

See What I'm Saying

Word-Shape Stage/Sequence



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Around 2½ to 4 Years

Adam, 3, is sitting on the floor in his bedroom, playing with miniature cars. With one in each hand, he zooms them around the space in front of him, crashing them into each other at one moment and whizzing them past each other the next. He makes loud noises to accompany the cars' movements and intersperses these sounds with commands to the imaginary drivers. Lisa, his twin sister, is in her bedroom playing with her dollhouse. She is busily rearranging the furniture and telling an imaginary Mommy doll to "hurry and make lunch; the children are hungry."

Around 3, all children start to be interested in specific toys and "play out" activities, imitating parents or other caregivers, stories they have heard, or television programs they have seen. Mimicking special adults in their lives pleases Adam and Lisa greatly. It also helps them to handle uncomfortable feelings that result from disagreements with Mommy or Daddy.

The twins still often play side by side, but not yet with each other. Sharing toys is still difficult and may need mediating—Adam and Lisa do not want to share any of their possessions. This proprietary attitude extends to their beds, special plates, and eating utensils. Certain blankets and bedtime companions, such as a teddy bear or doll, become important objects in their world. In the normal transition period, in which children give up some of their attachment to Mommy, Daddy, or early caregivers, these personal claims are necessary substitutes helping them in the natural process of becoming separate from these adults.

During the word-shape stage/sequence, words are repeated for pleasure at first. Gradually they are connected and take on more meaning. Adam and Lisa speak in monologues to themselves. Even when stimulated by a question or command from another child or an adult, the response still sounds like a monologue, unrelated to the question or command. At this age words are clear, but complete sentences

are more the exception than the rule. Adam and Lisa will learn more about words and sentences by example from their parents and other adults, but they will still continue their monologues for a while. They cannot be expected to hold conversations before they are ready. These skills will be accomplished at each child's own pace.

By age 3, the twins are aware of themselves as separate persons and will assert themselves frequently to confirm their place in the household. Only in the past few months have they felt very comfortable playing in a room by themselves; they still leave their play frequently to make sure that a special adult is nearby. Mealtimes are less messy, but the struggle over toilet training has not been resolved. By definite words and actions, Adam and Lisa demonstrate that they will decide to regulate their bowel and bladder habits when they are ready. Their preoccupation with this process is often reflected in their going out of their way to avoid unpleasant odors. This will probably stop when they are more willing to comply with adult requests.

Adam and Lisa delight in walking, running, and handling new objects, but their movements are not always smooth. The twins run around the house excitedly, sometimes bumping into furniture and breaking things. Like other 3- to 4-year-old children, they do not always want to admit they are responsible for the damage. They blame another child or create an imaginary friend or animal to be the target for the ensuing reprimand. When they grow to understand that someone can be angry with them but still love them, the necessity to blame imaginary friends dwindles. However, these imaginary friends may continue to serve as playmates until the child goes to school.

Early in this stage/sequence, scribbling is still evident in the twins' drawings, but gradually certain shapes will emerge and forms are outlined. The children begin to organize forms on paper, and they show an early sense of balance by drawing both large and small shapes. They combine some of these forms to look like recognizable objects, although the shape may be primitive and somewhat abstract. The world in which children live influence the objects crudely symbolized in their drawings and clay sculptures. They particularly enjoy rolling clay into long strips and round patties and drawing shapes they will tell you are monsters. Adam may master the scribble more quickly than Lisa, but within the year, like most children their age, their skills will be similar.

Here are some word-shape pictures created by the twins real-life counterparts at this age.

When Nicole is 2, her mother shows her how to use paint. Together they create a picture Nicole calls "Crickets" (Fig. 43). Paint is a new experience for Nicole at this age. Nicole's mother tells us that Nicole has been delighted with the "smeary" quality, but she has needed help to keep the paint on the paper.



Figure 43

Jamie is just past 3 when she produces this drawing with colored felt-tipped pens (Fig. 44). Jamie's parents furnish her with a rich array of art supplies, and she spends much time experimenting with them. In this picture she scribbles, draws forms inside other forms, and adds some lines. Notice how she is able to stay within the boundaries of the paper, considering the many images she wants to create.



Figure 44

It was a joy to meet Tony, who attended a preschool where I was known as the “art lady.” Tony was one of the most self-sufficient 3-year-old children I have ever met. Like Hal, he spent most of his free time drawing or painting. During my four weeks at the school, Tony invited me to look at his drawings or draw with him whenever I was free. The children worked on easels, and it was not easy to control dripping paint. Tony has discovered that he can make interesting designs from these “accidents” and has begun to create them consciously (Fig. 45). This is a remarkable accomplishment for a 3-year-old child. Tony’s rapid advancement in artistic development was demonstrated in two other situations.



Figure 45

One morning Tony asked me to sit with him while he drew with colored chalk on a small chalkboard. He wanted to produce a tree, grass, and sun, and he asked me to help him with these images. I took another chalkboard and in a simplistic way illustrated these objects, suggesting that Tony try to copy them on his chalkboard. I was not surprised that he was able to do this successfully. I was surprised a week later, however, when he greeted me with a detailed chalk drawing of these same objects. He was delighted that he had been able to replicate a picture that had been erased the previous week.

Tony's capacity to recall the instruction he had received and reproduce the objects so well over a period of eight days reinforced my impression that he was a very bright child who functioned on a more advanced level than most 3-year-old children. Imitating my drawing suggested that Tony was also beginning to seek out adults he wanted to imitate. This behavior usually occurs closer to 4 or 5 years of age. The preschool staff reported that Tony was advanced in all areas of cognitive and emotional development, supporting my perceptions gleaned from his creative expressions.

Holly, at 3, combines shapes and lines to produce "a man with funny hair" (Fig. 46). The familiar scribble and her description of the picture focus our attention on the top of the head. Children this age typically emphasize the head. Developmental psychologists believe that the rapid physical growth experienced by all children between birth and 4 or 5 years creates a feeling of imbalance in the child. Efforts to master this feeling, probably first expressed by drawing large and small shapes are now reflected by placing unrealistically large objects on the top of the head, by making one limb larger than the other, or by exaggerating the size of hands and feet. Holly's awareness of the opposite sex is also emerging—a natural course of events for children this age. There are two important men in her life, her father and her older brother, so it is no surprise that she calls this figure a "man."



Figure 46

Warning Signals at 3

The most significant warning signal at this age would be continuous scribbling with no evidence that the child is able to outline shapes within the scribbles or produce spontaneous combinations of shapes and

lines. It would also be important to note whether the child is advancing from babbling to saying words and incomplete sentences. These two developmental progressions generally occur at about the same time, and the strong presence or absence of advancing language or drawing skills are cause for concern.

In Chapter 2 we introduced Indira, the little girl from India who created the same images in paint as her Western playmates. "Doing art" with me at her preschool, Indira was very intrigued with colors and typically used them in a way that pleased her but had little to do with the actual color of an object. One day in particular, she had been using a variety of colored markers to draw forms that she named (Fig. 47). Indira called the large yellow shape a "horse," the turquoise form a "cat," and the orange figure an "umbrella." Between these images she drew some scribbles, but told me they were "nothing." Finally she picked up a pencil and drew a very light form in the lower left corner. She said this was "Mr. Uppity." This child's choice of pencil to draw a human form was as surprising as her name for this barely visible figure. She had made this image distinctly separate from the others—it had no color and was a human instead of an animal or inanimate object. She would not tell me anything about "Mr. Uppity," and I would not press her to discuss it. It was obvious, however, that it symbolized something or someone that did not deserve the colorful attention she gave the other images. I later learned Indira was familiar with a popular children's book containing a character called Mr. Uppity. I realized that Indira was sufficiently influenced by this character to reflect her response in a drawing.

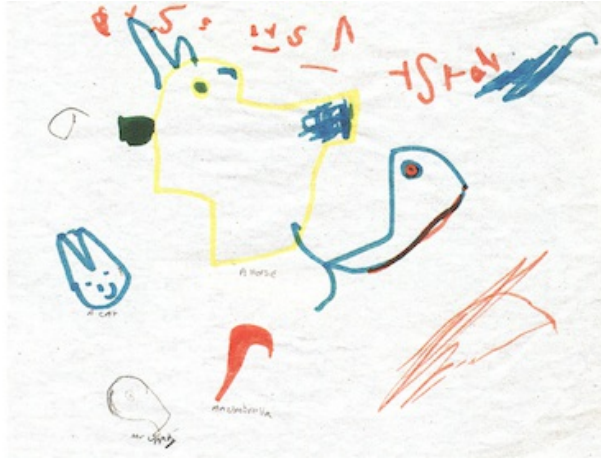


Figure 47

Subsequently, my experience in assessing children's drawings led me to query the preschool staff about Indira's behavior. I asked whether she handled distress situations by withdrawing. The teachers reported that when Indira was asked to do something she did not want to do, was having difficulty with another child, or was overly tired, she did not express her feelings, although she had a good command of English. She would either remove herself physically from the situation or have a temper tantrum so a member of the staff would be compelled to take her aside. We discussed the possibility that "Mr. Uppity" symbolized Indira's feelings of separateness in an environment where she was a minority. We also discussed the fact that she was the youngest of five children and perhaps was treated in an infantile way at home, making it more difficult for her to handle the usual demands of preschool. We all agreed that more communication between Indira's family and the preschool staff would ease this 3 ½-year-old girl's transition from home to school, so that she would be less likely to choose infantile ways to remove herself from challenging situations.

As Adam and Lisa move into the fourth year of their lives, they will face new experiences that will help them grow and learn new skills. These experiences and the new challenges they bring will be discussed in the next chapter.

