Drawing Development in Children

Adapted from the work of Viktor Lowenfeld & Betty Edwards.

CREATIVE AND MENTAL GROWTH, Viktor Lowenfeld, Macmillan Co., New York, 1947
The Scribbling Stage

Age: 2 years

Characteristics:
First disordered scribbles are simply records of enjoyable kinesthetic activity, not attempts at portraying the visual world. After six months of scribbling, marks are more orderly as children become more engrossed. Soon they begin to name scribbles, an important milestone in development.

Random scribbles begin at age one-and-a-half, but quite quickly take on definite shapes. Circular movement is first because it is most natural anatomically.
The Scribbling Stage

Examples:
The Preschematic Stage

Age: 3 - 4 years

Characteristics:
First conscious creation of form occurs around age three and provides a tangible record of the child's thinking process. The first representational attempt is a person, usually with circle for head and two vertical lines for legs. Later other forms develop, clearly recognizable and often quite complex. Children continually search for new concepts so symbols constantly change.

At four or five, the child begins to tell stories or work out problems with her drawings, changing basic forms as needed to express meaning. Often once the problem is expressed, the child feels better able to cope with it.
The Preschematic Stage

Examples:
The Schematic Stage

Age: 5 - 6 years

Characteristics:
The child arrives at a "schema," a definite way of portraying an object, although it will be modified when he needs to portray something important. The schema represents the child's active knowledge of the subject. At this stage, there is definite order in space relationships: everything sits on the base line.

By five or six, children develop a set of symbols to create a landscape that eventually becomes a single variation repeated endlessly. A blue line and sun at the top of the page and a green line at the bottom become symbolic representations of the sky and ground. Landscapes are composed carefully, giving the impression that removing any single form would throw off the balance of the whole picture.
The Schematic Stage

Examples:
The Gang Stage
(The Dawning Realism)

Age: 7 - 10 years

Characteristics:
The child finds that schematic generalization no longer suffices to express reality. This dawning of how things really look is usually expressed with more detail for individual parts, but is far from naturalism in drawing. Space is discovered and depicted with overlapping objects in drawings and a horizon line rather than a base line. Children begin to compare their work and become more critical of it. While they are more independent of adults, they are more anxious to conform to their peers.

At nine or ten years, children try for more detail, hoping to achieve greater realism, a prized goal. Concern for where things are in their drawings is replaced by concern for how things look—particularly tanks, dinosaurs, super heroes, etc. for boys; models, horses, landscapes, etc. for girls.

The passion for realism is in full bloom. When drawings do not "come out right" (look real) they seek help to resolve conflict between how the subject looks and previously stored information that prevents their seeing the object as it really looks. Children struggle with perspective, foreshortening, and similar spatial issues as they learn how to see.
The Gang Stage

Examples:
The Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage
(The Crisis Period)

Age: 11 - 13 years

Characteristics:
This stage marks the end of art as spontaneous activity as children are increasingly critical of their drawings. The focus is now on the end product as they strive to create "adult-like" naturalistic drawings. Light and shadow, folds, and motion are observed with mixed success, translated to paper. Space is depicted as three-dimensional by diminishing the size of objects that are further away.

The beginning of adolescence marks the end of artistic development among most children, due to frustration at "getting things right." Those who do manage to weather the crisis and learn the "secret" of drawing will become absorbed in it. Edwards believes that proper teaching methods will help children learn to see and draw and prevent this crisis.
The Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage
(The Crisis Period)

Examples:
Age: 14 years and older

Characteristics:
Art at this stage of life is something to be done or left alone. **Natural development will cease unless a conscious decision is made to improve drawing skills. Students are critically aware of the immaturity of their drawing and are easily discouraged.** Lowenfeld's solution is to enlarge their concept of adult art to **include non-representational art and art occupations besides painting** (architecture, interior design, handcrafts, etc.)
The Period of Decision

Examples:
How we can support children

**Scribble Stage (2 years)**: Give toddlers ample opportunities to make marks with a variety of easily-grasped tools. Use colorful materials and introduce papers with a range of textures.

**Preschematic Stage (3 - 4 years)**: Ask children to explain their drawings and tell the stories that spring from their work. Avoid guessing what symbols may be; ask and listen.

**Schematic Stage (5 - 6 years)**: Discuss basic atmospheric perspective and overlapping to enhance an understanding of spatial relationships. Simple figure drawing increases awareness of all the parts of the body to be drawn. Continue to invite children to tell stories and talk about their work.
How we can support children

**Gang Stage (7 - 10 years):** Introduce techniques to simplify complex forms for drawing, such as finding basic geometric shapes in objects. Explore one-point perspective to continue growth with spatial relationships. Encourage experimentation with abstract (non-objective) drawing to increase the scope of art awareness. Practice shading, anatomy, and simple composition.

**Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage (11 - 13 years):** Balance observational drawing with art based in meaning. Show artwork where the outward appearance is secondary to the emotional response or message sent to the viewer. Continue to practice perspective, shading, anatomy and composition as well as color theory.

**Period of Decision (14 and older):** Encourage artistic prompts that are inspired by emotions. Study work of master artists to experience a vast range of styles and techniques that can be mimicked and added to a child’s “toolbelt of skills.”