

Interpreting Children's Human Figure Drawings

Interpreting Children's Human Figure Drawings: Basic Guidelines for School Counselors

Yuehong Chen Foley • Fran Mullis

Yuehong Chen Foley, Ph.D., is a Behavior Interventionist at Cedar Hill Elementary School, Gwinnett County Public Schools in Lawrenceville, GA.

Fran Mullis, Ph.D., is Associate Professor Emerita at Georgia State University.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Maria_Chen_Foley@gwinnett.k12.ga.us, or fmullis@gsu.edu.

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Abstract

The literature was reviewed and summarized to provide common interpretations of human figure drawings. Basic guidelines for interpreting human figure drawings (i.e., face and head, body, arms and hands, and legs and feet) are presented. Expectations for students at different developmental levels (ages 1½ through adolescence) are identified, and the influence of artistic talent is discussed. Two children's drawings from case studies in a school setting are interpreted. Ethical considerations such as privacy, confidentiality, displaying drawings, and keeping drawings for documentation are summarized.

Interpreting Children's Human Figure Drawings: Basic Guidelines for School Counselors

Many counselors and psychologists believe that all people convey something of their emotional state when they draw a picture and that this information can be used in counseling. Drawings can be used in school settings with students who are struggling with normal developmental issues. Children's drawings are indicators of emotions, self-esteem, and social competence, as well as other aspects of personality (Di Leo, 1973; Malchiodi, 1998), and are a way for children to call attention to topics that are personally important or emotionally significant (Thomas & Silk, 1990).

Strong emotions emerge in the form of images instead of words (Kramer, 1973; Naumburg, 1973). Drawing

allows students to experience rather than verbalize feelings, and, therefore, may be more effective in helping children accomplish counseling goals (Withrow, 2004). Coleman and Farris-Dufrene (1996) found that children tend to be receptive to art therapy, because art is one of a child's natural ways to engage in creative self-expression, to explore conflicts, and exercise control over perceived realities (Kramer, 1979; Naumburg).

Art activities provide a safe and enjoyable means that encourage children to explore, make decisions, and solve problems (Allan, 1987), and provide a way for them to portray their inner world without having to rely on words (Gil, 2006). Kaplan (2003) and Gil suggest that although research on art-based assessments is inconsistent, drawings can help counselors increase their understanding of the client, and Carmichael (2006) states that drawings frequently are used as informal assessments for understanding children's struggles and their internal world. Drawings also can be used to help the child gain insight and to review progress through drawing records (Withrow, 2004).

When a child transfers the picture in the mind onto a piece of paper, the drawing becomes an external object that the child can use to gain control and mastery (Webb, 2004). Processing the meaning of the drawing may reinforce the child's self-exploration and motivation to change (Riley, 1994), and this effect may continue long after the counseling ends (Wadson, 1980). An effective interpretation helps the child to accept the painful thoughts and feelings and resolve internal conflicts (Whitmont, 1969), allows the counselor to tentatively

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generate hypotheses for working with the child (Furth, 2002), and facilitates collaboration between counselor and child in exploring and understanding the meaning of the drawing (Crenshaw, 2006).

When students are referred to the school counselor because they are struggling academically, personally or socially, the counselor must quickly determine what the student is experiencing and decide how best to intervene. When the specific issue underlying the concern is difficult to assess, children's drawings can be helpful in providing hypotheses. Interpretation is used only to generate hypotheses (Anatasi & Urbina, 1997; Gil, 2006; Gregory, 2000) rather than to diagnosis. As Anastasi (as quoted in Thomas & Silk, 1990) states, projective indicators such as drawings "serve best in sequential decisions, by suggesting leads for further exploration or hypotheses about the individual for subsequent verification" (p. 116).

Di Leo (1983) states that "drawings are one means of establishing a rapid, easy, pleasant rapport with the child" (p. 4). Children who are shy, quiet, impulsive, have speech and language difficulties or speak a different language from the counselor usually respond well to drawing activities (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Drawing may be especially helpful when working with children from other cultures, because it allows children to communicate with others across barriers of language and culture and helps to establish understanding between themselves and adults (Cochran, 1996; Gil & Drewes, 2005). Gil and Drewes state that art activities are especially useful for some ethnic populations that prefer metaphors and symbols over verbal communication, and for children who may not be comfortable talking about experiences because of family messages or beliefs. The act of drawing can be therapeutic even if the child does not talk about the picture. Although art in general is less limited by cultural differences between counselor and client than talk therapies and interventions, Carmichael (2006) cautions that counselors need to be aware that some religions, such as Islam, prohibit children from drawing human figures. Children from some Asian cultures are uncomfortable with drawing spontaneously and might prefer to begin by copying a drawing (Gil & Drewes). It is important to encourage children to draw without violating their cultural or religious values.

Although many school counselors have little or no training in art interpretation, they can learn basic guidelines for hypothesizing possible meanings behind what the student draws. A general understanding of the child's situation, affective expressions, and verbalizations, as well as the actual drawing, assist in making an

interpretation (Lenore, 1993). There are many types of drawings; however, only human figure drawings are discussed in this article.

Factors to Consider in Formulating Hypotheses

When making hypotheses about children's human figure drawings, there are three areas for school counselors to consider: the student's developmental level, his/her talent for drawing, and common interpretations of elements in a drawing. The drawings described for each developmental level are examples of what healthy children would draw. Counselors need to keep in mind that the developmental levels may overlap with regard to age range and that children tend to fluctuate between the stages (Malchiodi, Kim, & Choi, 2003).

Developmental Level

One and one-half years to five years. At about 18 months of age, children begin to make marks on paper. Luquet (as cited in Thomas & Silk, 1990), and Piaget (as cited in Thomas & Silk) both regarded these early scribbles as pure play and exercise, rather than attempts to draw pictures. Usually around the age of 2 or 3, this scribbling begins to be interpreted as a picture, although the child waits until the drawing is complete and then states what the drawing represents. People and animals are typically drawn using a tadpole schema, with a circle for the head or for the head and trunk, and two dangling lines for legs. Facial features and arms may be included, but the figure has the look of a tadpole. Children are unaware of color choices and typically use whatever color is close at hand (Malchiodi, 1998).

Five years to eight years. According to Luquet (as cited in Krampen, 1991) and Di Leo (1983), intellectual realism begins around 5 years of age. During this stage, children draw what they know about reality and sometimes depict the outside of a house, as well as what is inside the house, because they know that furniture and pictures are there, or they might show a person's arm even though it is hidden by the body. This type of drawing is called transparency or X-ray drawing (Di Leo, 1983; Krampen; Malchiodi, 1998) and might depict something that is not observable in the real world (Thomas & Silk, 1990) such as a bird with a worm in its stomach. Rubin (2005) states that around the time formal schooling begins, children find preferred ways of drawing things and repeat them. Children begin to connect color with what they see in the

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world around them, but it is difficult to know if the colors selected have a specific meaning, if they reflect what is seen in the environment, or if they indicate experimentation with different colors (Malchiodi).

The scaling and details of pictures become more realistic during this stage. Children typically stop drawing tadpole human figures and instead draw a head, a separate trunk, attached arms and legs, and details such as hands, fingers and clothing (Thomas & Silk, 1990). Children sometimes revert to earlier stages and in the same picture might draw one person using a tadpole schema and another using a more advanced mode of representation.

Eight years to adolescence. Luquet (as cited in Krampen, 1991) and Di Leo (1983) note that children at this stage produce visually realistic drawings which correspond to the stage of concrete operations. Children begin to use perspective and draw only what is visible from a certain point of view. For example, children would not draw the outside of a house and show furniture inside, because they know you cannot see furniture from the outside of a house. Children tend to develop rules for the use of color, such as brown or black for a tree trunk and green for the leaves. Unusual color use may have more significance at this stage than at earlier stages (Malchiodi, 1998).

Many elementary school students willingly draw pictures at the request of a school counselor or other adult. Around 10 years of age, children begin to become dissatisfied, discouraged and self-critical with their drawing attempts, probably because they are unable to draw as well as they would like (Rubin, 2005). At this time, children tend to draw cartoon or comic-strip characters, and their drawings are somewhat stereotyped, or conventional (Thomas & Silk, 1990). Middle and high school students, as well as some older elementary students, sometimes hesitate to draw because they doubt their artistic ability and are critical or self-conscious of their finished product (Van Fleet, 2004). To encourage reluctant students to draw, Van Fleet suggests that school counselors draw "goofy" art and invite the student to add to the drawing. According to Koppitz (1984), young teenagers who are language-impaired and view the visual-motor area as a strength, immature adolescents, and artistically talented adolescents continue to take pleasure in drawing. When formulating hypotheses from a student's drawing, one must consider the student's drawing talent, as well as his or her developmental stage.

Drawing Talent

Winner (as cited in Thomas & Silk, 1990), states that normal children with artistic talent advance through drawing development in the same sequence as do normal children without artistic talent, but they do so more rapidly. According to Winner, all children go through a pre-conventional stage where their drawings are simple and expressive, although artistically gifted children use fewer simple shapes and more fluid contours. After age six, all children move to a conventional drawing style. Most children do not advance beyond this stage; however, artistically talented children, she argues, continue to improve their drawing quality, usually achieving a unique style by early adolescence.

When making interpretations about a student's artwork, the school counselor must consider the overall quality of the drawing. A student who is artistic might add picture elements that would ordinarily signal a concern to be explored. For example, a student might erase and redo some parts of the drawing and or use shading and a variety of line types. In some students, this could indicate insecurities or conflicts, as discussed in the next section. For students with drawing talent, such details might not indicate a problem at all (Thomas & Silk, 1990).

Common Interpretations of Human Figure Drawings

Several researchers have suggested interpretations associated with particular body parts. In general, children typically over- or under-emphasize a body part that is of concern to them. Drawings indicate that a body part has significance for the child if it is overemphasized through enlargement, more detail, or a use of heavy lines, or if it is underemphasized by a reduction in size, little detail, or a use of faint lines.

Head and face. It is common for pre-school children to draw the head disproportionately large; however, by age 7 or 8, the head is usually drawn objectively proportionate to the body (Di Leo, 1983). Children older than 7 or 8 who draw large heads on their figures often wish they were smarter and better able to achieve (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Achievement concerns also may be indicated when figures are poorly integrated, for example, when the head does not join the body. Koppitz (1968) states that a very tiny head on a drawing points toward intense feelings of intellectual inadequacy. The mouth can reveal happiness or sadness with a smile or a frown, and emphasizing

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the mouth can indicate speech and language difficulty, or being overly dependent (Klepsch & Logie). Drawing teeth (especially if there are many pointed teeth) is a sign of aggressiveness and in some cases may indicate physical abuse (Peterson & Hardin, 1997). Timid children typically do not draw teeth. According to Koppitz (1968), however, drawing a few teeth could indicate leadership abilities rather than aggression. Klepsch and Logie also provide common interpretations for drawings of the nose, ears, and eye. Emphasizing the nose can be a sign of respiratory problems. When the ears are emphasized, a hearing problem could be present, or, if there is no hearing problem, the child may be suspicious of what others might be saying about him or her. Drawing eyes with no pupils can point to visual problems but also can suggest that the child has trouble meeting and socializing with people. According to Peterson and Hardin, drawing Xs for eyes could indicate physical abuse. Large eyes hint at suspiciousness. Adolescent girls commonly give eyes cosmetic embellishment (Di Leo, 1983).

Body. Di Leo (1983) interprets the presence of a belly button in drawings by children up to age 6 or 7 as suggesting dependency, while after age 7 a belly button may signal too much dependency on others. Drawing the person turned to the side can indicate evasiveness, and drawing sex organs can indicate aggressiveness or body anxiety (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). When genitalia are explicitly drawn, it is a strong indicator for sexual molestation. Young children tend to draw explicit genitalia, while older children conceal the genitals in order to cover up sexual abuse (Peterson & Hardin, 1997). According to Homeyer (2001), some drawings associated with sexual abuse may include, but are not limited to the following: torsos with blood running down legs, two people in bed with dots, displaced body parts, large parts of the body crossed out, and a figure with a large open mouth.

Arms and hands. According to Klepsch & Logie (1982), long or large arms imply that the child wants to control others and desires strength and power, although Koppitz (1968) states that long or large arms can signal a desire to reach out to others. Small arms, state Klepsch and Logie, point toward a fear of power or of the child seeing him/herself as weak or ineffective. Again, Koppitz takes a different view and asserts that small arms can be interpreted to mean that the child is well-behaved or withdrawn. She states that drawing arms that cling to the body often indicates that the child may have rigid inner controls and that it is difficult for the child to reach out to others; therefore, he or she may have poor interpersonal

relationships. Both Koppitz and Di Leo (1973) view big hands as indicating aggressiveness. Children who are aggressive often draw fingers that end in points and look like claws or talons.

Legs and feet. Drawing the legs close together indicates tenseness, an attempt to control sexual impulses, or a concern about a sexual attack by others (Koppitz, 1968). Koppitz reported that in her studies, several girls who had been sexually abused by older men drew people with their legs pressed together. Thomas and Silk (1990) also maintain that drawing legs pressed together is an emotional indicator. Drawing the feet very large or heavily outlined may indicate that the child seeks security or a firm footing, while tiny feet can be an indicator of feeling insecure or helpless (Klepsch & Logie, 1982).

In addition to the factors discussed previously, other indicators should be attended to when making hypotheses about a drawing. These indicators pertain to the techniques used, and the child's approach to the drawing.

Heavy lines are frequently associated with children who are aggressive, forceful, and have high energy, while light lines are often associated with shyness, inhibitions, insecurity, and low energy (Di Leo, 1983; Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Boys typically use heavier lines than girls (Klepsch & Logie). Excessive erasures (Klepsch & Logie) and shading (Di Leo, 1983; Klepsch & Logie; Koppitz, 1968) are related to anxiety, with increased shading pointing toward increased anxiety. According to Koppitz (1968), shading the face is very significant and indicates concern about the part that is shaded, but shading is age related and is fairly common up to age 8 for girls and 9 for boys; after that, shading is more likely to indicate concern for the shaded body part. Transparent body parts can suggest anxiety and concern about that body part.

Guidelines for Interpretation

Clients need a safe and private psychological environment to experience their inner emotions and resolve conflicts (Egan, 1998). Young children can be asked to tell a story about their picture; however, unless the child initiates sharing, it is important to not ask specific questions about the drawing such as "Is that you?"; rather, ask open ended questions or make statements that begin with "Tell me about ...". For counselors with a directive orientation, saying "Tell me a story about what you have drawn," or "Tell me about your picture" may elicit helpful information that leads to meaningful discussion if anything in the drawing reminds the child of something

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important in real life (Arlow & Kadis, 1993; Snyder, 1997). For counselors with a child-centered orientation, observation and empathy with an understanding of basic interpretation guidelines may be as effective.

Overall Impressions of Drawings

(Klepsch & Logie, 1982) note that "drawings represent what a person is like on the day he [sic] does the drawing" (p. 42). Keeping that admonition in mind, first consider your overall impression of the picture. Examples of overall impressions are happy/sad, friendly/unfriendly, active/passive, and strong/weak. This general impression provides an idea of the child's mood at the time the picture was drawn. Also look for themes over several drawings. If the child has drawn more than one picture, a common impression of sadness provides a stronger indication that the child feels consistently sad than does one picture. Other aspects of the drawing to consider in forming an overall impression are the use of color, the size of the people, placement on the page, especially in relationship to each other, facial expressions, and indicators of feelings in the way body parts are drawn (Furth, 2002). Furth suggests three principles in art interpretation: a) keep in mind your initial impression of a picture without sharing so as to allow the client's associations of inner world and drawings to develop, b) act as an open-minded researcher to look at focal points systematically, and c) synthesize what you have learned from individual components and assemble this information into a whole. School counselors can use these three principles to identify the focal points in the drawings and what can be learned from them. Suggestions for interpreting drawings will be discussed in the following sections.

Use of color. Developmental norms exist for the use of color in children's art as noted in an earlier section. Color has profound effects on the emotions, behavior, and body (Clark, 1975). Through the use of colors, the client can release various moods and emotions that could not be expressed by words (Withrow, 2004), thus the work in color becomes a powerful tool for emotional balance (Mahnke, 1993). According to Mahnke, the overuse of one color can lead to excessive emotional response, extreme reactions, and restlessness, whereas, the smearing and playing with bright colors enables the clients to experience various aspects of their personalities. Depressed clients use significantly fewer colors than those who are not depressed (Wadson, 1971), and children who suffered recent traumas, such as earthquake, chose more red and black

colors in drawing than others (Cotton, 1985; Gregorian, Azarian, DeMaria, & McDonald, 1996). Outgoing children often prefer warm colors like red and orange and find cool colors not stimulating enough, whereas introverts are more sensitive to cool, calming colors and report the warm colors to be distressing (Birren, 1980; Mahnke, 1993).

Although there is agreement that color is used to show feelings, mood, or tone in a drawing, there is lack of agreement on what specific colors represent (Peterson & Hardin, 1997). For example, rather than always interpreting red as standing for high emotions or danger and black as representing the unknown and fear or threat, it is more helpful to observe where color is used, its intensity and quantity, and what it is emphasizing or diminishing (Furth, as cited in Peterson & Hardin). A child might use a great quantity of black in a drawing and relate that to the sky at night, as when the family went camping and enjoyed sleeping outside. When the student chooses to share his/her own perception of a problem or solution, the school counselor may join the student in examining the harmony and balance of colors in the drawing, and support him/ her in balancing emotions and integrating solutions and problems.

Size of people. According to Di Leo (1983) and Koppitz (1968), children who draw small figures of people (about 1 to 3 inches high) frequently are timid, shy, insecure, and perhaps withdrawn, whereas drawings of very large people that take up most of the page may indicate children's aggressiveness with poor inner controls. Di Leo (1973) asserts that when children draw some people proportionately larger than others, it could connote that the larger drawn person is important to the child in some way, or it could also mean that the person is aggressive. Rezinkoff & Rezinkoff (as cited in Carmichael, 2006) studied black and white children's family drawings and found that in low-income families, the oldest child was often drawn in a more dominant position than other siblings.

Placement on the page. Placing figures at or near the lower edge of the paper may be indicative of feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and a need for support. Di Leo (1973) states that drawing figures in the upper half of the paper suggests optimism and fantasy, while drawings that slant by 15 degrees or more imply imbalance and a lack of a secure footing. Placing the figure of the person who represents the child doing the drawing close to other figures can mean that the child feels, or wants to feel, close to that person, or has a desire to be protected by that

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person (Burns & Kaufman, 1972). Hulse (1951) studied children's drawings of family and found the placement of the child in the family indicates perceived closeness to specific persons. Rezinkoff & Rezinkoff (as cited in Carmichael, 2006) found that compared to girls, boys more often placed themselves in the center of the drawing and omitted mother.

Omissions in the Drawings

The omitted elements may be quite significant to the individual in representing or symbolizing what is possibly absent from the person's life (Furth, 2002). Omissions of body parts, just like the under emphasis of body parts, tend to suggest under-use and anxiety surrounding that part of the body. Some common signs associated with the omission of a particular part of the body are described next.

Omitting the mouth on a drawing of a person may reveal problems with relating to others (Klepsch & Logie, 1982), and it may also be a sign of anxiety, insecurity, fears, and withdrawal, including passive resistance (Koppitz, 1968). Omitting the nose may signal feelings of powerlessness, shyness, or withdrawal (Di Leo, 1983; Koppitz, 1968). According to Koppitz (1968), it is rare for children to omit the eyes of the person they are drawing. Children who omitted the eyes tended to be nonaggressive, social isolates that denied their problems and used fantasy as an escape. Stone and Ansbacher (as cited in Koppitz, 1968) found a relationship between the omission of eyes and other organs of communication that suggested a lack of social interest (caring, or concern about others).

By age 10, more than 90% of children draw arms on human figures; therefore, the omission of arms is more significant for children 10 years and older than for children under the age of 5 or 6, who frequently omit arms (Di Leo, 1983; Silk & Thomas, 1990). For children over the age of 6, and certainly for children over the age of 10, omitting the arms is significant and may mean they feel a lack of power and feel ineffective (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Omitting the hands implies insecurity and problems in dealing with home, school, and people (Klepsch & Logie). Omitting the legs on a figure implies a lack of support, and immobility (Klepsch & Logie), insecurity, and anxiousness (Koppitz, 1968). Omitting feet on a figure typically signals that the child lacks security or feels helpless (Di Leo, 1973; Klepsch & Logie; Koppitz, 1968).

Two Case Studies

The following two drawings were from individual counseling sessions in 2005, and are presented here with parental permission. In one of the initial sessions, the child decided to draw and picked the paper and crayon from among a variety of choices. The school counselor instructed the student, "Could you draw a house, a tree, and a person?" After drawing, the child voluntarily shared that "the person in the picture is me," talked about the picture, and asked the school counselor to keep the picture. The school counselor used information from the drawing, along with observations of the child's verbalization and play, and the parents' and teachers' report, to generate a hypothesis and to plan interventions.

Figure 1 was drawn by a 7 year-old African-American/Caucasian biracial girl who lost her mother at the age of 4 and who now lives with her grandmother and uncle. According to the grandmother, this child experienced some interpersonal traumas before school age and was in constant fear that her grandmother would die. She refused to sleep alone and always shared the bed with her grandmother. In kindergarten she began to struggle academically, socially, and emotionally. She acted anxious and overwhelmed and repeatedly stated that she hated attending school. She would not do any writing assignments at school nor would she do any homework until the grandmother sat nearby to help. Her frequent crying, screaming, and refusal to follow directions caused disruption in the classroom and led her to multiple discipline referrals. In the picture we see a smiling girl in between a house and a tree. In reality she received a lot of support from her grandmother and uncle, signified by the house and the tree. The mixed feelings of happiness, loneliness, inadequacy, and insecurity were implied in her drawing. Overall, the person seemed lonely in the picture, although the warm color (purple) indicates a happy mood. She said she felt happy staying in the playroom and complained about her lack of control over her crying, lack of friends in her class, and inability to manage the work. The small size of the person suggests some insecurity and timidity; the figure's large head and small body tends to suggest her wish to be more important and better able to achieve (Di Leo, 1983; Klepsch & Logie, 1982; Koppitz, 1968). The special attention to the hair curling suggests her need to be cared for and her desire to be good looking. In actuality she was often eager to show the school counselor her nice clothes and her different hair styles in the early mornings. Notice the stick-like arms, the omission of nose, ears, hands, and feet, and the heavy shading in the

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torso. Each of them implies the lack of security and social interest as well as communication difficulties (Di Leo, 1973; Klepsch & Logie; Koppitz). When synthesized, the information revealed in the drawing shows a general feeling of helplessness and anxiety and a need to feel important and connected to others. To improve her self-confidence and self-control, in the first 2 months, the school counselor focused on using encouragement and empathy skills with her in individual play therapy sessions and then placed her in peer group counseling sessions with a focus on practicing social skills. In the third and fourth month, the school counselor consulted with the grandmother on using encouragement, empathy, and logical consequences at home, and collaborated with the teacher in designing strategies to support the student's efforts in building friendships in class. The grandmother reported that the child started sleeping and getting up independently, becoming excited to come to school, initiating homework and appropriately solving problems with the neighborhood children. Her discipline referrals decreased significantly at school, and her behaviors significantly improved to the present.

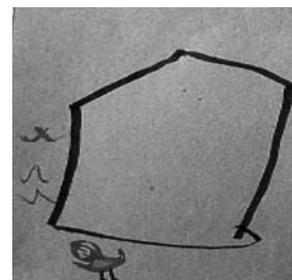
Children draw not only to indicate personally important or emotionally significant information (Thomas & Silk, 1990) but also to verbalize the meaning of their drawing. Figure 2 was drawn by a 5-year old Caucasian girl. The mother addressed her as "baby" and shared that she received special privileges without taking much responsibility because she is the youngest of three siblings in the family. She received multiple discipline referrals because she refused to follow the teacher's directions, withdrew from work assignments, and threw temper tantrums when things did not go her way. It seems she enjoyed the special privileges as a baby but the loss of such a special position in the Kindergarten classroom resulted in her feeling lonely and unhappy: "This is me in Pre-K. I am happy. But not any more in Kindergarten now." Although she stated the picture depicted her during Pre-K, it implied personally important information about her functioning at the time of drawing. Overall, the person seemed happy but inadequate in the picture. The warm color (orange) indicates a happy mood and an outgoing tendency; however, the small size of the person suggests some insecurity and timidity, and the placement on the lower left edge with a slant implies feelings of inadequacy, imbalance, and a lack of secure footing (Di Leo, 1973). The emphasis on the mouth suggests the need for support, and the large head a wish that she were smarter and more important (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). In the play therapy sessions, the child consistently verbalized that family

members liked her more when she was speaking and acting like a baby, but she also complained about being treated like a baby and not as an important person. She stated that her classmates teased her about speaking and acting like a baby and refused to play with her. The omission of nose and ears indicates feelings of powerlessness and difficulty in communicating with others (Di Leo, 1983; Koppitz, 1968). She verbalized that acting like a baby was an important method in gaining personal significance at home, but this behavior led to teasing by classmates at school and she felt unsure how to cope with this change. She expressed her unhappiness verbally and gained some control over this feeling by drawing it on paper. To support her in coping with this transition, the school counselor discussed with the child several ways to build her importance in the classroom and at home (e.g., talk in normal voice instead of baby voice, work quietly, help self and others to organize materials) and followed up with her by visiting her class during recess and bus-call times. In the individual play sessions, the school counselor focused on encouraging her efforts in self-care, self-responsibility, and respecting the limits. In demonstrating to the mother how to conduct play sessions, the school counselor focused on supporting the mother in effectively setting limits, providing encouragement, and returning responsibility to the child instead of doing for the child what the child could do for herself. The school counselor also offered one paraprofessional from the child's class strategies to use in the classroom that encouraged the child in continuing positive efforts and provided immediate feedback for misbehaviors. During the 14 weeks of intervention, the child made significant behavioral and relational adjustments and became more confident and cooperative both in school and at home. Her positive behaviors continued throughout the Kindergarten year and into first grade even after the intervention terminated.

Figure 1



Figure 2



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Ethical Considerations

Most school counselors are not art therapists, and making a decision about a student based solely on an interpretation of a student's drawing approaches the boundaries of professional competence. However, school counselors can be trained to understand the basic themes of children's art and can use the drawing as one piece of projective information in case conceptualization. Interpretations may, in some cases, signal the need for a referral to a community-based practitioner. Students who use drawing as a major communication tool may be referred to an art therapist or therapists with a specialty in color and drawings, for example. School counselors must keep in mind other ethical issues concerning drawings made by students.

The Ethical Standards for School Counselors (American School Counselor Association, 2004) do not address the use of art. The American Counseling Association (2005) *Code of Ethics* addresses the use of art with regard to storage and disposal of artistic documents and, in both areas, states that client consent should be obtained with regard to handling of these documents. Both ethical codes address confidentiality and privacy. Confidentiality is honored, within limits, for any verbal communication between school counselors and their clients, and privacy issues are considered when talking to students. Hammond and Gantt (1998) posit that artwork is symbolic speech and should be given the same protection as verbal communication. If school counselors use drawings to help them better understand a student, they argue, this protection should be extended to the student's artwork. This means school counselors would not show a student's drawing to others in the school, but would only verbally describe the work to someone who has a valid interest in the student.

If a student's drawing suggests that he or she may be suicidal, violent toward others, or may be the victim of abuse, the drawing should be kept for documentation, along with records of other school counselor actions taken. In this case, it would be helpful to show the picture to referral sources. If the student wants to keep the picture, the school counselor could ask permission to photograph it (Hammond & Gantt, 1998).

Young children often ask the school counselor to display their pictures. If the school counselor requests a drawing to gain useful hypotheses or information to be used in counseling, displaying the picture would be a violation of confidentiality. Displaying pictures initiated by the

child may not be a breach of confidentiality, although school counselors must use their judgment about what is appropriate to display and what could be regarded as a breach of the student's right to privacy and confidentiality. If school counselors believe it would be inappropriate to honor a student's request to display a picture because of confidentiality issues, they could tell the student that they will keep that picture in a special place but would like for the student to draw a different picture to display.

Conclusion

Children's drawings can be used by school counselors in many ways. Through the use of drawings, school counselors can build rapport with students, observe and listen to their thoughts and feelings, discuss important issues, design interventions as appropriate, and refer students to community resources if necessary. Differences in interpretation guidelines emphasize the importance of formulating hypotheses rather than making hard and fast conclusions about a drawing. Cultural factors must also be considered.

To develop expertise in the use of art as a means for personal and professional growth, school counselors can begin with references listed in the reference section at the end of this article, attend workshops about art therapy, and explore techniques that are most useful across cultures.

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