

Start With Scribbling
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Almost every baby follows a predictable sequence of locomotion before walking: rolling over, crawling, pulling up on furniture, and tentative steps with lots of diaper-cushioned falls onto his rump. Children's art skills also advance in stages. Components of physical and intellectual development mature with time, bringing wondrous changes in the artwork of growing children. With a little insight into this naturally unfolding process, adults will not diminish the value of the early scribbles that precede recognizable figures; they can enjoy and support each passing season of growth. From a jumble of line and color, a full expression of experience, feeling, and imagination will bloom.

SHOULDER TO FINGERS

Physical development dictates how much control the young artist has over his crayon or paintbrush. As an infant, Eddie was adept at grabbing pens from Mom or Dad as they tried to jot down a phone number or write a check. His main interest was in getting the pen into his mouth. Crude stabs onto paper (or inadvertently onto Mom's check), were less art than imitation of how parents use these tools. Steady on his feet after age one, Eddie sways his whole body to manipulate a fat crayon in his chubby fist to make wobbly jots and streaks on big paper. Dad holds the paper down so it doesn't slip off the coffee table under Eddie's concentrated efforts. With close supervision, a magic marker gives Eddie smoother control as it glides wet pigment across the paper. At age two, he gets control of the shoulder joint, and can make sweeping arcs of color while standing at an easel. Big paper is still the key to accommodating his limited coordination. Gradually, by about age three, control from the shoulder spreads to the elbow, affording a sitting position for art. Now we see diagonal scribbles turning into closed shapes, coarse circles. A circle soon becomes a human face. Smaller crude circles make eyes, maybe a mouth. One day there is hair erupting from the perimeter. A delightful progression in the human form comes next. Eddie adds arms and legs – but no torso – to his "people." All appendages come from where a neck would be – early childhood professionals call this the tadpole stage. Progressing on down the arm, wrist control comes around age four. This development gives Eddie the ability to make much smaller marks so he can add more detail to his shapes. Suns, spiders, and flowers are popular, with their respective rays, legs, and petals emanating from the center of the drawing or painting. With more control, buildings get windows, cars get wheels, bodies get clothing. By age six, Eddie can comfortably grasp a pencil with his fingertips. He can use this skill to add even finer elements

of detail to his drawings and, incidentally, to make the tiny circles and line segments used in writing.

PAT AND SNIP

Other physical milestones can be observed during early development with play dough and scissors. These experiences add to the growing coordination of the small muscles of the hands. The introduction of play dough is saved until Eddie has less interest in tasting every new experience. Close to age two, he gets his first feel of this wonderfully malleable material. With an open hand he pats the dough flat. He uses his pointer finger to poke some craters. Pat and poke. Mash and squish. This is developmental play dough play for a two-year-old. At age three, Eddie discovers that he can control his curved palms to make snakes. More control lets him advance from back and forth rolling to round and round rolling and voila! he creates a ball. With the added wrist dexterity at age four, he shapes a bowl. Soon, added features are possible: a handle for the cup, small buttons for the snowman. By age six, he can represent many of the familiar objects in his world. Before scissors are offered, Eddie takes pleasure in ripping paper with his toddler fists. These can be used for collage – glued onto a paper plate or other stiff surface. As a typical toddler, he wants to use scissors like the grown folk. Dad firmly holds an old greeting card while Eddie grips the cutting tool with a hand on each finger hole. At age three he gets pretty good at making snips with the open close motion of one hand on a child-size pair of scissors. He goes along the edge of the paper relishing the sheer fun of this newfound power. In a slow rhythm, it's open, close, open, close. Next he can cut across the paper in a not-so-straight line. At first this is just a series of snips like his "fringes," only forward instead of along the edge. The rhythm gets progressively faster and the line straighter. With the wonderful wrist motility of age four, jagged shapes are cut out of the paper. Over the next few months the edges lose their roughness. Lots of paper is employed in Eddie's adventures in handling the scissors. Color contrasts can be explored: gluing pieces onto a flat background, covering a box or coffee can, or stringing shapes on a hanger mobile. Messing around with colors and shapes is elemental to art.

PICTURES IN MY HEAD

Representational art – that which holds meaning to the artist – accompanies language development. As children are able to put objects and actions into words, so can they ascribe meaning to their scribbles. "That's Daddy's truck" is inscribed on the back of a toddler's green scrawl. Mommy and Eddie show the picture to Dad, who is touched to have had his truck immortalized in this way. "Tell me about your picture" is a politic way to capture what is on a child's mind when he is drawing. Writing it down for him reinforces the notion that art can represent ideas.

A few hours later he may have changed his mind (he's thinking of something else now) or simply forgotten what it was he was thinking about before. The scribble itself holds no more clue to him than to you. No matter. Like his endless cutting, the practice of attaching meaning to his artwork helps him shape his ideas as it helps him shape the drawings. It is not insignificant that the human face is usually the first recognizable form a child draws. From the moment he opened his eyes at birth, this has been his favorite sight. The people he cares the most about, including himself, are the people he represents in his first human figure drawings. Drawings continue to show the child's perspective: objects are not to scale, and their location is often important to the story. At age three, Eddie draws a telling family portrait. He places himself, the largest figure, in the center of the page. His tiny parents off in the corner, are nearly eclipsed by the new baby sister who floats between them. His artwork draws from the emotions of his experience.

Don't miss the dramatic epic of "Scribble Becomes Expression of the Soul" playing out on a refrigerator near you.