

Michal Wimmer

## **The Complete Guide to Children's Drawings**

Accessing Children's Emotional World through their Artwork



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# THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS

Accessing Children's Emotional World  
through their Artwork

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Please visit Michal Wimmer's website: <http://childredrawingcenter.com/>

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## About the Author



Michal Wimmer, M.A, is an art therapist and an international expert on children's drawings analysis. She has years of experience supporting families with children (aged 2–18) with emotional and social difficulties using their drawings. Michal is also the founder of an advanced studies program, introducing social workers, psychologists and art therapists, as well as elementary and preschool teachers to the world of children's drawings analysis. The program includes a two-year graduate study on children's drawings analysis, based on practical exercises, various psychological theories and parental guidance.

A popular speaker, Michal has given hundreds of workshops and keynotes about children's drawings analysis in Universities, Colleges and private events. She is often interviewed in TV shows, magazines and newspapers for insights about parenting through children's drawings. Michal manages a national forum about children's drawings analysis, providing parental guidance based on drawings. Finally, she also provides written expertise to courts of law, based on analysis of children's drawings, mainly in the context of family abuse and children at risk.

Michal runs a private clinic for treating children, adolescents and adults. She also works as an art therapist in psychiatric hospitals and mental health clinics. Recently, she has founded the Roshida website. Her therapeutic strategy is deeply influenced by the classic psychoanalytic approaches of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.



# PREFACE

One of the most charming moments in parenting is when your child shares a new and fascinating discovery with you. Together with the child, you too are excited to see a tiny beetle resting on a green leaf, sand dunes that have instantly become giant slides, and an entire world of scents, tastes, colors and shapes we have all but forgotten over the years.

Children's drawings reveal similar experiences. Each drawing is the starting point of a voyage led by the child explorer. In this book, you – educators, therapists and above all parents – are offered the opportunity to join this unique voyage and understand the child's world from his distinct perspective.

Parenting in today's world is far from straightforward. Parents who may be successful in other areas in their lives are often unconfident and even helpless when facing parenting tasks. The parental role involves dealing with fundamental questions, such as: Have I set the appropriate boundaries? Have I understood my child properly? Have I given him the right behavioral reinforcements? Have I correctly interpreted his signals? Today's parents are anxious to understand their child and be more involved in his emotional world, so as to be able to provide the right answers when he'll need them.

In this context, children's drawings offer a kind of map enabling you to navigate in the child's inner emotional world. Through the drawings, the child expresses his difficulties, as well as the solutions he requires. Informed observation of the child's artwork may provide parents, therapists and educators with a reliable compass for understanding the child's present needs.

My approach to interpreting children's drawings and to diagnosing children in general is positive and optimistic. The drawings shed light on the child's world, enabling us to understand his difficulties but also the strengths which enable him to grow towards solutions that are appropriate for his personality. All children want to develop and experience the world around them, but they require proper encouragement and guidance to support them on their way to realizing their potential. Interpreting children's drawings enables the parent to avoid forcing standardized, one-size-fits-all solutions that have been offered to different families under different circumstances, and instead assess what is most appropriate for his child at

a given moment in his life. Just as many children can have fever, but each for a different reason, children's drawings allow us to better understand the various reasons for the same behavioral manifestation.

This book presents hundreds of fascinating examples of children's drawings that I have collected from various places around the world. Most of these drawings have been made by children whose parents had been referred for emotional counseling and therapy, in the course of which multiple drawings have been analyzed. The conclusions presented next to the drawings are based on comparisons with other drawings by the same child in different periods of his life and on a personal interview with his parents, which add an important dimension to understanding the child's world in the family system. Drawings selected to illustrate various phenomena usually include one manifestation of the given phenomenon (sometimes the most common and sometimes a particularly rare one). Naturally, every interpretation is based on recurring manifestations of the same phenomena, together with graphic indicators supporting my conclusions. Note that one may never reach any final conclusions based on a single feature in the drawing – such features are offered only as illustrations of broader phenomena.

The last few years were dedicated to a thorough research, which included reviewing findings of studies conducted in the best universities in the world as well as conducting my own groundbreaking studies on 100–300 children each in order to obtain statistically significant results. It is an honor and privilege to present the fruits of this labor to you, in this book. Throughout the book, I have sought to enable all readers to understand the significance of the various research findings and to integrate them with my professional knowledge and experience as an expressive art therapist.

I sincerely hope that the resulting book will enhance public awareness of how the child's inner world is reflected in his drawings and open an additional channel of communication between the parent, educator or therapist on the one hand, and the child on the other – a channel that will enrich and reinforce their relationship.

Note: All drawings in this book have been published with both parents' informed consent. Wherever necessary, identifying details of the child or family have been changed or removed.

Right after this page begins a magical and colorful journey in the world of children's drawings. I hope the book will give you tools to gain a new perspective of your child's drawings, your child's world and even the child within you...

**Michal Wimmer**

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Developmental Stages in Children's Drawings

When you observe a child's drawings over an extended time period, you will notice trends of change and development. Without any deliberate adult intervention, the child advances from stage to stage and develops his abilities. Nevertheless, despite evidence of clear and general developmental stages, I do not recommend analyzing a child's artwork in strict terms of how it matches a certain population norm. When I interpret a child's drawings, I do not compare them to his friends' drawings but to his own developmental trajectory. Therefore, the ages noted in the titles below are suggestive only and should be treated with caution.

Age norms are important. However, if your 4 year-old child still scribbles – unlike his friends who are already drawing human figures – this does not necessarily attest to any developmental lag. The ages appearing below indicate developmental periods and their general characteristics, but you must bear in mind that each child has his own combination of such characteristics, some enhanced, and others nonexistent, etc. Moreover, the developmental trajectory and the transitions between stages are individual. Some children may skip a certain stage or regress to a previous one before moving forward again.

#### Stage 1: Spontaneous Scribbling – Ages 1½–2½

The first times a child holds a pencil and discovers what it can do are highly significant to his development. In families with several older children, you can see babies as young as 9 months imitate their brothers by using drawing tools and admiring their own work.

In many senses, these occasions are similar to the moments a child realizes he can produce sounds and begins to speak. Scribbling is thus akin to the infantile muttering. In both cases, the child begins a prolonged learning process by way of trial and error. He moves the drawing tool (changes his voice) in different directions and observes the different results on the page. Moreover, just as infantile murmuring or crying expresses a certain need or emotion (hunger, anger, boredom, etc.) scribbling is intentional, albeit pre-schematic.

To the untrained eye, drawings made at this stage would seem like senseless doodling. However, a closer look reveals that children definitely

develop distinctive scribbling styles.

At this stage, the child attaches great importance to the dynamic aspect of drawing, and delights in the sensory experience of moving the drawing tool across the page. Lines start and end at random, and if there are any geometric shapes in the drawings, they are usually drawn inconsistently and disproportionately. Given these factors, I recommend checking that at least three months have passed since the child had first begun to experience drawing before his artwork can be analyzed for emotional meanings.



**Figure 1-1: Inconsistent and unstructured lines**

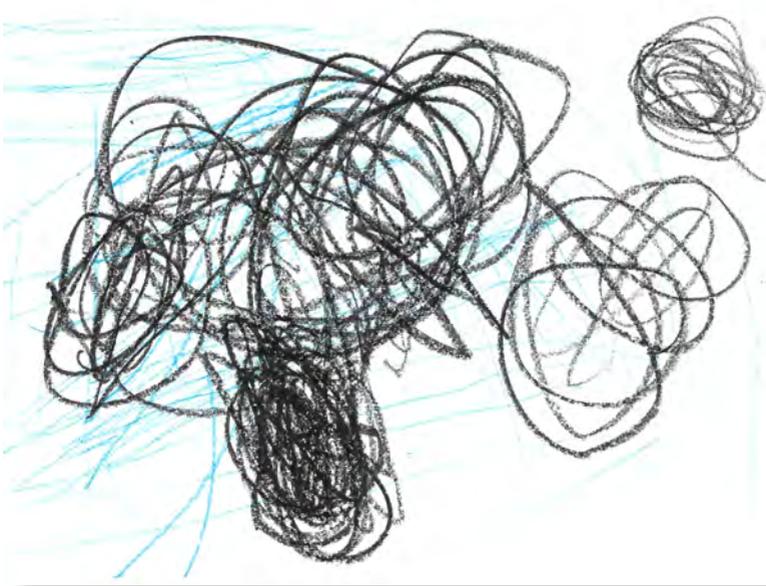
In the following drawing by a 22-month old girl, you can see lines that extend beyond the page's boundaries, lines with different lengths and directions, without any consistency or personal preference. You can also see asymmetric loops, lines drawn erratically across the page, cyclical circular scribbles and insertions of the drawing tool into the page, whether vertically or diagonally, to create a "point map" (children enjoy doing this very much, and tend to imitate one another around the drawing table at kindergarten).

In terms of psychological development, Sigmund Freud (1954) calls this age span the oral stage, a period characterized by children's tendency to taste paints and crayons, to check what sounds they produce and to explore them tactually as an integral part of the creation process.

**Stage 2: Structured Scribbling – Ages 2½–3½**

At this stage, the child begins to plan the drawing in advance. Basic geometric shapes begin to appear on the page, including circles (or quasi-circles), and squares (or lines that cross to form a square area). This time, they do not appear accidentally; on the contrary, the child would often use up entire pages in recurring attempts to draw the same shape. Finally, at this stage we begin to see children who critically observe their artwork as it unfolds, or even stare fixedly at the page before they even start.

Usually, children at the structured scribbling stage are happy to talk about what they have drawn, and will explain about the various elements on the page.



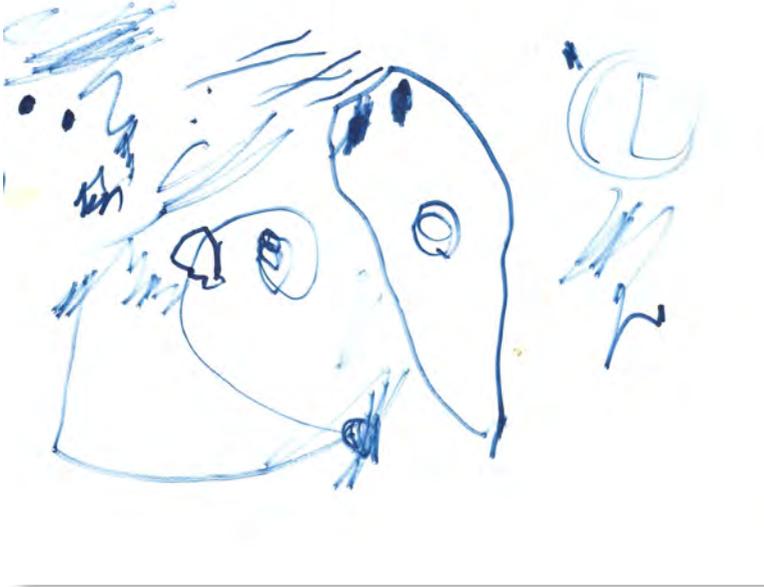
**Figure 1-2:** Drawing accompanied by the sound of a motor

Although the drawing still looks like a mess, the child sees it in a completely different light. For example, a 34 month-old boy made the sound of a motor while drawing this example and when he finished, exclaimed: "I drew a car!"



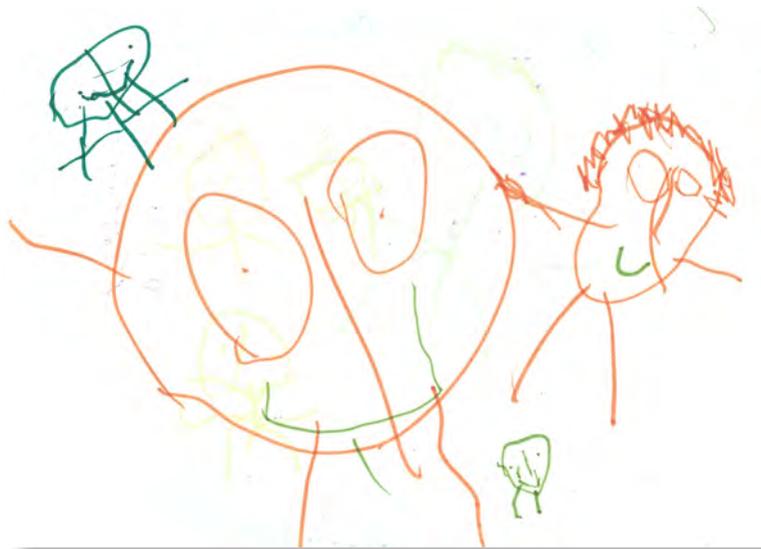
**Figure 1-3: Drawing accompanied by a barking sound**

Similarly, a 31 month-old girl drew the following disarray of short and disjointed lines, and while drawing, she said: "This is a barking dog, woof, woof".



**Figure 1-4: Initial attempt at formal structuring: drawing a circle**

Drawing a circle requires meticulous planning. The child has to start at a certain point, move the drawing tool around a central axis (this requires optical control) and arrive at the starting point. At this stage, you can see children go past the starting point because they get carried away with the movement and find it difficult to stop. You can see the opposite phenomenon in the following drawing by a 38 month-old. This boy took great care to structure the circle appropriately, and although he didn't manage to draw it accurately at the endpoint, he returned there until a closed and well-structure circle was drawn. You can also see various snail-like shapes, which also belong to the circle family and require careful planning and executive control.



**Figure 1-5: Tadpole figures**

Once the child has become adept at drawing circles, human figures begin to appear (at this preliminary stage, they are called “tadpoles”). To draw a tadpole, the child uses lines acquired in the previous stage to represent the four limbs. These are attached directly to a large, round head. Children with the same level of skill also draw suns with linear rays.

In terms of cognitive development, this stage marks the beginning of symbolic cognition: the child can now use his drawings to represent events along a temporal sequence, distinguishing between past and future events. The child free-play style and the stories related to the drawing will be more and more clearly related to actual experiences during the day, and at the same time the child’s verbal skills will develop significantly.

Freud identifies this age span as the transition from the oral to the anal stage, marked by improved motor control and brain-eye-hand coordination. The child internalizes cause-and-effect processes and therefore examines his drawing at the end of the process, rather than just enjoys making it. Piaget defines this period as the beginning of the pre-conceptual (pre-operational) stage, in which the child solves problems by trial and error, his thought is concrete and reality is perceived as a static image. The child uses objects around him and his own drawings as internal representations of events he has experienced, and adopts an animistic perspective, whereby inanimate objects are humanized. Examples of this tendency may be seen in Figures 1-2 and 1-3, which represented an interesting occurrence experienced by the children, with the disarray of lines animated at will.

According to Erik Erikson (1993), in this period the child develops will-

power and confidence as well as doubts in his abilities. The latter are usually dependent on the environment's critical response to the child's inquisitive behavior. In his drawings, the child directs his curiosity to every drawing tool and surface which could enable him to express himself. This is why drawing on walls is most common at this age. From his point of view, the child expresses himself confidently and autonomously, while the environment criticizes him and demands that he exhibit control and understands the boundaries set for him.

### Stage 3: Pre-Schematic Stage – Ages 3½–5

At this stage the child begins to plan his artwork, which usually also receives a name at the end. We begin to see features that are recognizable to adults: flower, house, tree, car, etc. However, the child still does not attach any importance to the relationships among the various figures in the drawing. Now that he is interested in depicting reality as it is, he carefully draws every element by itself, with all the items he can recall from his daily reality.



Figure 1-6: Three-wheeled car

In fact, the child draws everything he “knows” about the drawn object, rather than the object as it really looks.

The resulting images often do not make visual sense, but they are accurate as far as the child is concerned because they document the characteristics and functions of the object in question. Thus, this 45 month-old draws a three-wheeled car, despite the fact that it is not a common sight in daily life.



**Figure 1-7: Two-dimensional limbs**

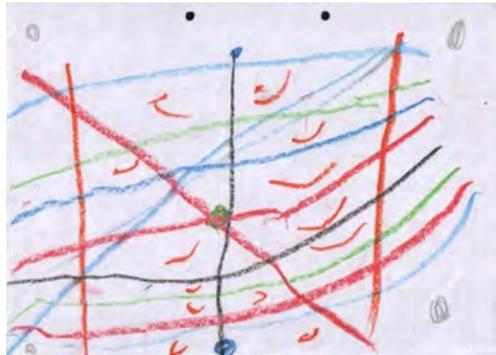
Human figure drawings also become more sophisticated at this stage. Usually, we begin to see two-dimensional limbs (rather than the lines typical of the previous stage), and some children begin to draw bellies as well, the forerunners of future torso drawings.

In addition, the pre-schematic child begins to acquire the ability of drawing diagonal lines, and later also triangles. The previously rounded roofs now take their typical triangular shape, together with skirts, cypresses, high-heeled shoes, hair ribbons, etc.).



**Figure 1-8: Sun-like ray structure**

Beside meaningful schematic drawings, this stage also marks the appearance of schematically structured graphic diagrams, such as sun-like ray structures, symmetrical constructions crossed by a line in the middle, balanced square structures and cyclical lines.



**Figure 1-9: Square and cyclical linear structure**

The child begins to give meaning and names to all these diagrams and drawings (graphic drawing naming). He describes the act of drawing as if he is “inside” the drawing. Closed forms are described as closed elements familiar from daily life, such as door or window. Finally, the child uses a minimalistic, single line to describe a daily movement experience, such as

the road from home to kindergarten and back.

Psychologically, this stage marks the dawning of the insight that the child is separate from the world, that the self is an autonomous entity. Following this insight, the child begins to depict the world around himself in his drawings. Because of the interest in genitals in this age, many drawings refer to the figures' intimate organs.

In observing such drawings, one must carefully determine whether they represent age-appropriate concerns or indicate inappropriate exposure to adult content or even abuse.

It is recommended not to rush the child to make well-structured schematic drawings at this stage, but allow him to progress at his own pace. Adult intervention at this stage could make the child feel guilty, as if he has not met the adults' expectations to make a clear drawing, with an understandable name and identifiable figures.

Together with progress in motor skill and spatial perception, some drawings in those ages will still be disorganized, with human figures and objects floating around without any realistic relationship among them. As far as the pre-schematic child is concerned, the paper is the basis on which the figures are "overlaid".

#### Stage 4: Schematic Stage – Ages 5–8

By this stage, the child begins to be aware of the logic behind laws and rules of conduct, develops his own rituals, and judges the world according to his inner feelings. He also begins to treat the world of colors more realistically (brown earth, blue sky, etc.).



Figure 1-10: Realistic approach to colors

The child already knows the drawing scheme by now. He doesn't have to observe a tree to be able to draw it. However, through drawing he reprocesses his impressions of reality, so that his documentation skill improves each time. Freud identifies these ages with the onset of the latency period, in which children show greater interest in their peers and other people around them.

Consequently, human figures assume a central role in their artwork. Technically, children are now able to add more organs to the basic human form, as well as articles of clothing. The figure becomes more elongated, and children begin attending to differential proportions within it: elongated legs, belly, outstretched arms, and so on.

Drawings by 5–8 year-olds focus increasingly on the family and begin to show tendencies of accuracy to the point of perfectionism (reflecting the conflict between industry and inferiority).

In the drawings, you can see the objects are rendered complete with their identifying characteristics, as part of the adult conceptual world: a simple square becomes a window; a straight line with circles on top becomes a flower, and so on. Piaget also characterizes perception at these ages as polarized between good and evil, with inflexible and one-dimensional approach to rules. Indeed, in their drawings, children at the schematic stage begin focusing on evil characters (monsters and witches) and good characters (knights and princesses).

Cognitive development enables the schematic children to abstract and separate the wheat from the chaff:

The child will often neglect many details (although he may be fully aware of their existence) and emphasize only those perceived to be critical to functioning: legs that walk, arms that reach out, a mouth that talks or expresses some emotion, and so on.



**Figure 1-11: Legless human figures**

This emphasis can make the drawing seem surreal, as in the following drawing by a 5 years and 2 months-old girl. For this girl, the most important thing is to draw the figures holding balloons or each other's hands. Therefore, she allowed herself to ignore their legs (which is not typical of her other drawings).

Another example is children who draw a human figure on one side of the page, and the figure's behind on the other, "because it is behind".

Drawings at this stage are concise: the children focus on the common denominators of all houses/trees/flowers, rather than on the characteristics which differentiate them. Only after formulating general schemes can these children document the exceptions to the rule.



**Figure 1-12: Connecting elements in the drawing**

Schematic children begin to attach importance to the relations among the various objects in their drawing. In the following drawing by a 5½ year-old, for instance, you can see a child, a dog and a line (leash) connecting them. The schematic children's spatial perception also improves, and they often begin the drawing by marking the ground and the sky at the lower and upper edges of the page.

Moreover, this period is also characterized by drawing multiple land lines (for example, one at the bottom of the page to designate nearby objects, and another nearer the top to designate distant object) or rounded baselines (to indicate sitting around the table, for example). Usually, the

child will refer to the bottom of the page as a baseline, and not turn the page while drawing. In terms of perspective, objects will be drawn in their complete form, and it is rare to see objects hidden by others.



**Figure 1-13: Drawing by a Tibetan child with multiple land lines**

Multiple land lines are a fascinating phenomenon in drawings by Tibetan children. Despite being in the midst of the schematic stage, well aware of the locations and colors of earth and sky, these children choose to revert to drawing row after row over imaginary land lines.

This style may be affected by the Tibetan prayer wheels, set in a row one next to the other, which represent balance and recurrence which are part of their religious worldview.

At this stage, children still find it difficult to draw figures in profile or in motion, because doing so requires them to ignore schematic characteristics and omit some of the organs (such as a hidden eye, or an arm that is only partly visible while the figure is walking). Instead, they draw “everything that has to be there” by making some organs transparent. Use of colors is

also schematic, as children tend to use basic colors rather than shades and combinations. Finally, schematic children attach central importance to the drawing's subject, and can even engage in a deep conversation about its meanings and the story hidden in the drawing.

### Stage 5: Pre-Realistic Stage – Ages 8–11

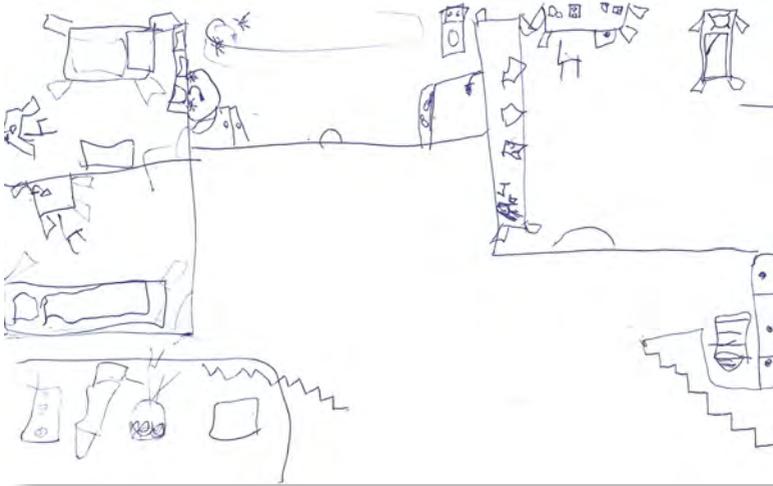
Pre-realistic children acquire motor skills which enable them to refine their depiction of reality and differentiate objects more accurately. Thus, we see attention to various types of cars or trees, local animals, etc.



**Figure 1-14:** Yaks in a typical Tibetan pre-realistic drawing

By this stage, each human figure receives individual attention, with its own typical details and accessories: glasses, buttons, bag, hat, and so on.

In each human figure drawing, the pre-realistic child tries to resolve graphic difficulties such as: How to draw a person lying down? Should I draw all the table legs or only those visible from this angle? How to draw the house interior and exterior at the same time? In most cases, the difficulty is resolved by flattening the image: for example, houses will be drawn as seen in figure 1-15.



**Figure 1-15: Typical flattened house drawing**

As abstract cognition develops, this flattening tendency will disappear.

Since the pre-realistic child wishes above all to document reality, he is careful to maintain the proportions among the various objects in the drawing.

His subjects combine figures from his intimate world (family drawings) with imaginary and historical drawings (Bible stories), as well as current affairs (war scenes, etc.).

In terms of psychological development, Piaget calls this period the operational stage, in which the child can grasp concepts of preservation (of quantity and weight) and to organize items in groups according to common denominators. Problem solving no longer relies exclusively on trial and error, but also on social rules of conduct, as well as the opinions and emotions of others. The child's understanding of reversibility (every change in location, form, or order may be reversed) and of hierarchic relations refines his family drawings, to which other groups are added, such as sports teams. Moreover, the child begins to attach several drawings together to represent a continuous plot.