Markers of Insecure Attachment Classifications in Eight to Nine Year Family Drawings: Applications from Research

Noah Hass-Cohen, MA, ATR-BC, LMFT

Art-making is a developmentally appropriate approach to child therapy, as non-verbal limbic imagery and right hemisphere processing are more easily available to the developing brain (Schore, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). Artwork is easily obtainable from children, and is primarily a quick snapshot of the child's here and now emotions, feelings, and thoughts. By middle childhood, eight- and nine-year-old children willingly utilize drawing as a means of self-expression and non-threatening communication (Lowenfeld & Brittain 1987; Malchiodi 1998; Rubin, 2001). Children innately utilize drawing as a means of safe communication, especially in times of increased stress when verbal communication is difficult (Klorer & Chapman, 2004; Van der Kolk, 2002). Drawings are also non-threatening measurements that can be easily administered and collected (Malchiodi, 1998). Moreover, children's drawings are relatively fair and non-biased measures since little, if any, difference in the art of eight year olds has been observed across cultures (Lowenfeld & Brittan, 1987).

Family Drawings have been identified as clinical tools that can qualitatively assess for aggression and externalizing behaviors (Burns & Kaufman 1972; DiLeo 1983; Gillespie, 1994; Hammer, 1997; Koppitz, 1968; Ogden, 2001; Oster & Gould, 1987). However, while projective assessment approaches have good inter-rater reliability, they have validity problems and have been primarily used as subjective tools (Groth-Marnat, 2001; Lally, 2000).

More recent publications in child development literature have demonstrated sound psychometric findings for drawing characteristics as valid markers for early detection of disrupted attachment. Early detection for insecure attachment classification is important as it may contribute to the prevention of violence across the life-span, and mitigate the vulnerability to aggression, alienation, depression, and conduct disturbances associated with this attachment classification (Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Olson, Bates, Sandy, & Lanthier, 2000; Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999; Sroufe, 2000; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003).

There are some excellent psychometric measures of externalized conduct disturbances for middle childhood, which focus on the identification of manifest externalizing behaviors and cognitions, associated with conduct disorders (Achenbach, Child Behavior Checklist, 2001; Conners' Parent & Teacher Rating Scales Revised, 2003). However, the validation of assessment measurements that would help access less explicit information is necessary. Many externalizing behavior disturbances can be hidden due to: a) the deceitful nature of conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000); b) female tendencies to internalize emotions; and, c) developmental difficulties in verbally expressing feelings or thoughts despite the rapid development of cognitive abilities at this age.

Fury's 1996 doctoral study examined family drawings done by 171 eight- to nine-year olds who were entering the fourth grade. The children came from families thought to be vulnerable to attachment and relationship problems. Fury collected the following data for each child: Draw a Person Drawing, Family Drawing; anxious avoidant or anxious resistant attachment classification scored at 12 and 18 months; attachment history; maternal life stress assessment for grade one through grade three; teacher form; check list reports from grade one through grade

three on behavioral problems; and report on IQ at eight and half years of age based on an abbreviated form of the WISC-R. Children drew the family drawing as part of their third grade at-home assignments, mostly without the presence of parents or siblings (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997).

The main purpose was to empirically validate differences in representations of *anxious avoidant vs. anxious resistant attachment*. The study's theoretical support was based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980; Main, Kaplan, & Kassidy, 1985) and on Kaplan's 1985 unpublished drawing signs catalogue (as cited in Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997). Statistical analyses included clusters of family drawing characteristics for insecure attachment classifications [*Anxious –Avoidant* (A); *Anxious-Resistant* (C); *Anxious-Insecure* (A or C); *Disorganized/Disoriented* (D)] and markers for eight Family Drawing Global Rating Scales: Vitality/Creativity; Family Pride/Happiness; Vulnerability; Emotional Distance/Isolation; Tension/Anger; Role Reversal; Bizarreness/ Dissociation; and, Global Pathology (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997; p. 1157). There were two main findings: 1) a significant association between blind rating of the family drawings and attachment classifications at 12 and 18 months; and 2) all empirically derived Family Drawing Global Rating Scales were significantly correlated with the attachment styles.

In Figure 1, eight-year-old Leah drew her family. The drawing was collected in a one-hour interview, and was part of a normative art project ("Draw a picture of your family"). All the figures are facing forward in the schematic representation, which is expected for this age (Lowenfeld & Brittan, 1987). Father and mother were drawn to the left and Leah was drawn in the far right. A younger sibling figure is next to the mother figure. An unidentified older female is drawn to Leah's left.

Leah embellished the figures with identifying forms and colors. Her hairdo is in the same style as her mother's, and her dress is the same orange color as is her father's shirt and hair. Therefore, even though she is two figures away from her mother, the color schema represents identification with both parents.

Figure 1

A limited palate of colors was used purposefully and creatively to indicate individuality and family togetherness. A baby crib and basket represent the newest addition to the family. The drawing's details and style gives a sense of Leah's feeling of belonging to and happiness in the family group. They meet criteria for Fury's empirically derived Vitality/Creativity and Family Pride/Happiness Family Drawing Global Rating Scales (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997).

Leah drew all the family members' hands facing down. Fury (1996) significantly associated "Arms downward" with a classification of *avoidant attachment (A)* at 18 months. However, the cluster of drawing characteristics associated with avoidant attachment are not present (lack of individuation; omission of mother or of child; arms downward, close to body; exaggeration of heads; lack of color and disguised family members), and there are no criteria that meet Fury's Global Pathology and/or other difficult Family Scale characteristics. Therefore, it would be a clinical assumption to infer an insecure attachment style from this single drawing characteristic (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997). It is much more likely that this representation reflects a normative adjustment to the new family member, and a repositioning of the family relationships.

The family drawing that follows shows strikingly different characteristics.

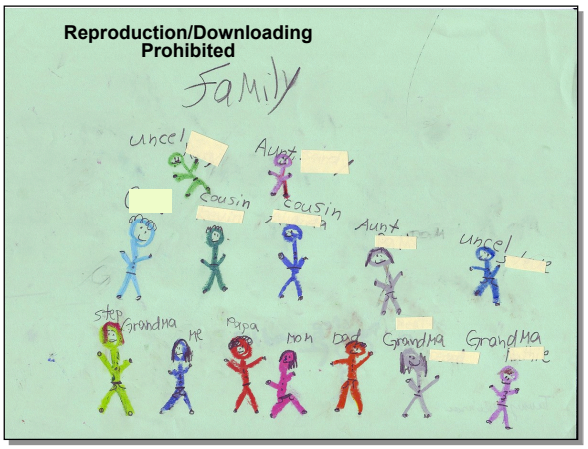

Figure 2

Ella's family drawing was also collected in a one-hour interview. She, too, is eight years old. Ella drew 14 stick figures that represent her extended family members. Mother and father, as well as paternal and maternal grandparents are drawn in the first row of this diagram. Ella's blue stick figure is between her step-grandmother and her grandfather's ("Papa") markers. Aunts, uncles, and cousins' floating stick figures are represented in the second row. There is vulnerability in the quasi-uniform X-like stick figures, and a distortion of the mother's schema. Facial expressions and identifying clothing details seem to be quickly drawn, and gender differences can only be inferred from hair. Overall, the drawing's characteristics, which show low emotional investment, meet the Global Pathology Family Drawing scale in their constricted organization, inaccuracy and incompleteness of stick figure details, diagrammatic use of color, and lack of background scene. This scale was significantly related to all three insecure attachment histories (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997). The diagrammatic placement of many small figures contributes to the disconnected and isolated presentation of the figures. Each stick figure has a different color, which enhances their isolation from each other, rather than their individuality. Fury (1996) found that a single drawing characteristic of lack of individuation was significantly associated with a classification of *anxious-resistant* attachment, and small figures were significantly associated with a classification of *anxious-resistant attachment* at 12 months (Fury). Therefore, the contextual analyses of this drawing, which includes both the global scales and single drawing characteristics, may support hypotheses of an insecure *anxious-resistant attachment* classification. In practice, the hypothesis would need to be supported by additional clinical interviewing and objective data. However, as no case history and/or objective testing were available for these drawings, the clinical impressions outlined above are hypothetical. These art therapy analyses are intended to give clinicians ideas as to how they can contextualize the information, and better understand children's art representations.

In summary, individual drawing markers, clusters, and scales of drawing signs have been significantly associated with an insecure attachment pattern, and significantly and discriminately predict internal representations of insecure patterns of attachment. However, clinicians are urged to use clusters and scales of drawing signs contextually rather than rely on individual drawing characteristics. In a confidential therapeutic relationship, child artwork provides a window of opportunity to understand how the child's attachment history informs his/her current internal representation. While beyond the scope of this review, it is underscored that most importantly, art therapy work can provide children with positive growth experiences that can help mitigate the effects of a disrupted attachment.

This article is a partial extract from a chapter: "Attachment in 3-D" in an upcoming publication on clinical neuroscience and art therapy edited by Noah Hass-Cohen, MA, and Richard Carr, Psy.D. Chapter authors include Margarette Lathan, MA, and Joanna Clyde Findlay, MA. Additional studies that have supported art therapy ideas that children' drawings may be useful for the assessment of children's internal states will be reviewed, and a check list of empirically driven drawing characteristics that takes into account developmental considerations will be compiled. To receive information on this publication and/or on art therapy, e-mail noah@pgi.edu.

Noah's biography and references are on the following page.

Noah Hass-Cohen, M.A., is the founder and director of the art therapy program at Phillips Graduate Institute, a 60-unit masters degree in psychology. The program focus is on the integration of art therapy with clinical neuroscience and marriage family therapy theories. Noah is in the process of completing a clinical doctorate degree in psychology where she is pursuing her interest in neuropsychological and psychodiagnostic assessment. In her private practice in Encino, Noah provides psychotherapy and consultation. She can be reached at noah@pgi.edu or 818.386.5611.

References

Achenbach, T.M. (2001). Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist/2_3 and 1992 Profile. Burlington, VT: Department of Psychiatry, University of Vermont.

American Psychiatric Association. (2000) *DSM-IV-TR fourth edition text revision: Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders.* Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Belsky, J. & Fearon, R. M., (2002). Early attachment security, subsequent maternal sensitivity, and later child development: Does continuity in development depend upon continuity of caregiving? *(Attachment and Human Development, 493):* 361-387.

Bowlby, J. (1980). Volume I: *Attachment and Loss*. New York: Basic Books.

Burns, R., & Kaufman, S. (1972). *Actions, styles and symbols in K-F-D's: An interpretive manual.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Conners, C. K (1997). *Conners' Rating Scales-Revised*. Minnesotta: Pearson Assessments.

DiLeo, J. H. (1983). *Interpreting children's drawings*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Fury, G. (1996). *The relation between infant attachment history and representations of relationships in school-aged family drawings*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota.

Gillespie, J. (1994). *The projective use of mother-and-child drawings a manual for clinicians.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Groth-Marnat, G. (2001). *Handbook of psychological assessment* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons,

Hammer E., F. (1997). *Advances in projective drawing interpretation*. Springfield. Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Ltd.

Klorer, P. G. & Chapman, L. (2004). Cumulative trauma and art therapy: Neurodevelopmental advances in theory and practice. Presentation at the American Art Therapy Association, Inc. 35th Annual Conference, November 10-14, 2004, San Diego, California.

Koppitz, E.M. (1968). *Psychological evaluation of children's human figure.* New York: Grune & Stratton.

Lowenfeld, V. & Brittain L.W. (1987). *Creative and mental growth.* (8th edition).

Main, M., Kaplan, N., & Cassidy, J. (1985). Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: A move to the level of representation. In I. Bretherton & E. Waters (Eds.), Growing points of attachment theory and research. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Developmen*t, *50*(1-2, Serial No.209), 66-104.

Malchiodi, C. (1998). *Understanding children's drawings.* New York: Guilford Press. New York: Macmillan.

Ogden, J. (2001). *Handbook of psychological signs, symptoms, and syndromes.* Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

Olson, S. L., Bates, J. E., Sandy, J. M., & Lanthier, R. (2000). Early developmental precursors of externalizing behavior in middle childhood and adolescence. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 28*(2): 119-123.

Oster, G.D., & Gould, P. (2004). *Using drawings in assessment and therapy: A guide for mental health professionals*. Oxford: Routledge Taylor & Francis.

Rubin, J. (1978). *Child art therapy: Understanding and helping children grow through art*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Schore, A. (2001a). The effects of a secure attachment relationship on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health. *Infant Journal of Mental Health*, *22*, 7-66.

Schore, A. (2001 b). The effects of early relational trauma on right brain development, affect regulation and infant mental health. *Journal of Infant Mental Health*, *22*, 201-269.

Schore, A. (2002). Dysregulation of the right brain: A fundamental mechanism of traumatic attachment and the psychopathogenesis of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *36*, 9-30.

Sroufe, A., L. (2000). Early relationship and the development of children. *Infant Mental Health Journal,* 21(1-2), 67-74.

Sroufe, A. L., Carlson, E. A., Levy, A. K., & Egeland, B. (1999). Implications of attachment theory for developmental psychopathology. *Development & Psychopathology, 11*, 1-13.

Van de Kolk, B.A. (2002). Posttraumatic therapy in the age of neuroscience. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 12(3),* 381-392.

Webster-Stratton, C. & Reid, M. J. (2003). The incredible years parents, teachers and children training series: A multifaceted treatment approach for young children with conduct problems. In A. E. Kazdin & J.R. Weisz (Eds.), *Evidence-based psychotherapies for children and adolescents* (pp. 224-240). New York: The Guilford Press.