

The Stages of Drawing Development in Children: 0-6 Years

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Here is a brief overview of the fascinating stages of drawing in child development and why it's important to encourage young children to draw.

Drawing is a natural process for all children. From infancy, children begin by experimenting with drawing tools and making marks on paper, and as they grow, these marks start taking on meaning.

Drawing ultimately becomes a child's way of expressing their understanding of the world and all the things that are important to them.

Find out how children learn to draw and why it's a crucial activity. There is also a breakdown of the stages of drawing development at various ages.

How to Teach a Child to Draw

During the early years, it is important to **focus on the process** of creative drawing, and **not on the product**.

There is no need to formally teach children to draw. The best way to teach them is to give them exposure to materials and drawing tools and let them express themselves freely.

As they grow and mature, their drawings will become more detailed and reflect the world around them.

While using colouring books in small doses is enjoyable and still has some value, it's best to limit exposure to them and rather opt for free drawing, which has greater creative value.

Why Drawing is Important

There are many benefits of drawing during the toddler and preschool years.

- Drawing builds a child's **fine motor skills**.
- It develops **hand-eye coordination**.
- It develops **creative expression** through free drawing.
- Drawing is the foundation of **pre-writing skills**.
- It builds a child's **attention span**.
- It develops **cognitive understanding** of concepts.

Tracing pictures or "teaching" a child to draw by following models are not natural, age-appropriate ways to develop creativity.

The Stages of Drawing

Here are the characteristics of the various developmental stages of children's drawings. These are not set in stone as children develop at their own unique rates.

They will reach the milestones at their own pace, however, they all progress through the same stages, which are based on their level of understanding.

The characteristics are listed by age.

The info in the following sections is based on the books "Language and School Readiness", written by Martie Pieterse and "Learning Through Play: A parent's guide to the first five years", written by Jan Natanson.

12 Months: Random Marks and Scribbles

The first stage of drawing is about exploring and developing motor coordination.

At around 15 to 18 months babies begin to develop uncontrolled scribbles that don't represent anything.

Shapes

Babies begin by making random marks and soon begin to form:

- scribbles
- vertical and horizontal lines
- multiple line drawings

Understanding

For babies, drawing is really about learning cause and effect and their ability to make things happen.

It has little to do with creating and representing their world, and more to do with enjoying their movements and the effects of them.

Their scribbles enable them to learn about the properties of objects, materials and tools such as pencils, pens, paint, crayons and paper.

Grip

From around 15 months of age, toddlers are usually able to grasp crayons with their whole hand (called a palmar grasp).

2 Years: Controlled Scribbles

This stage is known as **controlled scribbling**.

It is characterized by spontaneous circular or to-and-fro scribbles and dots.

Similar scribbles can be found in all children's drawings at this age and the shapes in them are necessary for developing drawing and **writing skills** later on.

Shapes

Toddlers begin to make drawings that include:

- horizontal and vertical lines
- multiple loops and spirals
- roughly drawn circles
- shapes that resemble letters T and V

Grip

Two-year-olds learn to hold a pencil well down the shaft towards the point, using their thumb and first two fingers (called a tripod grasp).

They will usually use their preferred hand.

At this age, toddlers begin to discover the connection between the movements they make and the marks that form on the paper. They will begin to repeat movements on purpose.

By the end of this year, these drawings evolve into **simple diagrams**.

3 Years: Basic Shapes

During this stage, children begin to use **basic shapes** in their drawings as their fine motor control and hand-eye coordination improve.

Shapes

Drawings at this age include the following shapes, combined in different ways:

- circles and squares
- crosses
- dots
- shapes that resemble letters T, V and H

Drawing of a person

The first drawing of a person usually emerges around 3 or 4 years of age.

These 'tadpole' people are drawn with just a head and usually legs directly attached to the head.

Grip

A 3-year-old holds a pencil near the tip, between the first two fingers and the thumb.

They use their preferred hand and hold the pencil with good control.

At this age, you can help your child develop a good tripod grasp by using triangular crayons.

Understanding

At this age, children are able to tell you what their scribbles represent, although you may not be able to see what they have described.

They usually name their picture while drawing it or after it is complete, but they do not start a drawing with a clear plan for what they will draw.

The use of colour at this stage is unrealistic and they often prefer to use only one colour.

4 Years: Patterns and 'Tadpole' People

By 4 years of age, patterns start emerging in children's drawings. A child will make a pattern and interpret it as a representation of something, giving it a label.

Shapes

Their drawings include:

- Squares, circles and rectangles
- Attempts triangles and diamonds, although they may not be able to form them yet
- Crosses
- Letters (pretend writing)

Drawing of a person

A 4-year-old's drawing of a person will progress from a head with legs to include details such as eyes – since eye contact is important to them.

They draw not what they see, but what they know, and will add details as they become important to them.

Details such as arms, fingers and a trunk emerge.

Drawing other images

By 4-and-a-half they begin to combine two or more shapes or forms together to form basic images, such as a rectangle and a circle to form a hat. They often learn this from adults.

The first shapes children make consistently will usually form people, but later includes basic images such as a house or sun.

Grip

At this stage, they hold a pencil with good control, in an adult fashion.

Understanding

Drawing takes on more meaning and intention. Children usually decide what they are going to draw before they begin.

They deliberately try to combine shapes and lines together and their pictures start to look like the images they describe.

5 Years: Pictures and Portraits

5-year-olds begin to show much creativity in their drawings.

Shapes

Their drawings will include:

- Basic shapes
- Triangles and diamonds
- Spontaneous letters (to imitate writing)

Drawing of a person

A portrait of a person emerges, with many details such as hair, hands and fingers, feet and a body.

Drawing other images

They draw images such as animals, houses, vehicles, trees, plants, flowers and rainbows.

They are able to include details – such as drawing a house with a door, windows, roof and chimney.

Grip

By 5 years of age, children should have developed good control when holding a pencil, crayon or paintbrush.

Understanding

Children will now draw spontaneously and begin to show their own backgrounds, interests and experiences in their drawings. They draw what they know.

Their representation of people, animals and houses changes constantly.

They will also name their picture before beginning.

They can colour within the lines but their use of colour may still be unrealistic.

At this point, people and objects may still be floating in the air as children are still developing spatial perception.

They usually place themselves in the middle of a drawing due to their egocentric nature (seeing themselves as the centre of the world).

6 Years: Drawings Represent Interests and Experience

By 6 or 7 years, children have their own style of drawing, which can usually be recognized by adults.

Shapes

By the time they are 7, they will be able to form good circles, squares, rectangles, triangles and diamonds in their drawings.

Drawing of a person

A child usually settles on a certain representation of a person at this age and tends to draw them all with the same basic shape.

For example, they will draw the whole family with the same body outline but will make the members of the family different sizes and show gender with hair and clothes.

Drawing other images

Drawings represent all kinds of animals and things, usually those that interest them the most.

They tend to draw animals with human-like faces.

Understanding

At this stage, children show their higher level of cognition by drawing people, animals and objects on a baseline, such as on the ground or grass.

They also show perception by drawing, for example, trees higher than the house or flowers that are small.

This drawing shows a child's greater understanding of depth and distance.

The way they see the world comes through their drawings. They leave out unimportant things and enlarge things that are important to them.

They may draw a small door on a house, just big enough for themselves, or very high windows, since they cannot reach them.

They can also show movement in their drawings by portraying objects that are flying or drawing the legs of an animal wider apart if running.

Their use of colour becomes quite realistic.

I hope you've enjoyed reading about the stages of drawing development in young children and are inspired to encourage your children to do lots of free drawing and creative expression.