

### Use of Projective Art

There are numerous tools that can be utilized to help determine diagnoses that have the potential to have a degree of accuracy. The CHAFCA (Cline-Helding Adoption and Foster Child Assessment), the RADQ (Randolph Attachment Disorder Questionnaire), intellectual functioning tests, visual-motor tests, sentence completion exercise, etc, each provide useful information that can be used to obtain a picture of the child's functioning. Various drawing assignments are also useful – the Kinetic Family, House, Tree, and Person drawings all have the potential to yield valuable information about the inner workings of the child. Children behave the way they behave because they think the way they think. Projective art gives the therapist and parents an inside view of what is going on in the child's thought processes...inner thought processes that drive many of the child's behaviors. Through projective art the child can non-verbally express his view of the world. Others who are aware can then see where the child's view may be skewed and where it is functional.

Whole books have been written on the diagnostic principles. Those principles are presented here in a brief, outline form. The evaluator must keep in mind that potential meanings must be used in conjunction with other tests and other information to establish a pattern. The interpretation of projective art is not necessarily accurate when standing alone, but confirm or point to diagnoses under consideration. This is particularly true when working with a child who has been repeatedly exposed to projective art assignments and has learned to avoid including any elements that can be interpreted. Drawings of these children tend to have rainbows and sunny skies and present an artificially cheerful cover-up of what the child's true thoughts, perceptions and feelings may be.

In order to have any form of validity interpretations must take into account age, maturation, emotional status, social/cultural background, etc. Most suggested interpretations given have been tested with children above the age of 7. It is best to get an immediate emotional, gut level response to the entire picture before interpreting details. While there is much uniformity among experts, many interpretations will be contradictory as different interpreters sometimes assign different meanings to the same indicators. Particularly important is that the same detail may be both an overt signal or a denial of it, it may be an emphasis of a quality or a compensation for lack of it. Notice what mood or message overall is being conveyed and look for confirmation or denial in the details. Look for health as well as pathology.

The process begins with having the parents and the child come into the room. The child is told that while the therapist is speaking to the parents the child can draw. The child is told to sit in a specific spot near by and use the provided paper and crayons or markers. The child is then told that when he is done he is to sit quietly with his hands folded in order to let the therapist know he is done. The assignment is then given. Suggestions:

- Draw the reason why you are here.
- Draw the problems which caused your parents to bring you to therapy.
- Draw a car/dog (Used to establish drawing ability, attention to detail)
- Draw a tree.
- Draw a picture of your family at the table.
- Draw a picture of your family doing something together.
- Draw a house.
- Draw your family.

Draw a Person (Instruction is to draw a person as completely as possible. Used to discern how person perceives self and/or how he wants to be perceived by others)

Draw a person of the opposite sex. (Represents how the subject perceives others. Normally, the same sex figure is drawn first. Other sex first may be an indicator of homosexuality, discomfort with own sex, or primary identification with opposite sex. (except in small children who often draw women first due to identification with mother).

Draw a feeling.	Draw a difficult time.	Draw a Person in the Rain
Draw you as a baby.	Draw a future time for you	Draw an emotional heart
Draw a self portrait	Draw a problem/solution	Draw a house/tree/person

Part of the diagnosis is how the child follows through on the assigned process. Does he stay where he is told to stay? Does he interrupt? Does he ask questions when he knows the answers? Does he say he doesn't know the answer when he does? Additionally, when the child is near then the therapist can observe the artistic process while talking to the parents. What is drawn first? Does he draw quickly or slowly? Does he erase and start over? What does he erase?

After the child is done the therapist looks at the work with interest and can ask open ended questions to help elicit more information from the child about the drawings.

Tell me a story about this person. What has just happened? What will happen next?

How old is this person?

What is this person feeling?

Tell me about this person's family/mother.

The picture can then be subjected to the following general interpretive guidelines. The child should not be present when the interpretation is discussed with the parents.

## **General Considerations**

### Line Quality

Sketchy, scribbly, fine, broken lines – overt anxiety

Parts disconnected – low frustration tolerance, impulsivity

Discontinuous lines – inner conflict

Straight, uninterrupted strokes – quick, decisive, assertive

Faint – feelings of inadequacy, indecisiveness, hesitant, timid, insecure, lacks self-confidence, low level of energy, problems with self-assertion

Heavy pressure/lines – tension, high energy, forcefulness, possible acting out tendencies

### Shading – anxiety

### Erasures

Numerous – uncertainty, indecisiveness, restlessness, dissatisfied with self/efforts

Area of erasure – conflict of concern for individual

### Size in comparison to paper

Overly large – aggressive, expansive, grandiose, acting out potential, possibly compensatory for feelings of inadequacy

Overly small – hesitant to reveal feelings, restrained, inhibited, possibly depressed

### Placement

Central – normal, reasonably secure

Right – intellectualizing tendencies, sometimes to the point of inhibiting feelings, governed by here and now, reality based, identification with masculine/father side, stability

Lower right – integrating new ideas, developing, integrating

Left – impulsive behavior, immediate emotional satisfaction of needs, feminine/mother side, extroversion

Lower left – orientation towards the past, that which is unknown or the ending of some phase of life

Top – high level of aspiration, an active fantasy life, extreme optimism (often unjustified)

ungrounded in reality, fantasy as escape, unrealistically high need for achievement  
Bottom – insecurity, low levels of self-esteem, possible depression, defeated  
On bottom edge of paper – depressed, inhibition of fantasy  
Use of boxes, lines to separate areas/figures – difficulty controlling self/lives, need boundaries, without limits gets anxious, lack internal controls, separation of one area from rest of life

#### Symmetry

Extreme – rigid, stiff, lack of spontaneity of impulses/emotions, obsessive-compulsive  
Extreme asymmetrical – unbalanced, excessive impulsivity of emotions, behavior

#### Detail

Lack of – psychosomatic hypertensive conditions, depressed, withdrawn, uncaring  
Too much – obsessive-compulsive, rigidity, anxious, highly emotional or creative  
Bizarre – psychotic

Severe Distortions - confused & chaotic thinking, psychotic, schizophrenic

Obvious omissions – strong area of conflict with use of denial

#### Perspective

From below – rejection, unhappiness, inferiority, withdrawn  
From above – superiority  
In the distance – inaccessibility, desire to withdraw, area of concern but unable to handle it  
Close – accessibility, warmth

Line at the bottom – feelings of instability, trying to maintain sense of security with solid foundation

#### Process

Asks lots of questions about how to do the drawing – strong need for approval, difficulty with unstructured tasks  
Apologetic for poor artistic ability – insecure, lacks self-confidence  
Less than 1 minute to complete drawing – resistance, defensiveness, poor impulse control  
Longer than 10 minutes – obsessive-compulsive, strong need for approval  
Order of drawing – those parts generating the most anxiety will be drawn either first or last

Color – can only be interpreted if full range of colors available

Red – anger, burning problem or danger, violent, strong emotional response, sensuousness, need for warmth and affection  
Orange – extroversion, externalization, emotional responsiveness, sometimes ambivalence  
Yellow – cheerfulness, intellectualizing tendencies, uninhibited expansiveness  
Green – regulation of affect, homeostatic, healthy ego, security, peacefulness, growth  
Blue – quiet, calm, well-controlled emotions  
Pale – distance, fading away, withdrawing, cold  
Purple/violet – emotional and effective stimulation, internalization of affect, anxiety, tension  
Brown – sensuousness, security, fixation, rigidity, guilt, struggle to overcome, destructiveness  
Black – depression, suppression, cumulation of feelings, inhibition, blocking, inadequacy, projection of dark thoughts and fears  
Dark – depression  
Overabundant, bright, multiple – manic  
Light, barely visible – hide true experience, feelings

#### Person Drawings

Sequence – normally head is drawn first as that is the location of the ego. Drawing other part first makes that part of more importance.

Stick figure – evasive, insecurity

#### Caricatures

Evasive, defensive about revealing themselves, immature, hostile toward others, use humor to protect, hide from others

Profile – guarded, evasive

Sexual identification unsure

Ambivalent sexual identity

Male draws larger female – passivity, feelings of inadequacy

Female draws larger female – masculine strivings, feelings of hostility

Shading

Shading of face – poor self-concept, seriously disturbed

Shading of arms – aggressive impulses

Figure slanting > 15 degrees – instability, mental imbalance

Having essential means of communication – eyes, ears, mouth, open arms and hands

Size

Tiny – insecurity, withdrawal, depression, feelings of inadequacy, shrunken ego

Large – expansiveness, grandiose, poor inner controls

Disproportion of body parts – poor inner controls, low frustration tolerance

Transparent – immature, impulsive, acting out

Head – a strong ego will have the most details focused on the head and face

Large – preoccupation with fantasy life, focus on mental life, inflated ego, grandiose

Small – obsessive-compulsive, intellectual inadequacy

Oddly shaped – brain function is unusual or distorted

Back to viewer – paranoid/schizoid tendencies

Hat – attempt to keep a lid on, control/hide angry feelings

Hair – virile, sexual, elaborate hairdos may indicate excessive narcissism

When drawn last indicates a severe, non-specific, psychological disturbance

Face

No features – evasive, superficial, hostile, extremely cautious

Excessive detail of features – concern with outward appearances

Dimly drawn – timid, self-conscious

Strongly drawn – assertive or compensation for feelings of inadequacy

Nose – related to sexual perception, too large, too small or unusual treatment indicative of sexual difficulties, fears, sense of inferiority or impotency

Ears (prominent) – paranoid, hearing voices, sensitive to criticism

Ear phone – shutting out world, need for isolation

Mouth

Overly emphasized – immaturity, oral-aggressive, oral conflicts (eating disorder, speech problems, alcoholism)

Omitted – guilt related to oral conflict, reluctance to communicate verbally, nonverbal preferred

Very large – orally erotic

Teeth bared – aggressive, hostility, anger

Thin line – tension, hypercritical

Wide grin – forced congeniality

Eyes – express watchfulness, alertness, fear, anger, etc.

Omitted – avoidance, possible visual hallucinations so don't need external eyes

Large – visually alert, watchful, voyeuristic

Large with tiny pupils – strong curiosity, guilt

Small circles – self-absorption

Sideways glance – suspicion and paranoid tendencies

Staring, blank – fear

Emphasis on the outline of the eyes – paranoid

Neck – connection between intellectual, physical and emotional realms, link between id impulse and ego control

Emphasized – need to control threatening impulses  
Short, thick – gruff, stubborn, bullheaded  
Long – socially stiff, rigid  
Omitted – immature, trouble handling impulses rationally

#### Shoulders

Unequal – emotionally unstable  
Large – preoccupied with perceived need for strength  
Broad – aggressive, assaultive, need for physical power  
Squared – overly defended, hostile toward others

#### Arms – used to change, reach out to or control, feelings of personal power and contact with world

Stiff, close to body – rigid, compulsive, inhibited  
Limp, fimsy, stunted – inadequate, powerless, ineffective  
Reinforced, muscular – power strivings  
Folded over chest – hostile, suspicious, denial, feelings of rejection, suspicious, closed  
Held behind back – wanting to control anger, aggression, interpersonal relationships  
Omitted – inadequacy, helplessness, guilt, depression, withdrawal from environment  
Short – withdrawn, turning inward, attempt to inhibit impulses  
Long – ambition for achievement/acquisition, reaching out towards others

#### Hands

Big – acting out  
Cut off – troubled, inadequate  
Omission – guilt over hostility, sexuality  
Vaguely shaped – lack of confidence or productivity  
Heavy shading – guilt/anxiety with aggression or masturbation

#### Fingers

Long and spikelike – aggressive, hostile  
Enclosed by loop or single dimension – wish to suppress aggressive impulse

#### Trunk – associated with basic drives

Omission – severe degree of deterioration of reality, hypochondriacs  
Belt – sexual concerns/conflict, tension regarding body impulses, division of drives  
Genitalia – sexual abuse, primitive drives  
Breasts – sexual concerns, identification as sexual  
Body turned away – avoidance, guardedness, inaccessibility

#### Legs – keep people grounded, stable

Absent – constricted, possible castration anxiety  
Size difference – mixed feelings about independence  
Long – striving for autonomy  
Short – emotional immobility  
Wide stance – aggressive defiance, particularly when centered on page

#### Feet – degree of personal and interpersonal mobility

Large – sexual problems, guilt  
Long – striving for virility, security  
Tiny – dependent, blunted feelings, insecurity, ungrounded, depression  
Omitted – lack of independence, helplessness

#### Clothing

Makes figure socially acceptable, covers up nakedness, presents façade to world  
Excessive adornment – sexual provocativeness

#### Transparent (organs visible)

Delusional, schizophrenic, manic  
Sexual organ visible through clothing – voyeuristic, exhibitionistic, possible problems with sexual

identity

Cognitive Maturation – number and complexity of details/parts is indicator of mental age/IQ

Hostility & Aggression – (note number of signs and intensity) – bared lips, clenched fists, pointed teeth

Weapons, spiky hair, clawlike hands, asymmetry, crossed eyes, oversize, transparencies

Extra long arms, extra large hands

Anxiety – slanting figure, shading, short arms, arms clinging to sides, omission of hands, fingers, eyes, mouth, legs, feet, neck, small figure, excessive midline details, faint lines, scribbly

Poor Reality Testing – bizarre facial features, nonhuman like, religious/mysterious symbols, empty facial expression

**Draw a Person in the Rain** – ego strength, coping ability under stress

Umbrella, protection, shelter – competence

Unprotected – minimal self-regard, unresolved dependency issues, unable to face challenges

Partial protection – fragile defense system

Shelter visible but not being used – with for warmth and safety, view it as unattainable

**House-Tree-Person**

House is often related to mother, tree to father, person to child/self

Position – person close to house or tree, between them, separate from them, facing them, elements on same plane or foreground/background placements

Relative size – proportionate, disproportionate

Balance of overall picture

**Draw a Family** – reveals attitude toward other family members, perception of family roles and place in family. Family relationships are expressed by relative size and placement of members.

Position

Close to authority figure – close emotionally

Distant – isolated

Size – large indicates dominant role

Facial Features – as indicators of feelings toward or view of child

Omission of self – no role in family

Barrier (net, furniture) – divisiveness in family

Competitive Activity – vying for attention, love, resources in family, not enough to go around

**Draw a Kinetic Family** – Instruction is to draw the family doing something together.

Alternative: Draw a together time for your family. Draw an un-together time for your family.

Passive – lack of interpersonal communication

At a table – key is position of client at table and what is on the table

Food present – warmth, where is client in relationship to food and others

Shape of table – round is more emotionally close

Everyone is doing something different – emotionally distant and withdrawn from each other

Different treatment of one person (ex. Sitting when everyone else is standing) – something different about that member and relationship to child

Members looking at each other or away

Barrier/Wall – presence of obstacle to family unity, emotional energy blocked

Fire, light – presence of warmth unless fire has hostile presence of huge flames

**Draw a House** – interpersonal dynamics within family setting, source of affection/ security, feelings toward Mother, overall sense of complexity/warmth/sparse/ welcoming/hostile

Essentials – One door, one window, one wall, a roof, lack of essentials indicates disturbance

Irrelevant – (shrubs, flowers) need to structure environment more completely, controlling

Size

Small – withdrawal, rejection of home/home life

Large – overwhelming presence of home restricts personal growth

Chimney – a symbol of intimate relations

Absence – lacking warmth, conflicts with significant figures

Large – emphasis on sexual concerns, phallic, exhibitionistic

Billowing Smoke – inner tension, anger

Door – openness to relationships, allows direct contact with environment

Above baseline, no steps – interpersonal inaccessibility

Absence – shutting out relationships, inaccessibility

Open – able to receive warmth from external world

Large – dependent on others

Small – reluctance to make contact with world, withdrawal, fearful of relationships, timid

Locks/Hinges – defensiveness, suspicious

Peephole – paranoid, suspicious

Fence – need for boundaries, protections

Gutters – suspicious

Drawn on base of paper – basic home, intimate insecurities

Perspective

From above – rejection of home situation, looking down on it

From below – desirable home situation unattainable

Roof – fantasy area of life (bats in belfry, something wrong upstairs, few shingles loose), fantasy distorts one's mental functioning is seen in the drawing of the roof

Single line connecting two walls – unimaginative, emotionally constricted, low intelligence, concrete thinking

Large, overhanging walls – seeks satisfaction in fantasy, rich imagination preferable to reality

Lightning rod – need for structure, control to provide protection

House drawn within roof – schizophrenic

Heavy lines – seeking to control fantasy life, keeping fantasies from becoming overwhelming

Windows

Absence – hostile, withdrawing

Presentation on ground, absent on upper story – gap between reality and fantasy

Curtains – small = hominess, reserved, controlled, guarded to the extent windows are covered

Bare – blunt, direct

Shutters

Closed – defensiveness, withdrawal

Open – ability to make sensitive interpersonal adjustment

Walkway – well proportioned indicates accessibility, open to others

Very long – lessened accessibility

Narrow at house, broad at end – superficially friendly

Walls – directly related to ego strength

Crumbling – poor ego strength, disintegrating ego

Heavily drawn – hyper-vigilant to maintain ego

Weakly drawn – defeated attitude toward maintenance of ego

**Draw a Tree** – reflects deeper and more subconscious views of self, role in life, work best when compared to drawing of person (compare and contrast)

Age – (must ask client) – correlates to felt psycho-social-sexual maturity of client

Size

Large – aggressive

Tiny – inferior, feelings of insignificance

Two parallel lines and looped crown

Impulsive, variable, oppositional, negativistic, minimal

- Cooperation, just short of refusing outright to draw a tree
- Crown – representative of the spirit, intellect, imagination, conscious awareness (roof)  
 Exaggerated – analytical, inhibited emotionally, frightening/disturbing fantasy
- Branches –(arms) personality organization, ability to derive satisfaction from the environment, branching out, reaching out/up for achievement growth  
 Branches dead appearing blunt, bleak, tiny – loss of satisfaction in life, colorless, unhappy  
 Club-like, thorny, pointy – hostility, aggression  
 Open on end of branches – little control over expression of impulses  
 Broken branches – trauma, castration, impotency  
 Turned inward – egocentric, introverted, narcissistic  
 Reaching out and up – balance of reaching out toward environment and up in goals  
 Reaching toward sun – seeking warmth and affection  
 Bending away from sun – shy away from authority and domination  
 Tall, narrow, reaching more up than out – emphasis on fantasy for gratification  
 Not joined to trunk – disconnected  
 Bending back into themselves – masochistic  
 Thicker near trunk and thinning out – high ability to get satisfaction from environment
- Leaves (hands)  
 Sharply pointed – aggressive, acting out  
 Absence – barrenness, dissatisfactions  
 Too many – obsessive-compulsive
- Trunk – ego, sense of personal power/strength/integrity/self-esteem (body)  
 Short – stunted growth  
 Exaggerated – emotional immaturity  
 Heavy lines – need to keep ego intact, contained  
 Faint lines – loss of ego identity  
 Scars, knotholes, broken branch – associated w/trauma, closer to top of tree the more recent  
 Knotholes – sexual symbolism  
     Small, diamond shaped – related to vagina  
     Small, simple – sexual assault, initial sexual experience  
     Outline reinforced – shock impact greater  
     Circles inside – experience in past and healing  
     Blackened – shame associated with experience  
     Large – preoccupation with procreation  
     Small animal inside – guilt
- Roots (feet/legs)  
 Exaggerated – emotional responses shallow, reasoning limited  
 Reaching out, claw-like – grasping to take hold of reality  
 Seen through transparent ground – impairment of reality testing ability  
 None, groundline – repressed emotions
- Type  
 Fruit – sense of fulfillment, confidence in creative/procreative abilities  
     If fruit has fallen – feelings of rejection, failure  
 Foliated – precise, detail oriented, meticulous, careful, slow, reflective  
 Delineation of leaves – obsessive-compulsive  
 Winter, w/o leaves – feels exposed  
 Dead – feels victimized, powerless, hopeless, defenseless, depressed, may be suicidal  
     How did it die? – look for either internal or external force to cause death of tree, relating to either external force killing client (trauma) or internal rotting away  
 Palm – adventurous



Pine – goal-oriented, pointed toward achievement  
Abstract, fantasy – avoiding reality

### **Sources**

Using Drawings in Assessment and Therapy – Gerald Oster & Patricia Gould, 1987

Handbook of Psychological Assessment – Gary Groth-Marnat, 1984

Major Psychological Assessment Instruments – Charles Newmark, 1985