
From Chrysalis to Butterfly

The Development of Children's Drawings

~ Laurie Clark

After overhearing a conversation with his older brother, my little grandson said to me, "Did you know that your brain is on both sides of your head?" I replied, "How do you know that?" He confidently answered, "My angel helped build me, that's how I knowed."

Over five decades as a Waldorf teacher, one of the many things the children have taught me is the marvel of how they portray themselves through their drawings in the first seven years of life. My interest has grown ever wider as I carefully observe and gather drawings from the children in my care and study Rudolf Steiner's insights on child development. Children's phases of development are mirrored in their astonishing drawings, as Audrey McAllen indicates in her book *Reading Children's Drawings*. She describes how, through focused observation, the teacher can "decipher what the angel consciousness of the [young child's] individuality is trying to tell them." What my little grandson said about the "angel helping to build him" was a precise description of how he "knowed."

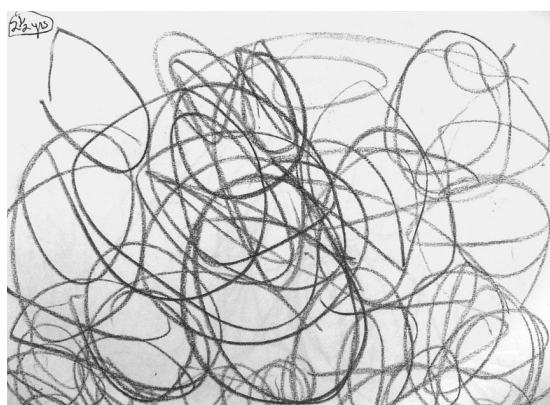
Children's drawings from all over the world have something in common. Specific age groups of children in the first seven years draw similar representations of their physical body. What a wonder! The drawings can be seen with our eyes, but there is more to it. There are invisible spiritual forces at work, which the child expresses in drawing the same shapes, sometimes over and over again.

There are many things in the world that are real, though invisible to our physical eyes. When we plant a seed in the ground, there is a flower that will grow from it, though it cannot yet be seen. If we are lucky, we may see a butterfly, but what transforms the caterpillar inside the cocoon into the beautiful creature is invisible to us. When a woman is pregnant and carries a becoming child under her heart, we wonder what that child may look like, but cannot yet behold the answer. What is the force that makes the gigantic waves crash on the shores of the ocean? The love we feel for someone is not perceptible in a material form; it is a feeling that can be expressed but not physically perceived. Our life is full of mysterious, invisible forces.

Rudolf Steiner offers insight into these invisible forces, which invite the soul and spirit to integrate through specific developmental phases for the child. In *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* Steiner describes the invisible forces that are gifted to the child from the spiritual world during the first three years of life.

In the first three years, Steiner tells us, we are still in direct contact with the higher worlds. Forces from the spiritual world stream into the child directionally from below to above. In the first year of life, with the wisest of guidance, spirit helps bestow the capacities to come into uprightness. The child begins to walk and find their way into the world. Around two years old, the child begins speaking and can communicate as a social being. Somewhere between two and three years old, there comes a moment when each child can identify as an individual, saying "I" instead of using their name. From living in the consciousness of total oneness with the world, the child moves toward the experience, "This 'I' is me, I am my own self separate from everyone else." With this individualized development, the first seeds of waking up in thinking begins. These spiritual forces stream from the feet (walking) to the larynx (speaking) all the way to the head (thinking), giving an orientation into the earthly life. In adulthood, when we work with spiritual ideals, these same powerful spiritual powers generate creativity and become healing forces for the injuries life brings to us.

At the same time as these forces are streaming from below to above in the first three years, there are invisible spiritual powers that draw into the physical body from the opposite direction, from above to below. These etheric vital forces do their work in the first seven years of life in a formative way, building and sculpting, transforming the inherited body of the child and individualizing it. The etheric body provides the child's physical body with the nourishing life forces it needs to grow in a healthy way. Being respectful to these forces that are imperceptibly working in the child will sustain them. Adults can give the child the gift of time that is needed to complete this process.



Spiraling. Around age 1-2



The circle closes. Between ages 2 and 3



Lines emerge. Around age 2-3

This formative life stream can become visible to us, from the head all the way to the toes, when we observe the way children draw. Step by developmental step, their drawings show us where they are in their consciousness and how they perceive their body. The drawings in this article are pictures from the children I have had the fortune to care for.

Observing a child's drawings as an adult requires a certain reverence. We would never judge, jump to conclusions about, or diagnose a child by these drawings. I would suggest taking the good advice from the Irish poet, John O'Donohue; "What you encounter, recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach... When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us." When observing the child's drawings in this way, over time, they begin to speak to us, and we begin to hear what they are telling us.

It is quite common that the earliest forms the child draws are recapitulated again and again in the first seven years of life. A five- or six-year-old child may fill the page with circles or other forms that they drew at an earlier stage of development. All of the ages that I describe in the developmental drawings are approximate, and there are always exceptions.

I can only briefly describe these various stages that portray the child's consciousness and how the formative forces move through the physical body, fashioning it into its own individuality. In this article, I am focusing on how children draw themselves. Pictures of a tree and a house similarly reveal developmental stages, but are not included in this article as there is just not enough room in this journal to include them.

When children can pick up a writing tool in the first year or two of life, they often begin to draw large spiraling circles that have no beginning and no end; they are drawn spontaneously. Often this spiraling movement looks as though it is carrying the hand and arm of the child, as they keep drawing it even when not looking at the paper. The very young child is swept up into the movement, there is no separating yet; all is in oneness. There is a living drive and rhythm that carries children in these spiraling motions. Their awareness is still very connected to the spirit world that have just recently come from; the young child is a total sense organ. Every sense impression enters into them, and they fully take it in, with no filters yet. These never-ending spirals are a picture of the consciousness of the children, their first self-portraits.

When children are between two and three years old, something new arises in their drawing. The formative forces are coming down from above into the region of the head. From out of the never-ending spiraling movement appears a closed circle; a stopping point is found. The child will often draw the circle over and over again with great effort. It is a remarkable thing to observe how much determination the children use to draw this new form. Something compels them to keep closing the circle, sometimes filling up whole pages with circles. What is the child trying to tell us? The circle is not spiraling anymore; it is closed. This is often when the child begins to say "I." The circle says: "This is me, and everything else is not me." Saying "no" to almost everything one asks of them is healthy at this stage. It is as if they were telling us, "This circle is my separate self, I have a boundary now that I am trying out and practicing, so, 'No!'"



The square trunk. Around age 4-6



Triangular forms. Around age 6-7



The full body. Around age 7

Around the ages of two to three years old, the children's drawings of the circle develop lines coming out of them. The lines often start from inside the circle, and like little "sensory feelers" reach out of the self (the circle) into the world, hovering in space on the paper. These are the earliest drawings of head/limb people. The first awakening awareness of the limbs is shown, coming out of the head form, which sometimes has facial features. The formative forces are in the head, but children are also becoming aware of their arms and legs reaching out like the rays of the sun. Often the eyes are drawn as large circles, as if to tell us the children are taking in all the impressions of life deeply in, drinking in the world and then imitating what they have experienced.

The formative forces make their way down into the body around the age of four to six. Now the child may begin to draw the trunk in a square shape, as the formative forces graciously do their work in the middle realm of the chest. The head has a square form under it, and stick figures with arms and legs appear. Strong feelings are expressed by the child, as they open more consciously in the heart realm. As consciousness awakens in the four- to five-year-old child, the fingers may be drawn as long, long lines that reach out into the world around them. The fingers, too, are "waking up" and yearning to become active. Finger knitting, sewing, hand gesture games and other such activities are very satisfying.

Somewhere between six-and-a-half to seven years old, the child draws a triangular form. The symbol of the triangle carries profound meanings in various cultures and religions. The triangle's point reaches upward to the heavens, and the straight line on the

bottom is parallel to the earth. The drawing of the triangle is most often seen below the chest area. The formative forces now enter the metabolic region. Christhilde Blume, in her book *Young Children's Drawings As a Mirror of Development*, tells us that there is an inverted triangle in the cross-section of the colon. The triangle is also found in some of our bones, such as the shoulder blade. The spiritual formative powers have penetrated all the way into the bones, as well as all the way to the periphery of the body, the hands and feet. Again, it is remarkable to see drawings that the children are making at various stages as they become aware and draw where the formative forces are working.

Around seven years of age, the figure the child draws is on the ground, not in space; it is in gravity. This can be seen in the drawings that show the completed figure of the body. The strong, playful fantasy that was so available to the child now retreats. This is also the time when the teeth are falling out and the empty space in their mouth waits for something new. The children are ready for a new adventure in their life, once the etheric formative powers have finished this part of their task; they have individualized the physical body from the model body given by the parents. With health and full potential, the child is ready for academic learning.

These archetypal developmental forms in children's drawings are similar to each other in most parts of the world. Though there is a sequential manifestation of forms, in connection with the age of the child, some will draw certain forms earlier, others much later. Some children may not draw them at all for various reasons, though this is quite rare. Leaving all possibilities open without diagnosing is essential.

Drawings are a piece of the puzzle of development, not the whole picture. However, the more one observes children's drawings, one begins to see patterns of development. These drawings can be a helpful tool to understand the child.

In *The Education of the Child*, Rudolf Steiner describes that just as the physical body of the mother surrounds the unborn child enveloping and protecting it inside her as it develops, so it is that until about the seventh year, the child is surrounded by a second protective envelope, like an invisible kind of womb. Children's drawings show how the formative vital forces unfold and develop, from the drawings of the head all the way to the full schemata of the body, down to the feet. The mother carries the child inside her for nine months. The etheric forces transform the physical body in the first seven years of life.

The child's etheric envelope of protection in the first seven years of life is very much like the chrysalis that cradles the caterpillar, the becoming butterfly. When the time is just right and the transformation is taking place, the butterfly slowly pushes against the shell of the chrysalis with its legs and head and comes out with crumpled wings. It is well known that if a person, with all good intentions, tries to help a butterfly unfold its crumpled wings, it will not live. It takes time for the butterflies, with great effort, to use strengthening movements of their own as they pump a fluid into their wings and stretch them for a few hours before they can fly.

So it is with the protective, etheric envelope of the child in the first seven years of life. The hatching out of the etheric envelope and the transformation that the child developmentally experiences needs patience and understanding; it is a gradual process. A child's development cannot be accelerated or hurried in any way. Giving the child this opportunity is a winged gift. ♦

References

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