phenomenon. It has always existed, but today the news media have made us much more aware of its occurrence. When directed by qualified professionals, children will draw realistic and/or symbolic representations of abuses they have endured. These expressions are especially useful in helping children to express and deal with these traumatic events.

Unfortunately, small children who have been sexually abused, but not physically hurt in the act, often do not know that the abusing adult did something wrong until they are old enough to learn this from others. Even when they do know it is wrong, they are often afraid to tell about it, especially if the abuser is a close relative.

Art therapists working with children have, for many years, been qualified as an Expert Witness in alleged abuse cases. In 1986, such a case was brought before Judge Sorkow in Family Court in Hackensack, New Jersey. He had no problem accepting the art therapist as an expert witness, but

questioned the validity of art therapy as a qualified discipline. I was asked to testify and at the conclusion of my evidence, Judge Sorkow, in an unprecedented decision ruled art therapy as valid as psychology and psychiatry in such cases. The reference for his position paper and subsequent published article pertaining to this decision is listed in the bibliography.

Much research is underway to determine the best ways to identify child abuse as quickly as possible. At present we do not have sufficient information to allow us to say we can "see" evidence of specific physical or sexual abuse in children's free, non-directed drawings. We can see indicators of children at risk in spontaneous drawings, and such drawings have been shown and discussed throughout this book. Recognizing warning signals in drawings, and having a qualified professional person pursue information about the child and the environment, may reveal that some kind of abuse is the source of the signal. In my own experience, using drawings to evaluate children and supervising art therapy students working with children, this has frequently been the case. But, I repeat, the drawings provided, are only indicators that directed us to examine more closely the child's environment before the exact nature of the problem could be determined.

It is our hope that continued research in this area will identify markers of child abuse in drawings that can be interpreted before the damage caused by physical and sexual abuse is irreversible.

We have endeavored to communicate the importance of creative expression as one way parents and teachers can "see" what children are "saying" about themselves—how, through drawings and other artistic productions, we can chart the normal progression of children's intellectual and emotional development and the problems they encounter.

A number of years ago, I was privileged to work with a very sensitive and creative psychiatric nurse. She became familiar with the use of art psychotherapy for severely disturbed adults, and we often discussed how, for many of these patients, it was the first time in years that they were expressing themselves creatively. The following poem, given to me as a gift from this nurse, is her creative expression of the sadness she felt for those who had been inhibited in their own artistic expressions.

I could not talk
and so I drew
on the floor, with chalk,
When I was small.

I tried to tell you
you didn't know.
Poor soul!

I could not talk
and so I sketched
on paper, with charcoal,
When I was young.

I tried to show you—
you didn't see.
Poor soul!

I could not talk
and so I painted
on canvas, with oil,
When I was grown.

I tried to reach you—
you didn't understand.
Poor soul!

I could not talk
and so I created
on clay, with my hands,
When I was old.

I tried, too late!
You can no longer feel what I say.

Jeanne Byrne Kosek