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Children's use of symbols in art for expression of the conscious and unconscious mind

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Abstract

Children spontaneously create symbol-embedded art. This paper reviews the relationship between these symbols and the multiple layers of the child psyche. The developmental trajectory of a child's drawing ability is delineated in order to understand the scribbles and symbols children create during their early years. Finally, art created by a 3½ year old bereaved child is presented to exemplify the expression of the conscious and unconscious mind through artwork. The analysis of the child's narration and use of symbols sheds light on the inner world of the child, permitting a better understanding of the child that may be unattainable through verbal expression alone.

Keywords

Symbolism, bereavement, grief, children, Hong Kong.

Introduction

The popular phrase, 'a picture is worth a thousand words', is especially pertinent to children since their utilisation of pictures to communicate is often more powerful than their use of words. Studies have found that most children do not utter their first words until sometime in their first year; they are often not able to combine words before the age of 3 and many do not produce grammatically correct sentences until the age of 4 (Chomsky, 1969; Pinker, 1994). As a result, prior to the age of 4, communication is facilitated by meaningful gestures and other symbolic representations (Longobardi, Quaglia, & Lotti, 2015).

According to Jung (1964), young children are naturally drawn to symbolic expression such as that found in artwork, fairytales and fantasies. Such symbols are multi-faceted; the psyche of an individual responds to these symbols at both conscious and unconscious levels (Schaverien, 2005). Most children begin to draw spontaneously around the age of 18 months (Dubowski, 1984). Their drawings can reveal the multiple layers of their psyche

and enable them to communicate and express various levels of consciousness. Furthermore, the creation process and the symbolic product itself can help to promote a sense of wholeness and growth (Malchiodi, 1998).

This article focuses on using psychodynamic approaches to understanding children's use of symbols in art-making. The developmental factor of children's drawing abilities will be taken into account alongside collective and individual meanings of symbols. Finally, a bereaved child's artwork will be presented to illustrate the value of art in understanding child psychology.

Symbols, psyche, and artwork

The presence of psychological material in symbols attracted psychologists such as Freud and Jung to study symbols in myths, dreams, and fantasies as a way to understand the unconscious mind (Jaffé, 1964). While symbols in dream and imagery are transient, symbols in visual art are aesthetically concrete (Schaverien, 1999). The concrete visual form allows psychological material to surface for