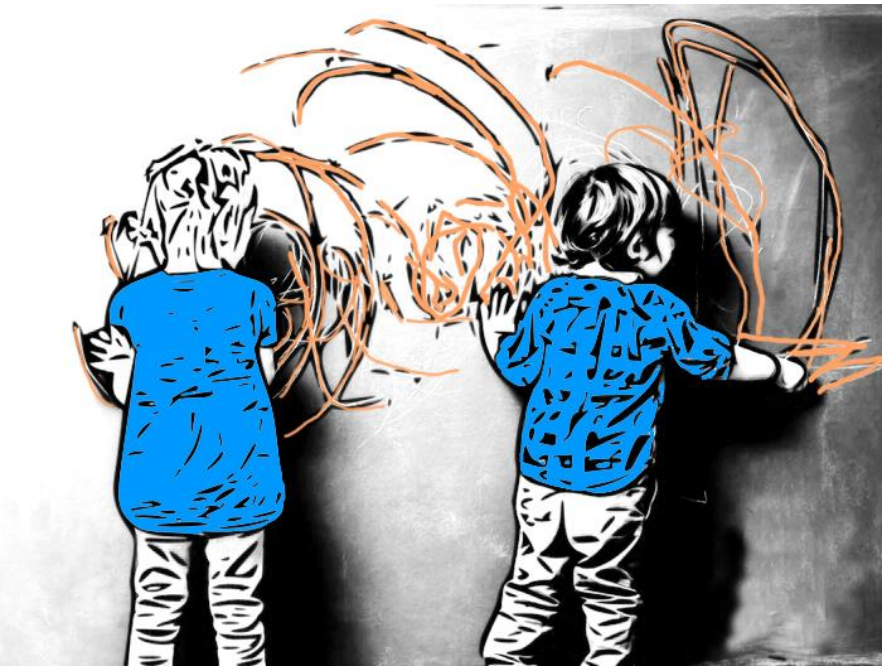
# Drawing Problems

## *Is your child having trouble drawing?*



Is your child:

- Coloring outside the lines?
- Bursting into tears as you comment, “Oh, what a cute mouse” when he intended to draw a dirt-bike?
- Struggling to hold a crayon or pencil?
- Having difficulty copying a shape?
- Scribbling repetitively when classmates are creating recognizable vehicles, houses, animals and figures?
- Hating art class in spite of being engaged in other activities at school?
- Feeling embarrassed when peers refer to her work as ‘scribble scrabble?
- Rushing through drawing tasks?

## LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

Pictured below is a self-portrait that was drawn by a three-year-old in preschool. As shown, the child is able to make a recognizable figure. If indeed the child has big eyes and brown hair, he is beginning to show some resemblance of the subject he is drawing here. He is showing the ability to draw straight lines (both horizontal and vertical lines); they are not feathered, too light, or trailing off into being unrecognizable.

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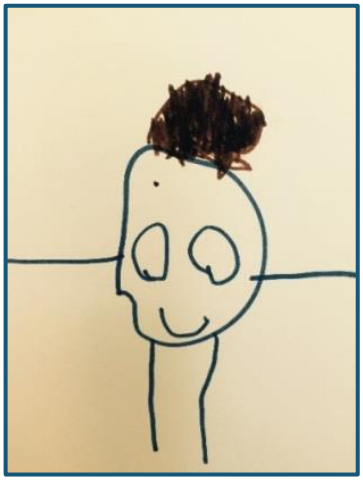

Further, he made an attempt at a circle, which is meant to be the subject of the picture. He stops once and has to re-start on the circle, as shown by that jagged edge below the left arm. *For a child his age, this drawing is developmentally on track*.

However, as the child progresses to kindergarten and certainly by first grade, this figure would need to include more complexity. The child would need to include a neck and body on the figure. The face should be in proportion to the body. The child should be able to include hands and feet.

Now, of course, some of us just aren't great artists, and nothing is terribly concerning about that. However, if your child is really struggling to make straight lines and recognizable shapes and figures, he may have a relevant problem that requires some support or remediation. Pre-writing shapes include the following shapes (in the correct developmental sequence:

**2 years:** vertical line
**2.5 years:** horizontal line
**3 years:** circle
**3.5-4 years:** cross
**4 years:** square
**4.5 years:** diagonal line in both directions
**4 years, 11 months:** X shape
**5 years, 3 months:** triangle [3]

## CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

Clinically, kids who have trouble drawing may have a few primary problems.

*Fine motor:* First, the child may have *poor fine motor coordination*. That is, they may have trouble controlling or manipulating their pencil, or they may have poor pencil grasp. Fine motor control can be defined as,

*"use of the small muscles of the hands to make smooth, coordinated, or fine motions." [2]*

*Visual Spatial:* The second major area that may be worth considering is *visual-spatial processing*. If the child does not understand how objects are supposed to look or how they are supposed to relate to each other on the page, visual-spatial processing could be the issue. Children with poor visual spatial skills have trouble remembering shapes. They may get lost in familiar places. They may bump their heads getting into the tunnel slide.

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*Dysgraphia:* Finally, if your child struggles with drawing, it is important to consider issues like Dysgraphia. Dysgraphia is a true writing disability that often does not get a lot of attention in school. This disability comes from poor fine motor coordination and visual-spatial processing that makes it very hard for a child to write. In this case, often the child has great ideas but fails to get them on paper.

When children learn to draw, several different skills come into play. They need to be able to see how things are supposed to look (visual perception) and to make their muscles move to produce the shapes and lines (motor skills).

*Visual motor integration:* The combination and coordination of both visual perception skills and motor skills is called *visual motor integration*. These skills are all required to make shapes and drawings that are clear and concise enough to convey the meaning. Children with poor visual motor integration will generally struggle with handwriting, art, and other tasks that require precision and focus with a pen, pencil, or paintbrush.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD CAN'T DRAW

If your child can't seem to draw to save his life, there are a few things you can do.

1. First, if this problem is not 'getting in the way' of school success or happiness, you can feel fine about doing nothing for now.
2. Second, if your child is having some difficulty but not to the level that he or she seems to need intensive intervention, try this list of strategies below. Your child may not be a great artist and that is okay. Try some of these supports at home and if the child's skills improve, you may be 'out of the woods.'
3. Third, If the problem is significant, you may seek an outside evaluation from a Psychologist or Occupational Therapist, which you would then bring to your school professionals to consider for accommodations and supports.

### Activities to practice drawing and coloring include:

- Games involving tongs
- Drawing or coloring on a vertical surface such as taping a coloring sheet to a wall or an easel
- Addressing seated posture while writing
- Performing fine motor activities (e.g., cards, buttons, lacing)
- Popping packing bubbles with thumb, index, and middle finger
- Writing with a MagnaDoodle
- Utilizing broken or short crayons
- Drawing shapes in different textures such as sand, playdoh
- Playing with shaving cream, or a plastic bag filled with pudding or shampoo
- Practicing drawing simple pictures such as houses, flowers and trees

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If the difficulties go beyond drawing and into handwriting, more issues may be worthy of consideration. If your child cries or has a tantrum when attempting to learn to write his name or to form simple letters to write a sentence, general fine motor concerns may be present. In that case, it will be necessary to consult with the school and to request supports either from the school psychologist, occupational therapist, or both.

If the concerns are significant, a 504 plan or IEP may be necessary. An excellent program for improving handwriting is Handwriting Without Tears [4]. Children with these challenges often benefit from an opportunity to use a dictation software for writing assignments. Children who type well should be able to type all assignments. If your child's school does not utilize a program of this nature, perhaps a tutor in your community could offer this support to your child.

## SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

*If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.*

- Visual tracking: drawing problems could be related to challenges visually following words on a page as you read or an object as it moves through space. For example, children may struggle to watch a ball as it flies through the air or a plane flying overhead
- Focused attention: drawing problems could be related to difficulties with maintaining attention to a task. A child who cannot stay focused unless provided with praise, constant attention, or a prize is struggling with focused attention
- Dexterity: drawing problems could be related to challenges with fine motor coordination and visual perception
- Depth Perception: judging the distance in space between the child and other objects in the visual field
- Spatial reasoning: drawing problems could be related to struggles in seeing how objects fit together
- Coordination / gross motor skills: drawing problems could be related to challenges with running, walking, catching a ball, kicking a ball
- Learning problems: drawing problems could be related to challenges with reading or writing
- Body space awareness: drawing problems may be related to problems judging where one's body is, body parts are in physical space; as well as, social space and attending to nonverbal cues

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## POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- Motor Apraxia: challenges with gross motor movement
- Developmental Coordination Disorder: challenges with fine and/or gross motor skills, likely including poor handwriting and drawing
- Autism Spectrum Disorder: challenges with social communication and restricted repetitive interests/behaviors. May have motor delays that impact writing/drawing
- Dysgraphia (Specific Learning Disability in writing– Educationally Identified Disabilities, may be diagnosed clinically as well): challenges with writing due to visual or motor processing deficits. Not a lot of attention dedicated to this disability in schools. May require outside testing to diagnose
- Dyscalculia (Specific Learning Disability in math – Educationally Identified Disabilities, may be diagnosed clinically as well): challenges with mathematics may relate to visual-spatial deficits
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): challenges with sustained attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

*If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.*

- CLEAR Child Psychology: to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child, to *consult 'live'* with a psychologist.
- Physical Therapist: to assess and treat gross motor coordination; to help with large muscle groups and movement
- Occupational Therapist: to assess and treat fine motor skills and sensory integration needs
- Psychologist or Neuropsychologist: to consider symptoms in context; may be related to visual spatial problems, attention, or learning

*These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:*

- MVPT-4: test of visual perception, including the following aspects:
  - *visual closure*- what would a partially drawn object look like completed
  - *visual figure ground*- locating a visual figure in a distracting visual image or an object that is altered to be smaller, larger, or darker

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    - *visual memory*- recalling a picture presented a moment before among distracting objects
- VMI sequence: test of visual-motor integration, visual perception and motor coordination.
- WISC-V: test of intelligence. Using tasks of block design, coding, symbol search and cancellation, examiners can look specifically at visual tracking and visual motor (IQ test)
- DAS-2: test of cognitive ability that includes measures of fine motor using the spatial index (IQ/Cognitive test)
- CTMT: test of executive functioning using tasks requiring visual search and sequence in which the examinee draws lines from symbol to symbol. Assesses sequencing, visual attention and distractibility
- TOVA: continuous performance test of sustained attention in the absence of immediate reinforcement. Often, children with significant challenges with sustained attention have poor handwriting.
- NEPSY-II: test of executive functioning, including the ability to plan, organize and sequence, memory and learning. Visual and auditory tasks of memory that provide multiple learning trials to assess visual spatial processing, visually perception and information processing
- WIAT-III: test of academic achievement for related concerns in reading, writing, or math (academic test)
- TOWL: test of Written Language: provides standard, age and grade equivalent scores for writing only (academic test)
- Writing Samples: assessments of handwriting samples from your student's language arts class are helpful to assess legibility (academic test)

## LEARN MORE


[1] Kroncke, Willard, & Huckabee (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings.* Springer, San Francisco.

Springer: http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319255026
Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1468348614&sr=1-2&keywords=assessment+of+autism+spectrum+disorders

[2] Lewis, PhD, Jeanne, Calvery, Ph.D., Margaret, & Lewis, Ph.D., Hal (2002). *Brainstars*. *Brain Injury: Strategies for Teams and Re-education for Students*. US Department of Education: Office of Special Programs.

[3] Liz's Early Learning Spot: http://www.lizs-early-learning-spot.com/category/research/

[4] Handwriting without tears. www.hwtears.com


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