The Complete Guide to Children's Drawings

A Practical Handbook to Children's Emotional World

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Chapter 8: Social Functioning

The issue of children's social functioning preoccupies many parents. Social abilities and skills are some of the most common subjects assessed through drawings. Perhaps one of the reasons for that is because drawings enable parents to understand what their child is actually experiencing behind the kindergarten or school gate, just after they go to work and for hours thereafter. Assessing social skills is critical because most early childhood experiences – including learning experiences – are social experiences based on peer group contacts. In those contacts, the child learns about himself and his environment more than in any social contact with adults or books.

Cultural differences aside, it is obvious that parents throughout the world are busy asking themselves the same questions (albeit with varying intensity): Who are my boy's friends? Why is my daughter unpopular? Why does my boy hang out with the class bully? And above all – What is the relationship between social status, academic success and self-image?

The objective of interpreting children's drawings in this context is to complete the puzzle of the child's inner world, starting from the assumption that social conduct is intimately related to the child's overall subjective experience. According to Adler (Dreikurs 2000), for example, social conduct is the starting point of our entire personality structure. According to Adler, human beings are social creatures seeking to belong – when we experience a sense of belonging to society, we structure our entire personality and belief system around it. Thus, diagnosing children's drawings can help us understand how they experience their social environment and thereby understand how it affects his beliefs, perceptions and personality.

Popularity

Many people approach me for consulting after finding out that their child is not as socially popular as they thought. They may find their child charming, cute and smart, but kindergarten reality is slightly different. The child's peers have failed to be impressed with his qualities. One day, this wonderful, talented child comes home with a sad face and a voice choking on tears, saying: "They told me I'm stupid... and that they don’t wanna play with me... they keep bullying me, and-and... I have no friends!" The parent stares at him, trying to take in the bad news, feeling the pain of rejection together with his child. Often this pain is familiar to the parent from his own childhood, and he now re-experiences it. So he thinks along the lines of: "I have
to teach him how to manage... I won't have them tell him things like that! Who are they anyway? How can I turn him into the most popular kid in the 'hood?"

Social popularity and belonging are significant in every child's life. Children naturally want to belong to society, contribute to it and express themselves uniquely. There are many ways of doing so, and every child tries several paths, some more successful than others. The social contacts the child forms with his peers, as well as his family members, contribute considerably to his personal development, and in the future shape his conduct as an adult member of society (Shapiro 1998).

Naturally, it is important for parents to help their child make his first steps outside the family greenhouse. How can this be accomplished? For some parents, popularity means the ability to stand out. They will encourage their child to demonstrate their skills at any opportunity. Such children's drawings will often reflect this parental tendency, such that they will continue emphasizing their skills, as though these constitute their entire personality rather than just one aspect of it, even at the cost of detracting from their spontaneous and free expression. For example, a girl to whom belonging means occupying center stage and being admired by everyone around her may often choose to draw herself as a dancer, actor, etc. Talent will become her "calling card" – her gate to belonging. Accordingly, she will never draw herself in plain clothes that are not directly associated with her unique talent.

Obviously, standing out is not always the best way to achieve social popularity – all too often, it makes the child different and separate from the others. This does not mean that children have to be mediocre and talentless to become popular, but that children who always seek to stand out and require children around them to be their cheering audience will often find it hard to win their heartfelt sympathy. Moreover, parents who stress the child's uniqueness in order to resolve various social issues, and tend to interpret the rejection experienced by their child as envy (because he's so much smarter or richer than the others) may end up perpetuating the child's experience of being different, and thus rejected and unlovable.

Conversely, many parents think social popularity means getting along with all children without any fights. When disagreements arise, they immediately teach their child to give up and to empathize with the other, saying things like: "He didn’t mean it, you must share..." Upon hearing that, many children tend to react by experiencing social encounters as unpleasant and develop resistance to them. On the other hand, some parents encourage their children never to give up, never be "losers", while reporting their own success using various "wartime tactics" that used to work for them as children. Be that as it may, the question arises – Should the child follow in his parents' footsteps to become popular, or should he find his own way?

In order to assist in their child's social adjustment, the parents are required to intervene in a highly focused way. Psychological studies based on observations of parents to more and less
popular children found that the former tend to encourage their children to join in social games, while mirroring the others' perspective for them, but stop intervening once the child joins in (Duke 1996). On the other hand, parents of less popular children tended to intervene more intensively, by stopping the game, announcing their child's agreement to join in, and acting as referees.

Aged 8 years and four months, the girl who made the following drawing likes to spend time with her classmates. Her drawing style is unique, attesting to her independent ability to function socially and understand the social map. In her drawings, she makes a point not to copy subjects and techniques from her friend, but to focus on her own work and develop independent techniques as she goes along. In other words, while drawing she remains very attentive to all that is going on around her, but never at the expense of maintaining a unique approach to her drawing.

![Figure 8-1: Independent and unique drawing style](image1)

In order to effectively integrate in her peer group, she manages to adjust herself to the social situation (by taking part in social games, for example). In her drawings, this is evident in the flexible and soft – but not too soft – lines. This line style demonstrates that she can stand up for herself and get what she wants, so that integrating in the group does not come at the expense of her own desires.

For a child to develop from a popular child to a popular leader, he needs to be skilled in keeping several children together, in other words, the ability to achieve interpersonal integration. The drawing above is also characterized by diverse and original relationships among the various figures shown, indicating ability to forge fruitful contacts. On the other hand, it is important to see how the child connects the various figures and objects in his drawings. Are those relationships productive and original? Or are they banal, without adding any meaning to the drawing?

![Figure 8-2: Banal relationship that adds no meaning to the drawing](image2)
In most cases, children who form multiple but rather banal relationships between the various objects and figures in their drawings will also tend not to take the initiative in social situations, but tag along. This means they may require safer playing environments, so that they would prefer inviting their friends over, where everything is safe and familiar. Later on, after their social skill develops further, some children will change this pattern and come to enjoy diverse playing environment, and this will be seen in their drawings, which will also become diverse in terms of subjects and general use of line, color and movement.

To return to the first drawing (Figure 8-1), you can also see an effort to make the drawing more intelligible, in that she adds a title to it, as well as explanatory signs to prevent misunderstandings. These add-ons, apart from being age-appropriate, are directly related to the drawing child's need to be understood by others, and of course to her social experience.

Another example is the drawing seen below. The 7½ year-old who made it loves initiating social encounters, and this is evident in the combination of the multiple subjects into a dynamic and fascinating plot. Each part of her drawing includes several elements that are originally and uniquely interrelated.

For example, the laundry line which connects the house with the swing poles, also used for hanging a pair of glasses. She takes the page boundaries into due consideration and seems to draw enormous pleasure from the process itself, rather than just the outcome.

*Figure 8-3: Combining multiple elements*

Another way of achieving popularity is pleasing an authority figure such as a kindergarten or school teacher. This helps the child socially, particularly in kindergarten and the lower classes. Later, this approach is liable to become irrelevant and even detrimental.

Children who seek to please in kindergarten make efforts to become the teacher's favorite, thereby attaining a powerful position through positive reinforcements from the most significant authority figure around.
To do so, they adjust to her demands, sometimes at the expense of true self-expression. They cater to her every whim, paying particular attention to how they do things, and need her to appreciate the outcome of everything they do. Their drawings will be characterized by the absence of a unique personal style, and a tendency to follow orders to the letter (in extreme cases, such children will also ask for help in choosing colors). The outcome will be a rigid drawing, with the artist demanding to know what everyone around him thinks of it.

![Rigid and banal drawing by a dependent child](image)

The definition of social popularity varies with culture, as indicated by the interactions children from different cultures create among the various figures in their drawings. In cultures which attach great importance to social contacts, children tend to draw the figures closer to one another, while in cultures in which children stress good manners and social distance, the drawn figures will be physically more distant from one another (Cox et al. 2001).

**Social Rejection**

Many children seem not to want to be popular and not take any part in social play. Psychologically, this is often perceived as an indication to their fear of making contact, which prevents them from daring and taking positive steps to promote their social integration.

Such children are known to be shy from an early age, and to be relatively fearful of strangers. They would rather not experience anything new, including in artwork and drawings in particular. Their drawings will sometimes be characterized by thin lines and weak pressure on the drawing tool, but only when they are shy and find it difficult to express themselves beyond the narrow social circle of their kindergarten or class.

When a child feels socially rejected or finds it difficult to adjust to and communicate with his peers, this may be for many reasons, including learning difficulties and various physical disabilities, as well as personal issues such as low self-esteem, difficulty expressing himself confidently, family issues, etc. Physical appearance can also affect the ability to adjust, as well as various behaviors acquired in the family system (such as overindulgence) which can make it difficult for the child to manage in peer society, and may even be rebuked in kindergarten.
Such children's drawings will include various indications of their distress due to their difficulty dealing with social realities. Their drawings will also bear marks of complex emotional coping, particularly in terms of color combinations and line qualities (shaky, disjointed or varying line). Social rejection is also liable to undermine self-confidence, and consequently the desire to draw and create in general. In such cases, children feel that what they do does not promote them and therefore lose interest in doing, and in more extreme cases, lose confidence in their abilities.

In my work I have often analyzed children's drawings of social groups or families. I have noticed that when children feel popular, they tend to emphasize the similarities between them and the other figures in such drawings. Conversely, when they feel rejected, they tend to emphasize their uniqueness compared to the others.

The following drawing by a 7½ year-old illustrates the feeling of being socially rejected. Together with other drawings by the same boy, it sheds light on a painful personal world. Here, the flowers do not blossom, the sun is tiny and distant, not giving warmth, and there is no relationship among the various objects. Collectively, the drawings shown to me seemed to indicate significant trauma experienced by this boy at a tender age, which had made him lose trust in all adults around him. I therefore referred him to art therapy and thanks to the emotional process he underwent, he also found himself able to express his feelings through drawing.

![Figure 8-5: A sense of distance and alienation indicative of early trauma](image)

**Social Anxiety Disorder**

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is common among adults, teenagers and children (mostly girls). Children with SAD experience disquiet and discomfort in a wide variety of situations related to interaction with others. The main difficulty often has to do with the fear of occupying the center of attention, including sometimes the difficulty of even asking for help, staying in another child's house, talk in class, etc. Such children may have a rich inner world, they may know the answer to the teacher's questions, but do not dare speak up. For these children, any social occasion, any birthday or class party, is a stressful and threatening event.
Some make the mistake of treating these children as introverted and shy, but for the children themselves this is not a desirable condition that corresponds to their general mood, but more in the way of "still waters run deep". In other words, to them, what is perceived as shyness is forced withdrawal and they experience it as failure rather than a constructive solution – failure coping with their social anxiety. When they do have to face this anxiety they respond with a variety of somatic symptoms such as excessive perspiration, blushing, hyperventilation and tachycardia, dizziness, stomach ache and paralysis, as well as temper tantrums. About half the children diagnosed with SAD will suffer from *generalized* social anxiety disorder, while the rest will react adversely mainly to a *specific* stimulus such as having to read aloud in front of an audience (non-generalized SAD).

The parents of the six year-old who made the following drawings asked me to diagnose her drawings because they felt she had social difficulties. After analyzing the drawings, I held guidance meetings with the parents, later followed by regular emotional treatment for the child. Initially, the drawings clearly indicated her social difficulties. As seen in the representative example below, she drew an almost totally deserted playground: the slide and seesaw at the center are unused, while the human figure to the right is drawn with a large mouth, giving the impression of a sealed mouth more of a mouth that can speak. As I have already explained, one indication of social popularity is human interactions within the drawing itself. As you can see, in this drawing each element is completely isolated and unrelated to the others.

*Figure 8-6: Limited interactions between elements indicating unpopularity*

The next drawing also represents her style upon arriving for treatment: the human figures are colored in a stormy and disquiet line, body boundaries are often exceeded, the legs are drawn in a thin and shaky line, and some facial organs have been omitted from the figures to the extreme right and left.

*Figure 8-7: Thin and shaky line and exceeding body boundaries indicating social difficulty*
This drawing style, combined with the social trends indicated by the previous drawing, suggested a key diagnostic conclusion: this girl is experiencing major social difficulty, and consequently lashes out at others and experiences bona fide anxiety when interacting with her peers.

My conversation with the parents after the diagnosis supported my conclusions: over the past two years, when their daughter was at kindergarten, she would not come out to play. In the afternoons, when her parents took her to the playground, she would not approach other children from her kindergarten, but stand frozen next to them. At home, her parents had to cope with extreme temper tantrums which included throwing objects. After several talks, the parents and I decided to start weekly emotional therapy with their daughter. In those sessions, this girl brought contents from her inner world to the therapy room and together we worked through the difficulties she presented. The drawing on the left is from the midst of the therapeutic process, and is typical of drawings in such stages. The line quality is calmer, and she allows herself to add creative decorative elements. In other drawings made during therapy, she also allowed herself to invent and create, and thus be occupied with her subjective uniqueness more than with what her social environment expects of her.

Figure 8-8: During therapy: rigid drawing, albeit with slight signs of improvement

This drawing was made at the end of the therapy process. By this point, the girl’s kindergarten teacher reported that she agreed to go outside and play together with the other children.

Figure 8-9: At the end of therapy: improved social integration

The parents also reported that her temper tantrums subsided and that when they did occur, they were not as prolonged and intense as before.

Note how compared to her first drawing (Figure 8-6), the playground became filled with children, each drawn differently with his or her unique look (hair color, clothing and handheld
object). Also, the human figures are drawn in a more clearly specified environment and no expressive organs such as eyes or mouth are omitted. Accordingly, at the end of therapy, the girl reported that she made new friends and that she enjoyed spending time with them.

The following case is more subtle, although also representative of many children. The 5½-year-old girl who made the next drawing refused to go to her friends' houses, but was willing to host them. Her parents wanted me to use her drawings to find out the source of this difficulty, and how she could be helped. Interestingly, I could see in her drawings many indications of well-developed social skills – primarily their high quality and rich detailing, as seen in the house drawing to the left below.

Figures 8-10 & 11: Richness indicating good social skills vs. cautious style indicating social caution

Another indication, which represents her persistence and seriousness, is the caution and precision with which she drew, as in the drawing to the right above. This indication points to the reason why she behaved the way her mother described – it was very important to her to be in control. Her drawings were painstakingly precise, and she wanted to excel in drawing and was willing to make the effort required. Due to this character trait, it was more convenient for her to play host. Perhaps this was less convenient for her parents, but for her it ensured the degree of control she needed. When she was the host, she could call the shots, she knew all the toys well, and whenever a fight would break out she knew her mother was around so that she was not dependent on another parent's judgment.

Since her drawings did indicate well-developed social skills, I recommended to the family not to intervene too much in her conduct. She had no extraordinary social difficulties requiring guidance or therapy, and I therefore advised her parents to wait patiently until she rid herself of the habit.
Having said that I did ask them to look into some issues, in order to see whether the source of their daughter's habit lay in her personality, or in the environment, such as in some parental pattern. First, I asked them to check how they intervened during fights between their daughter and her guests. Perhaps her need to host was due to her dependency on the parent's style – for example, the fact that her mother would immediately come over and take care of everything. When she was at another girl's house, perhaps the parents there would respond differently, making her feel less protected. In this regard, I recommended that they help her acquire some social skills. Most likely, she had the requisite skills, as evidenced in her drawings, but perhaps the parental pattern at home did not allow her natural skills to be fully expressed.

Second, I asked the parents to see what girls she hosted. Were these girls that she felt more "appropriate" to host in a familiar environment? Perhaps these girls acted domineeringly towards her, and therefore had to be hosted on the home turf, where she had the upper hand. This is a critical point relevant to many cases of social difficulties in childhood, particularly because in kindergarten the territory belongs to everyone and there is one teacher, while at home the boundaries are usually less clearly drawn.

Last but not least, I implored the parents to support, encourage and mirror. I instructed them to talk to their daughter about her need to host rather than be hosted, to show her that they were aware of that need, and that they could listen to her. In time, a child with social skills as developed as hers will surely manage to attenuate her need for control so as to better deal with uncertain situations.

One of the most interesting things about children's drawings is that the change is often indicated on the page before it appears in real life. It seems that children find it is more appropriate to for them to express the transformation they are undergoing in a nonverbal manner, and only later express it in words and conduct. This was also true in the case of this 5½ year-old. When the change occurred, it was first noticeable in her drawings, primarily through two main indicators: her drawing line became more flexible, and the coloring, although still very precise, could slip now and then as she allowed herself to express herself more freely, less cautiously. At the same time, her parents began noticing that she agreed to be hosted by some of her friends, so that her social conduct became more balanced.

Figure 8-12: Social transformation prefigured by flexible line with occasional glitches
Aggression and Violence

Children's aggression is one of the most complex behaviors a parent is required to face. First of all, it makes many parents feel as though they have failed as educators. They stand abashed in front of the kindergarten or school teacher and other parents, and find it hard to understand how their child could have stooped so low.

Other parents find themselves responding aggressively to their children's aggression, using either verbal or physical violence themselves.

Still other parents find themselves at an educational dead end: they communicate contradictory and confusing messages about how the child should behave in confrontations with other children, such as: "You must not be violent, but if others hit you – hit them back!" This makes many children feel very confused. In response to such contradictory messages, some of them begin to "tell on" others consistently, which makes their peers see them as squealers, which often exacerbates their social situation.

There may be several possible reasons for overt aggression by children:

1. **Age-appropriate aggression.** Many children aged 1-3 will beat, bite, or push others. At these ages, children are in the midst of the egocentric stage, and are very possessive about their toys.
   As far as they are concerned, there is no reason for any toy to be taken away from them, and the end justifies the means. At this point in their psychological development, their drawings are largely characterized by scribbles, and as these scribbles progress, so do their social cognition and experience, causing their aggression to subside in favor of new negotiation tactics.

![Figure 8-13: Scribble indicating age-appropriate aggression](image)

2. **Aggression as a socialization strategy.** In this case, the child realizes that using aggression he can improve his social status. Accordingly, as in the next example, such a child's drawings will be characterized by aggressive and even violent trends, such as intense pressure on the drawing tool and stormy, disquiet movement on the page.
When analyzing such drawings it is important to check whether this child used to draw this way prior to becoming part of a peer society or started doing so as a result of his new (false) insight.

Figure 8-14: Intense pressure and stormy movement

3. **Aggression due to frustration and low self-image.** As the saying goes, "there are no bad boys, only boys yet unreached". Aggression in these cases is better seen as a sign of distress. In these children's drawings, beyond classic indications of aggression, you also see motifs related to low self-image and feelings of frustration and helplessness. This is illustrated by the next drawing, where the figures are drawn in a weak and fluttering line and they are relatively thin, somewhat fragile and marginal compared to the rest of the elements in the drawing, which are made with a high pressure, rigid line and dominant presence on the page.

Figure 8-15: Figures drawn with weak pressure

4. **Aggression due to family stress.** In this case, aggression is specific to a certain time and place, and follows upon negative life events such as death, disease, divorce or alternatively, momentous events such as the birth of a new sibling that may be perceived as negative in the short term. In such cases, family drawings in particular may shed light on the cause of aggression. The drawing shown here, for example, was made in the midst of a prolonged and difficult divorce process. The father is drawn to the right and the mother to the left, separated by a large Star of David. The father is drawn with arms, while the mother is armless. Interpreting this drawing helped me pinpoint their son's aggression as directly related to the overt and covert conflicts between them, and the way he experiences both of them.

Figure 8-16: Aggression in a family drawing
5. **Aggression due to learning disability.** Due to their cognitive processing difficulties, children with learning disabilities often misinterpret social reactions to them and social overtures made by peers. Their drawings will be typically characterized by trends related to children with learning disabilities such as adding elements not related to the main theme, etc.

6. **Aggression as conduct problem** occurs mainly when the entire environment communicates contradictory messages to the child. In these cases, the child conducts himself in an inconsistent environment in terms of its reactions to his behavior, with right and wrong being unclear. If he cries or expresses any difficulty, sometimes others (teachers, parents) give up on demands from him, sometimes the mother takes a different stand than the father, and in other times the parents have a completely different opinion than the teachers, etc. In such cases, the child's drawings will lack any clear trends, as in the following example.

   ![Figure 8-17: Blurred boundaries as a source of aggression](image)

7. **Aggression as a form of release.** Many children act out aggressively to vent multiple stressors such as competition with the peer group or parental demands for high achievements. In this case, the most common indication of stress in their drawings will be rigidity, as seen below, in the dense coloring.

   ![Figure 8-18: External pressure as a source of aggression](image)

8. **Parental modeling** is often a source of aggression, particularly in cases of child abuse. In such cases, the child's aggression is a direct response to the harsh educational methods, to put it euphemistically, he experiences at home. Accordingly, the child's drawings will show clear indications of ill-treatment.
The parents of the girl who made the following drawings contacted me for consultation due to her violent behavior. They reported their daughter, aged 2 and 9 months, throws temper tantrums in which she is able to bash another child's head against the floor. Naturally, her parents were afraid of her violence and sought to determine its cause.

This girl is full of presence and confidence, as evidenced mainly by her fluent and self-assured use of the entire page area.

![Figure 8-19: Intense pressure and rigid movement indicating stress](image)

The rhythm with which she draws indicates that she has a quick grasp and able to express herself clearly in a way that enchants everyone around her. She likes the attention she manages to get and knows how to take advantage of it to influence her social environment. Nevertheless, the intense pressure she applies to the drawing tool, to the point of tearing the page in certain places, also indicates that she is a very obstinate and stubborn child.

However, her drawings indicate that her willfulness actually results from a deep sense of frustration. They also indicate that she tends to act out "violently" when things do not go her way – for example, she would vomit voluntarily when her parents left her or demanded that she behave in a way that was not acceptable to her.

![Figure 8-20: Weak pressure and loose movement](image)

Based on my analysis of this girl's older drawings, it seemed there was something in her present environment that significantly stressed her out. In her previous drawings, she applied less pressure to the drawing tool and her movement was looser in the entire drawing style.

I came to the realization that this girl's social difficulties and violent behavior in kindergarten resulted from a non-age-appropriate punitive system. A high achiever, she often found herself challenged by competition. The common punishment in her kindergarten – having children sit
in the time-out corner to reflect upon their misbehavior – achieved the opposite result in her case. While sitting there, she found it very difficult to learn any real lessons but rather used the time to identify the "guilty" parties – a pattern repeated in her relationships with her parents. Therefore, my first recommendation to the family was to see how her need for attention and influence on her environment could be channeled to directions that will help her understand the costs involved in her behavior.

As already mentioned, she liked being at the center of things and was totally present on the drawing page. Consequently, the solution of keeping her away could only achieve partial results. I thought it better to look into the various roles she liked to play and through them find out how she can contribute to her family and peer society. I also recommended to her parents to clarify the relationship between responsible and considerate behavior and taking responsibility in other areas.

My bottom line is that no child is born violent. Regrettably, some children find out that their violent behavior patterns have powerful effects on their environment and can benefit them in many ways.

**Social Functioning and Temperament**

Studies (e.g. Heimberg 2004) found a relationship between generalized social anxiety and certain types of temperament, with specific type most related to social functioning disorders being inhibited temperament. This temperament is evident already in infancy and is characterized by a tendency to shy away and withdraw from new situations, to the point of complete avoidance.

Parents of inhibited children can tell that from very early on, their children avoided playing with new toys or approaching unfamiliar children. Often, the child's temperament is woven into the parenting pattern he experiences. For example, when his parents are overprotective, restraining and anxious of his independence, the child may develop an insecure attachment style. Since the primary attachment pattern is a model for future relationships, a vicious circle develops, making it difficult for the child to take advantage of new social situations.

Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate that no particular parenting pattern can be the source of this or that anxiety. It is always about the synergy between parent and child, between the innate temperament which responds to the environmental conditions in the parent-child relationship, and vice versa.

Educating children is no mean task. In bookstores you will find many books encouraging liberal and open educational approaches, together with others that preach a harsher, more
disciplinary approach. However, I feel that many of the parents who read these books from cover to cover are uncertain of their approach and often wonder if they had done right with their children.

Whoever has some experience in raising children knows there is no "proven formula". Even within the same family, parents are often required to use different approaches with different children – this boy always asks for explanations and you have to discuss everything with him, while his sister feels such family discussions are confusing and useless, or can be used manipulatively. Some react to disciplinary measures the way the parents expect, while others only resist and regress even further behaviorally. At the end of the day, the proverb "educate the child according to his way" always proves to be powerfully true – all parents have to understand their child's "way" and once they do, it will be easier for them to tailor the right approach to him.

Rigid and stormy temperament

The parents of the 4½ year-old who made the following drawing asked me to analyze her drawings because they felt that her hot-temperedness and capriciousness affect her social functioning.

Indeed, this girl's drawings showed that she was curious and spicy. The "hot-temperedness" her parents inquired about was indicated in her drawings mainly in her extensive movements on the page and the speed in which she manage to complete the coloring of broad areas.

Figure 8-21: Rapid drawing style indicating impulsiveness

Generally, temperament is innate and cannot be controlled, nor is it recommended to try and control it. This is because in most cases, parents who try to fight this battle are bound to lose. In the long run, the child's temperament will not change due to this or that punishment.

Accordingly, in this girl's case, I did not recommend looking into ways of controlling her hot temper, but rather to see how the parents could communicate with her in accordance with her impulsive pace and style. In general, when she behaved impetuously and capriciously, the parents could mirror her intense excitement at the moment (but do it sincerely, rather than
cynically or patronizingly), for example: "Yes, I understand you are very excited and must have this now, and very soon I will be able to attend to it". It was important to reinforce her for every minute she managed to hold back and at the same time see if anything could be done to make it easier for her, and not have her be forced to hold back for too long. In this girl's case, it was important to change the parents' attitude, because once they were locked into viewing her as "impulsive", this narrowed down the range of potential educational approaches, mainly due to the negative and antisocial connotations of this word.

When you can pinpoint the "fuse" that sparks in the parent's brain in response to a given behavior by his child, you can often isolate the source of that parent's anger and determine how much it derives from the child's own behavioral patterns as opposed to the parent's character and related, perhaps, to traumatic childhood memories.

**Quiet and inhibited temperament**

The next drawings were made by a five year-old girl whose parents reported social difficulties. My analysis of her drawings gave me the impression that she was intelligent.

Her slow pace of drawing indicated that when asked a question, she was not quick to respond, but rather preferred to contemplate her answer.

When she spoke, she was pleasant to listen to – she had a rich vocabulary for her age and she enjoyed participating in adult as well as children's conversations.

*Figure 8-22: Slow, careful and high-quality drawing style in keeping with the child's character*

Nevertheless, this girl's very cautious drawing and coloring style indicated that she was quite demanding of herself – she sometimes behaved maturely for her age, but on other occasions she would surprisingly behave regressively. In addition, she tended to take assignments seriously, there was no need to rush her and she could set very high objectives for herself. This attitude made her pay a heavy price in her daily conduct, because she would often experience daily tasks as if there were truly "missions" she had to accomplish at any cost.
Next year, this five year-old will enter first grade. On the face of it, she seemed cognitively prepared. Moreover, her achievement-oriented attitude could be very helpful at school, where she would receive numerical or verbal feedback on her accomplishment and act accordingly.

**Perfectionism and achievements**

Based on my conclusions from the drawing analysis, my main recommendations for the parents was to look into their daughter's achievement mindset as a fundamental worldview. As explained above, children's inhibited temperament is intimately related to the parenting pattern they experience. In this case, the parents are overprotective of their daughter and at the same time expect her to perform and achieve at the highest level. This perfectionist approach, as reflected in her drawings, is typical of the family atmosphere, not just of her.

I want to stress that there is nothing wrong in pushing children to achieve. The thing is that in doing so, the children have to learn to cope with failure, so as not to arrive at extreme situations. In this girl's case, she would suddenly burst out in anger or seek intense intimacy and refuse to let go (for example, before going to sleep or to the kindergarten). On such occasions, her parents wonder how this mature and intelligent girl can act so regressively. Most adults know how to cope with losses and failures, but children usually need guidance from their parents in such moments, and it is important to provide this guidance even if the immediate results seem disappointing.

![Figure 8-23: Attention to detail as an indication of a perfectionist family attitude](image)

When using the term "perfectionist family attitude" the idea is not to diagnose the family or brand it, but simply to say that the dosage of attention to achievements in a given family may be higher than that devoted to other areas in the child's life. When you put this mirror in front of the parents and try to analyze its communication patterns, you will do well to include nonverbal messages as well: everyone knows that a B in fourth grade is not the end of the world, but does our face communicate the same message? When we find our child is not such a good math student, do we truly believe in his abilities to succeed in the future or do we envision the long hours we would have to spend on his homeroom and the money we would have to spend on private tutors? Remember, children can sense, "sniff out", what their parents truly expect of them.
The second area that deserves your attention is how you reinforce good achievements. There is no need to elaborate too much on this point – just remember to say a good word or two commending the effort and the final outcome. At the same time, you must be keenly aware of how you treat failures: do they mobilize the entire family to help the child overcome the difficulty? When the family is mobilized this way, the child gets the message that failure or loss means working together to win the next time, thus become more focused on achievements.

In some families, one of the siblings learns to stand out through his achievements – his report card is his strength and family role. As children enter first grade and advance in school, learning becomes more complex and difficult. For the achievement-oriented child this increasingly threatens his family role, making him feel that if he does not continue to excel, his very identity is endangered.

In view of the relationship found in the literature (e.g. McNeil and Hembree-Kigin 2001) between the parent’s responses to the child’s social functioning, another point parents will do well to look into has to do with the way they talk about their life in terms of success or failure. Like this inhibited five year-old’s parents, many parents see their children as tools for self-realization, so that every accomplishment by their child proves they are good parents. Every time their child presents his achievements to them, they are filled with pride and tend to refer to this often in social occasions. I do not mean you must not be proud in your child’s achievements, but only to be careful not to focus on the outcome rather than on the process that led to it. By the same token, when the child fails the focus is on the disappointing end result rather than on the daring and curiosity which made the child try something that proved too difficult for him.

When this girl draws, she is very precise. She thoughtfully analyzes the various elements on the page. When she writes, she does it slowly, being careful to keep it aligned and accurate. When she colors, she fills the entire area and usually does not leave a single uncolored point in the designated colored area. When interacting, she throws her arms out to her sides expressing her keen desire to make friends, but despite all that, occasionally, her drawing lines are shaky, attesting to the price she has to pay in order to continue being as good (and even excellent) as she expects of herself.

Nevertheless, you should be aware of the fact that perfectionist drawings can also be seen in families with a different atmosphere. For example, many children who grow in an overly liberal environment draw with painstaking accuracy, indicating their need for clear boundaries. Since such are not provided by their parents, the children themselves develop an entire array of behavioral rules and prohibitions that demand high standards of them.
When perfectionist children approach drawings, beyond the indicators mentioned above with reference to the 5 year-old about to enter first grade, they treat them as an "assignment". They try to glance at others' drawings, repeatedly ask the kindergarten or school teacher what they "should" draw, and try to avoid mistakes. When the drawing is complete, they will need to hear what others think of it, and will not take kindly to light-hearted or humoristic responses.

Perfectionist children often use extreme terms such as "this is the most beautiful drawing in the world", or "I draw better than everyone else", or conversely, "I will never be able to draw". When they encounter failure, they often tear up the page, crumple it and throw it in the garbage. In such cases, it is important to respect their wishes, but at the same time show forgiveness and love for every product of their work. Perfectionist children would rather use pencils because they are erasable, and do not like gouache or finger paints that cannot be applied with accuracy.

In itself, perfectionism is neither a good nor a bad quality. In this girl's case, it affected her social functioning – she was rigid in dialogues with her peers, always insisted on playing by the rules and when anyone suggested changing the rules she would become upset and lash out in anger.

At the right doses, children can get very far when they are achievers, when they are thorough, responsible and disciplined. Just remember to let them understand that at least at home, with the family, and also with their closest friends, their failures, doubts and fears will always be accepted with love. Perfectionism is one of the behavioral aspects of innate temperament. Analyzing this girl's case through the prism of her temperament proved to be the beginning of resolving her social difficulties.

To conclude, since children use their drawings as a second language, their artwork communicates their inner world and experiences. This is particularly true of the social interactions which take up such a significant part of the child's day, and which can be analyzed through their drawings in order to better understand social dynamics which as parents, we are not always able to observe directly.

**What to Do when Your Child Experiences Social Difficulty?**

Here are several recommendations from my clinical experience that will help you to cope with a child who experiences social difficulty:

1. According to the cognitive-psychological approach, the solution lies in cognitive biases and negative interpretation of social events. You can invite your child to draw the social situation, including even scenes "before" and "after" the main event. Observing the
drawings will enable you to see whether your child tends to interpret the key scene and subsequent events negatively. Using the drawings, you could check with him whether there may be additional, alternative storylines and courses of action.

2. According to the behaviorist approach, the solution lies in objective experience. You can ask your child to "dub" the drawings by giving the drawn figures words and voices. When the child is anxious about a given situation, you can leave it "distant" on the page and view it as in a show.

3. The genetic approach stresses inherited traits. The basic assumption is that the parent must be familiar with the various aspects of the social difficulty his child may be having. To cope with social anxiety, for example, parent and child can each draw his greatest fear and then observe and analyze the outcomes, looking for differences and similarities. In many cases, this experience turns out to be intimate and exciting for both, offering the parent the opportunity to share his life experience with his child.

4. I recommend that you do not intervene in your child's social choices. Even if he does pick friends that you do not like, try to observe from afar but do not be quick to demand that they separate. In many cases, such friendships are used by children to work through their weaker sides. As your child develops his character and interpretation of social situations around him, so will his social choices change.

5. When your child is aggressive, formulate a joint parental response and communicate consistent educational messages. Explain what is right and wrong using words, and model the desirable behavior in your own conduct.

6. Seek alternative, more legitimate channels for your children's natural aggression. Most children in the western world spend most of their day sitting down. This is out of touch with many children's temperament and with children's motor development in general. It is important to use sports and physical movement to vent their aggression.

7. Reinforce positive behaviors such as holding back or resolving conflicts through negotiation. Check for the relationship between exposure to television and computer games and violence. Studies have indeed supported such a theoretical relationship, and it is important for you to test it in practice. Perhaps your child becomes more violent after spending more than a certain amount of hours in front of the TV or computer screen.

8. Observe your child's drawings to better understand trends and reasons related to violence and use this knowledge to arrive at a solution that will make life easier for your child.
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