

understanding children's art

art professional development topic for educators

The following article and images are taken from a larger article on art education by Craig Roland, Associate Professor of Art Education at the University of Florida. [Click here to visit the site for the full article and further stages.](#)

Our schools should be places where...

'children develop an expectation that music, art, drama and dance can amuse, delight, comfort, illuminate, inform and excite'. In this professional development topic we focus on the visual arts - drawing and painting in particular.

By knowing more about young children's art we are in a better position to provide the conditions and encouragement necessary to help provide for their visual artistic development.

stages of development



- As a result of extensive research by educationalists since the early 1900's, it is generally accepted that children will progress through certain stages in their art making.
- Each stage is clearly recognisable by certain characteristics that show up time and time again in their art work.
- These stages can be linked loosely to chronological age but to do so absolutely is not appropriate as many internal and external factors can affect children's artistic development.

some generalisations



- Socio-economic factors seem to have little influence in the early stages.
- There are no discernable gender differences in the early stages.
- Drawings rather than paintings show greater development as felts, pencils and crayons are easier for young children to control than a brush.
- There is considerable overlap between developmental stages.
- If the end point is realism (there is considerable debate whether or not this is what we should be striving for) it is unlikely the child will reach this without some instruction. We cover the first three stages that we can observe in the early childhood setting.

stage one ... scribbling



- Scribbling is very pleasurable for young children. It is the act of leaving their own mark - with a pencil or crayon. It is important at this time to encourage them with the actual act of mark making. They are not trying to draw a picture but just delighting in the movement and mark making.

stage two ... pre symbolism



- Many children starting school will be at this stage. This is where circles and one or more lines are combined to represent a human figure. They may ignore things like necks, bodies, fingers, arms etc and be quite unrealistic in style. The start of pre symbolism is often called the tadpole stage.

random scribble



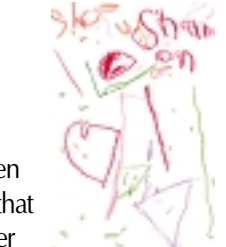
random scribble



controlled scribble



controlled scribble



- Initially a child does not recognise that there is a relationship between the marks they make and the scribble. It's just fun!
- Soon they will realise that there is a relationship between the movements they make and the marks on the paper.
- When this is discovered, you will find repeated patterns and lines starting to emerge in the scribble.
- As perception and motor skills improve, circular shapes and patterns begin to appear. Lines too are often combined with shapes making various patterns and designs.
- Look also for letter shapes - particularly those from their own name to begin to show up in the scribble.

the teachers and parents role

- Simple encouragement to scribble is often sufficient plus the sharing of the delight that the child has. The way a parent or teacher can help most is by providing the right mediums for scribbling, ie crayons, felts, ballpoint pens and pencils which young children can more easily control.
- As they gain more control, comment on ways that different movements they make can create different shapes. Help them notice the number of circles they have made or really nice lines they have made. If they start talking about their scribbles, listen carefully and ask questions to extend them, eg 'This is my mummy'. Ask questions such as where is she, and what is she doing in the picture? Show the child you value what they have done.

NB Scribble - unlike the adult connotations, should be valued.

understanding children's art



the first three stages of artistic development

two family portraits using tadpole figures



- There may be many reasons why children omit body details and experts can not agree on why. Perhaps ...
 - they may not understand how the body is organised
 - they may just put in the parts that are necessary to recognise it as a human form
 - they just use abstract shapes that are already in their repertoire of marks
- The important thing for teachers and parents to realise here is to not interpret the tadpole figures as a measure of intellectual growth.
- Teachers can help by providing experiences relating to using body parts, eg children who draw pictures without hands, arms or legs could be encouraged to kick and catch balls and then draw themselves doing it. They are then more likely to include these parts as they are a necessary part of the action.



three self portraits

- The self portraits above are typical examples of children at this stage. In two of the cases the head is larger simply because the head is very important to the child - it's where we speak and where we eat!
- Self portraits are a very important way for a child to develop good self image.
- Children at this stage are very egocentric and topics chosen for drawing that are personal to the child will motivate them to draw and paint. Topics should include the I or my
 - my family members
 - this is my house
 - these are my pets
 - I am playing a game
- The picture at right shows exaggerated legs. The action of walking is important for this child so the parts of the body will be emphasised.

my family



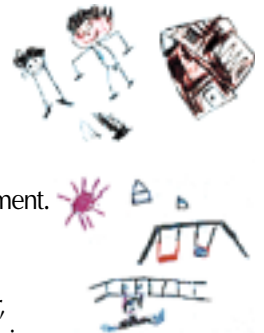
a picture of me walking



stage two ... continued



- During this stage of development, children become more and more aware of other objects and things that make up their environment.
- The thing to pick up on here is that these objects do not appear in their pictures in relationship to each other, nor are they related to each other in size. They rather just seem to be floating on the page.
- To adults, this spatial relationship appears incorrect as it doesn't use the normal 3 dimensional way that adults uses to represent spatial relationships. When you talk to the children about their art work, show you appreciate the way they have made pleasing arrangements of the objects. Even adult artists and artists from different cultures can use this two dimensional style. Remember there is no right or wrong way.



stage three ... symbolism



- At this change (approx 6-8), children have a sufficient repertoire of symbols of people and things in their environment to cover most things they want to describe visually in their art work. These include people, houses, trees, mountains.
- The important thing for adults to remember here is that these are highly individual and will differ greatly from child to child. They represent each individual child's response to the world around them. Once this symbolism is established, it will be repeated time and time again in their art works. Some children will include much detail while to others, it may not seem important and will not be included.
- We can help by providing children with experiences that encourage careful observation, eg look at and describe ...
- Another important development will be the arranging of their symbols around a baseline. Book, tv and sporting heroes will also begin to appear regularly.
- Encouragement and enjoyment of children's art is the best way we can promote this form of visual communication.

sophisticated people symbols



baseline example

