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## **Recognizing Defenses in the Drawings and Play of Children in Therapy**

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### **Defenses and Defense Mechanisms**

When children in psychotherapy are invited to express themselves by playing with toys or drawing pictures, they reveal their deepest concerns in the metaphors of their imagination. While the content of these drawings is often revealing, the process is often concealing. In a strictly verbal therapy the defenses enter the session as resistances and are, to a great extent, recognized as figures of speech and styles of speaking. In a play therapy, there is no fundamental rule, only an invitation to play. Consequently there is no resistance, only defense, which the therapist must interpret or at least manage. In The Ego and The Mechanisms of Defense (1936) Anna Freud contextualized her work by explaining that in the early days, psychoanalysis was a psychology of the id and was expected to: "... confine its investigations exclusively to infantile fantasies carried on into adult life, imaginary gratifications, and the punishments apprehended in retribution for these." (Anna Freud, 1936, 1966 p. 4) With the publication of Sigmund Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle, in 1920, psychoanalysis expanded, from a psychology of the id to a psychology of the ego and id. Thus, Anna Freud explained, the analyst's first task is to recognize the defense mechanism. "His next task is to undo what has been done by the defense, i.e., to find out and restore to its place that which has been omitted through repression, to rectify displacements, and to bring that which has been isolated back into its true context. When he has re-established the severed connections, he turns his attention once more from the analysis of the ego to that of the id." (Anna Freud, 1936, 1966, p. 15)

Anna Freud reminded us that defenses help us to manage 1) the strength of the instincts, 2) objective anxiety, and 3) superego anxiety. She lists nine defenses previously described in the literature - regression, repression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self, and reversal. To these nine, she adds sublimation. These ten are the defenses available to the ego in its conflicts with the instinctual representatives and their affects. In the ego's conflicts with objective unpleasure and objective danger, she says the ego employs denial in fantasy, denial in word and act and restriction of the ego. In the ego's conflicts with superego anxiety she lists identification with the aggressor and a form of altruism.

Subsequently, Arthur Valenstein and his co-workers formulated a list of 24 first order defensive activities and 15 additional complex, second order defensive activities.

1. BASIC (FIRST ORDER) Acting out, Affectualization, Avoidance, Blocking, Control through thinking, Denial (1. Denial by exaggeration 2. Denial through fantasy), Desexualization, Detachment, Displacement, Intellectualization, Introjection, Isolation (1. Compartmentalization 2. Splitting off), Magical thinking, Projection, Rationalization, Reaction formation, Regression, Repression, Restriction of ego function, Somatization, Sublimation, Turning against the self, Undoing, Withdrawal.
2. COMPLEX (SECOND ORDER) Aestheticism, Altruistic surrender, Asceticism, Clinging to object, Clowning, mocking and scoffing, Compliance, Controlling, Counterphobia, Depersonalization, Eating and drinking (a form of acting out), Falling ill, Identification (1. With the loved object, 2. With the lost object, 3. With the aggressor, 4. Out of guilt), Ritualization, Formalization, Sexualization (libidinization), Whistling in the dark. (Valenstein's work published in Bibring et al, 1961)

Robert Wallerstein then "...drew a distinction between defense mechanisms, as constructs that denote a way of functioning of the mind, invoked to explain how behaviors, affects and ideas serve to avert or modulate unwanted impulse discharge, and defenses as the actual behaviors, affects and ideas which serve defensive purposes." (1967 and 1983) He further noted that they can both be of varying levels of hierarchical complexity and so Valenstein's differentiation between first and second order defensive activities seemed to break down.

Subsequently Paulina Kernberg (1994) identified 31 defense mechanisms, which she subdivided into Normal, Neurotic, Borderline and Psychotic groupings. While such hierarchies are useful, we must bear in mind the limits of such schemas and recognize that defenses of one sort or another may be identified in the behavior of a wide variety of people with different levels of personality organization. As such, in addition to identifying defensive strategies we must also be attentive to the predominance of certain defenses, the constellations of defenses, the effectiveness and flexibility of those defenses and the threats, which they defend against.

Anna Freud noted that, in analysis, the uninterrupted flow of associations illuminate the contents of the id, while the resistances reveal the defenses. She cautioned against the lop-sided approaches of, on the one hand, simply dealing with free-associations, latent dream thoughts, symbols, and the contents of the transference or, on the other hand, simply dealing with the resistances, dream censorship, and various transferred modes of defense. (Freud, A., 1936, 1966) Subsequently Merton Gill, discussing the hierarchical complexities of defenses, noted that "Any behavior simultaneously has impulse and defense aspects..." and that "defensive behavior will provide some discharge of what is being defended against..." (Gill, 1963) Furthermore, Roy Schafer (1968) said that "defenses must be viewed as expressing the unity of the ego and the id and not just the division and enmity of the two." Anna Freud had said something similar when she recognized that "various measures of defense are not entirely the work of the ego" but are partially formed by the properties of the instincts. (Freud, A., 1936, 1966, p. 175) Nonetheless, Gill and Schafer were emphatic on this point and extended it to a completely different level. In Paulina Kernberg's summary of the British School's contributions to the concept of mechanisms of defense she included 1) their proposals

that impulses, feelings and modes of defense are experienced as fantasies; 2) the observation that defense mechanisms defend, “promote the gratification of instincts and serve growth and development”; and 3) the complex relationship of instinct to fantasy and defense mechanisms. (Kernberg, P, 1994, p. 60-62) Thus, the defense reveals as it conceals. In other words, the size of the lock on the vault tells us something about that which is contained within or at least how it is valued. By observing the style of the narrative, the drawings, and the play, the therapist recognizes the defenses being employed and their relation to the instincts and other threats. Defenses cover and invite us to dis-cover. As Schafer pointed out, defenses are not simply “wardings off, renunciations, and negative assertions” they are also “implementations, gratifications, and positive assertions.”(Schafer, 1968 p. 58)

### **Recognizing Defenses in Children’s Play**

In 1915 Sigmund Freud made a play observation of his eighteen-month-old grandson. Freud wrote: "The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' [there]. This then was the complete game - disappearance and return." (Freud, 1920, 1955, p. 15)

Freud wrote that based on the context of the game it was clear to him, and the child's mother, that the “o-o-o-o” that this child uttered when the reel was thrown over the edge of the cot was his way of saying “fort,” the German word for “gone”. Freud then made the interpretation that this game of disappearance and return - this game of fort-da - "was related to the child's great cultural achievement - the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. ...The child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent. How then does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle? It may perhaps be said in reply that her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending." (Freud, 1920, 1955, pp.15-6)

Freud suggests two interpretations: The first is that the child was in a passive position in relation to his mother’s departure. Thus the game offered him an active role and might suggest an instinct for mastery acting independent of the pleasure associated. The second interpretation was that throwing away the object might provide a pleasurable yield by satisfying an impulse to turn the tables and take revenge on his mother for leaving him - as if to say, and again I quote Freud, “All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself." In offering the second interpretation Freud helped us to understand the tendency to repeat scenarios in life that are seemingly unpleasant but are re-enacted because they are ‘familiar’ - shaped by and derived from early experience

within the family. He further demonstrated how this compulsion to repeat is the cornerstone of neurotic behavior. In his observation of the Fort-Da game, Freud recognized a defensive strategy in play when his grandson symbolized his mother and turned passive into active to come to terms with the threat of abandonment.

Anna Freud wrote, "...if we analyze the interruption to play, we discover that it represents a defensive measure on the part of the ego, comparable to resistance in free association." (Freud, A, 1936, 1966, p. 38) Erik Erikson later defined 'play disruption' as "...the sudden and complete or diffused and slowly spreading inability to play." (Erikson, 1940, 1987, p. 143) The inability to play may be due to a number of specific defensive maneuvers including suppression, ego restriction, repression but sometimes the play continues while at the same time maintaining a variety of defensive maneuvers. Of course, sublimation, displacement, and turning passive into active are three very important defensive maneuvers that are integral to almost all imaginative play. Doing and undoing is seen in a variety of commonly observed play scenes involving repetitious scenarios and themes of death and rebirth (fort-da, hide and seek, peek-a-boo). Anxieties about freely giving oneself over to the play - that is, anxieties about regressing in the service of the ego - are seen in the lining up of figures, in efforts to create games with rigidly fixed rules, and other manifestations of ego restriction. Acting out becomes obvious when the pretend status of the play is lost and the child's impulses seek direct gratification in actions that stop the imaginative play and become dangerous, destructive or inappropriate.

Lili Peller described the development of play from the infant's Solitary Body Play to -> Play with Toys or the Body in Relation to Mother to -> Creative and Imaginative Play with Toys in parallel with and then together with peers and on to -> Games. In addition to providing us with a developmental schema, Peller also gave us a tool for recognizing when a child starts to use regression as a defense. (Peller, 1954) Thus, regression could be seen not only in the appearance of infantile play themes but also in any shift in the entire play mode to earlier forms of play for the particular child. Depressive play themes reflecting a turning against the self may include destroying play scenes, dropping toys, and an absence of imaginative play. The therapist's invitation to regress in the service of the ego may also be defended against by the use of rationalization, as revealed in a preference for realistic figures, themes, and scenarios.

The following is a list of some popular children's games and a partial list of dominant defensive strategies mobilized in the playing of these games. Games like Fort-Da, Peek-A-Boo, and Hide-and-Seek, for example, pertain to a child's sense of emotional object constancy, as well as the anxieties associated with damage and repair, loss and return. (Louis Stewart - personal communication) As such they fortify the ego by practicing at doing and undoing, and turning passive into active. Games of Catch and Chase contain some similar components. Games like Tag - You're IT; Cops and Robbers; and running from the one with Kooties are built on the defensive operations of projection and identification with the 'bad object.' Contests, trials of strength and King of the Mountain provide a wonderful expression of oedipal rivalry and an opportunity for identification with the aggressor, and turning passive into active. Dress-up is another obvious game of identification. Simon Says and Follow the Leader address the sado-masochistic dynamics

of dominance and submission through identification with the aggressor, turning passive into active, suppression of impulses, etc. When children run, play cars and chase, manic defenses such as avoidance are mobilized and practiced. Building sandcastles, painting, and playing with modeling clay all require regression in the service of the ego, sublimation and the use of fantasy. Playing House and Playing Doctor also require regression in the service of the ego, sublimation and the use of fantasy but turning passive into active is an essential defensive strategy employed in these games. Children that like to make collections (stamps, sea shells, butterflies, thimbles, etc.), may be employing a number of different defensive strategies at the same time, such as rationalization, displacement, turning passive into active, identification, etc.

When children watch and play magic, we often recognize their fears of castration and the reparative fantasy of the female phallus – now you see it, now you don't; the woman that is cut in half and put back together, the wand that is broken and then made new, the disappearing rabbit that comes out of the hat, the magic wand and the mysteries of levitation without using the hands. Magical thinking, links faulty or partial information concerning the differences between the sexes, common to childhood experience. But when magical thinking becomes a style, after secondary process thinking has been established, it may serve as a link that maintains a split and in this way wards off anxiety related to the knowledge of sexual difference.

### **Recognizing Defenses in Children's Drawings**

As we now consider defenses in children's drawings it behooves us to recall that defenses are those strategies that are used to defend against the instincts, objective anxiety, and superego anxiety. In the case of Little Hans (1909) Sigmund Freud described the development of symptoms and the treatment of a five-year-old boy who had developed a phobia of horses. The boy was the son of Max Graf, a member of Freud's Psychological Wednesday Society. Within Freud's account of the world's first "child analysis" he wrote:

"His father luckily made a note of many things which turned out later on to be of unexpected value. 'I drew a giraffe for Hans, who has been to Schönbrunn several times lately. He said to me: "Draw its widdler too." "Draw it yourself," I answered; whereupon he added this line to my picture (See Fig. 1) He began by drawing a short stroke, and then added a bit on to it, remarking: Its widdler's longer.'" (Freud, 1909, 1955, p. 13)

The actual drawing of the giraffe and its widdler (penis) is reproduced in Freud's account of the case so we can see what they were specifically talking about. The short line of the giraffe's widdler and its subsequent elongation are graphically separate from the body of the giraffe. We could ask, Was Little Hans's intense interest in the horse's 'widdler' and the giraffe's 'widdler' counterphobic? Why has he drawn the giraffe's 'widdler' graphically disconnected or cut (castration and/or denial) from the giraffe's body? Was the first line of the 'widdler' drawn as a minimization of the giraffe's penis (his father's penis) or was it an accurate representation of Hans own diminutive penis about which he had become anxious? Was the second line of the 'widdler' drawn as a reaction formation to what may have been perceived as a small penis (his own) or an accurate representation (of his father's penis) about which Hans also had some anxiety? While speculations about

the answers to these questions could form the basis of another discussion, the anecdote itself and the questions I propose, provide us with a historical context and an orientation to our discussion about recognizing defenses in children's drawings.

As with symbolism, a discussion about recognizing defenses in children's drawings must begin with a statement about the importance of not using the following observations like a simple formula or decoding book in which 'this' equals 'that'. The aim here is not to present a decoding tool as much as it is to offer some general observations gathered from clinical experience that the reader can bear in mind while sitting with child patients expressing themselves through drawing.

Though I assume that the following observations might be applicable to drawings drawn in other contexts, it must be noted that clinically I generally use a non-directive approach in my invitation for children to draw in therapy. My office contains small toys, puppets, clay, paper, crayons and pencils. I invite the child to draw whatever he/she would like to draw and only coax enough to get the process started. During or after the completion of the drawing I like to engage the child in a discussion about the drawing and invite him/her to tell me a story about it. I take dictation and write the story down verbatim. This often engages the two of us more deeply into a discussion about the picture, and it not infrequently has the effect of stimulating the child to become more interested in elaborating the story and delighting in hearing the story retold at the end of the session. (Benveniste, 1985) When interpretations are made, I generally make them, at least to begin with, within the metaphor of the play, the drawing or the story. (Ekstein, 1966) The stories the children tell not only elaborate the content of their fantasies but the defenses come into higher relief, as well. Interpretation within the metaphor allows for an elaboration of the content and, to a certain extent, a demonstration of the defenses, which can then be interpreted or managed in such a way as to allow for the further elaboration of the fantasy.

Ernst Kris wrote, "When the artist creates during inspiration he is subject to an ego regression but it is a partial and temporary ego regression, one controlled by the ego which retains the function of establishing contact with an audience." (Kris, 1952, p. 167) The drawings of schizophrenics, however, are characterized by: "the tendency to fill space, to crowd in, the stereotypy and the rigidity of all shapes, and the hypertrophy of symbols." (Kris & Pappenheim, 1952, p. 152) "By his word the insane artist commands the demons, and by his image he exercises magic control. Art has deteriorated from communication to sorcery." (Kris, 1952, p. 61) The path from sorcery to communication is characterized by the exchange and refinement of lower order defenses for higher order defenses. Margaret Naumburg (1947), described the progression from rigid and stereotyped drawings at the beginning of therapy to those at the end of treatment which were characterized as being more personal, original and spontaneous. Edith Kramer (1971) described the typical defensive strategies in children's drawings as: stereotyped figures, repetition, and chaos; scribbles by children capable of representational drawing; perfectionism; 'abstract' art; designs; explosions; conventional representations; copying; tracing and the like. She noted that the progression from acting out to sublimation is not always possible during the course of a therapy and that more modest goals of exchanging chaotic acting out with only slightly higher order defenses can make a significant

difference in the life of a child. As an example, she noted, “In his better moments, Henry manufactured innumerable Stars of David, initials, or combinations of both and gave them away as presents. Although the activity was compulsive and stereotyped, it helped him behave in a less chaotic fashion, cement relationships, and establish some tenuous feeling of identity.” (Kramer, 1971, p.132)

Most of the literature on children’s drawings addresses the meaning of the content. When defenses are addressed, they are usually described in terms of the restriction of the ego, sublimation and regression in the service of the ego. Often in the literature on projective drawings, for example, Koppitz (1968), graphic indicators are associated directly with certain kinds of emotional problems without reference to defenses. While therapists may, in a sense, ‘naturally’ interpret or manage the defenses while more consciously tracking and addressing the drive derivatives, this paper endeavors to widen our point of view by helping the child therapist to more consciously recognize the defenses. The following is an accounting of a variety of defenses and their graphic indicators and/or other behavioral indicators associated with children’s drawings.

Defenses are behaviors for avoiding or modulating the strength of the instincts, objective anxiety and superego anxiety. As resistances in verbal therapies, many defenses appear as manifestations in speech – intellectualization, rationalization, humor, negation, etc. The verbal therapies canalize the psyche into language and, in doing so, support verbalization and reflection over acting out and other symptomatic behavior. On the other hand, the dangers of getting caught in the quagmires of intellectualization and rationalization are familiar to all psychotherapists working in verbal modalities. Similarly, a therapy that canalizes the psyche partially into drawings and play supports sublimation, regression in the service of the ego, and, to a certain extent, acting out. Acting out is one of those annoying demons that slips out of Pandora’s Box when we invite the child not simply to talk with us but to engage the motor system as well, by playing with toys, crawling about the office and drawing. Child therapists are not strangers to toys flying across their offices, unexpected punches, unexpected hugs, broken crayons, clay in the rug and drawings that spill over onto desks and floors. These are common clinical problems that every child therapist must find a way to deal with technically by interpreting the acting out, canalizing the acting out into sublimated activity, limiting the media available and, in some cases, by practicing self defense.

To begin with, the refusal to draw may reflect a fear of the impulses emerging uncontrollably, which are warded off with suppression or avoidance - the conscious effort to not be aware of something that has already entered consciousness. We see suppression in the child’s comment: “I don’t want to draw.” But in more cases than not, the refusal to draw is born of superego anxiety projected onto the therapist. Projection is the displacement and relocation of the person’s thoughts, feelings, desires, etc. into others or the outer world. Projection is a commonly used defensive strategy but when overused it manifests as a paranoid stance. This paranoid stance was demonstrated by an eight year-old boy who was content to draw as long as I didn’t watch but when I did, he stopped drawing, glared at me and said “What are YOU lookin’ at?”

Restriction of the ego is a limiting of activity to avoid threatening and overwhelming external stimuli. We may recognize it in a constriction and repetition of forms and themes. An autistic boy, from age 9 to 14 drew circles that changed only slightly during the course of our work together. The forms changed from scribbles to discs to suns to suns with radials to hollow circles and finally to hollow circles with a line off to the side. His 1,250 drawings are so similar that they were used to make a five minute animated film depicting the tiny changes in his psyche, as reflected in his drawings. While the changes corresponded with changes in his functioning, these images reflect, more than anything, a severe restriction of the ego. (Benveniste, 1983)

A restriction of the ego was also evident in the drawings of a seven-year-old boy who was violent and attending a school for disturbed children. He drew dinosaurs and vacation scenes. What was uncanny was the occasional re-creation of a scene, that he had previously drawn, in colors that were identical and with placement so similar to the previous drawing that one could place one picture on top of the other, hold them up to the light and see the features in both pictures in the exact same positions. Though I have only seen a few cases like this, the experience sensitized me to children's use of space in their drawings. Since then, I have often placed two drawings, from the same child, one on top of the other and not infrequently found that the father in one picture, for example, is in the same place as the monster in the next picture.

The restriction of the ego may also be evident in children's preferences for stick figures, the use of pencil or pen instead of color crayons, or the use of a single color instead of the whole spectrum. Stiff looking human forms and barren scenes can also convey a restriction of the ego. While the restriction of the ego can be recognized in the extremely rigid repetition of form, color, placement, style and themes, a more flexible repetition of forms and themes is routinely encountered in almost any series of drawings executed by a single child in psychotherapy. When the forms and themes recur with some flexibility they simply represent manifestations of the repetition compulsion and perhaps a good therapeutic process, as well. An example of this was the case of a child who for many months drew pictures and told stories about two friends who were fixing the bicycle of one of the two boys.

Restriction of the ego is a warding off of threatening external stimuli by limiting activity, and inhibition is a similar strategy but used to ward off internal stimuli. Recognizing them as defenses in drawings is not always as clear as their definitions. Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, the 'inventor' of play therapy wrote the first book on child analysis, A Study of the Mental Life of the Child in 1913. In this book, she reported numerous child observations of her nephew/patient, Rolf. In one passage, she reported: "'Very proper' drawings have come even from the hand of my nephew – who has won for himself, I fear, a bad reputation through the pages of this book: trains of cars without a 'closet' (toilet), but with an enormous smoke-funnel and a great quantity of smoke streaming from it; street-lamps with lamp-lighter and ladder, as they are seen in picture-books; beetles and butterflies without sex characters." (1919, p. 142) The 'properness' of drawings and the absence of toilets and sex characteristics are, of course, another kind of restriction of the ego or inhibition. (Footnote 1)

Some children will not only confine themselves to pencil drawn stick figures but will also prefer to draw their pictures using templates, a ruler or a compass. The restriction of the ego and/or inhibition are obvious but the preference for perfection in these pictures is often secondarily associated with intellectualization – the use of directed intellectual activity as a means of controlling affects and impulses. Intellectualization is also evident in the preference for minute detail as well as in the representation of maps, diagrams, non-pictorial patterns or abstract representations.

Representations of objects placed in the center of the page without backgrounds present a timeless, placeless, and socially disconnected statement of being. When the narcissism, intellectualization, isolation and abstraction are more intense, we see centrally placed abstract images and designs some of which have philosophical, political or cosmic meanings consciously attributed to them, as seen in the case of Richard, reported by Melanie Klein in 1945. Richard spoke of his abstract designs as representing relationships between political forces but with the help of his analyst, he was eventually able to understand those political forces as being more related to personal concerns. Isolation is an effort to ward off unpleasant stimuli by distancing oneself from them or by isolating affects from ideas. Abstraction is a kind of intellectualization in which the focus is not on the troublesome affect laden reality of the problem but on the concepts and patterns of life. Isolation can be expressed in a refusal to draw, a difficulty beginning a drawing, a pencil that reliably shakes several times before making contact with the paper, and a light or sketchy line that is used to draw the picture. It can also be reflected in the isolated or central placement of a person, object or abstract form. Related to isolation is withdrawal of affect, which can be seen in some monochromatic drawings, preference for pencil drawings and forms that are not filled in with color or shading. Depersonalizing can be recognized in an absence of human or any other animate form and a preference for robotic figures or abstract representations.

Depersonalizing is different from splitting but often associated with it as in borderline psychopathology, for example. Splitting is the manner in which two opposing attitudes toward an object are maintained and split off from one another temporally in order to satisfy an instinctual demand. Splitting is sometimes represented in an actually split image with two distinctly different sides within the drawing, but images such as these can also reflect a wide variety of conflicts in which splitting is, in fact, not employed as a means of dealing with the conflict. Furthermore, splitting may also be expressed in the representation of a single all good or all bad image with no representation of the split off other side at all. Though it is difficult to recognize the defense of splitting in children's drawings, I have, on occasion, seen drawings by borderline children that graphically depict their own use of splitting.

Defenses employed in the drawings of obsessive compulsive children often include intellectualization, rationalization and undoing. Rationalization, the use of rational explanations to avoid owning thoughts, feelings and desires, may be evident in preferences for realistic forms and themes over more imaginative ones and also in efforts to fix the pictures - to make them 'right.' Undoing may also be reflected in efforts to fix the pictures but is further reflected in drawing forms and erasing them - drawing and undrawing - or drawing pictures and throwing them away, usually because they too

accurately revealed the child's wishes or feelings. Anna Freud described a little girl who drew a world where "the people had to eat their way through a monstrous accumulation of pats of excrement arranged in rows. In addition to these drawings" Anna Freud reported "she made a series of most delicately colored pictures of flowers and gardens, which she painstakingly executed with much neatness and animation while detailing to me her very "dirty" anal daydreams." (Freud, A. 1927, 1974, p. 31) The doing and undoing in these anecdotes is recognized first in the pats of excrement being made less offensive by being lined up in rows and second in the dirty anal daydreams being illustrated with delicately colored flowers.

While those with an obsessive compulsive style inhibit with intellectualization, rationalization and undoing there are other ways to inhibit employed by a wide range of personality styles. Minimization, for example, is often recognized in verbal therapies through the use of the term 'just' – as in "I just pushed her." Or "I just had a couple of drinks." As a defense in children's drawings we sometimes recognize minimization in the preference for drawing tiny figures. Repression, is a mode of managing threatening impulses by simply not allowing them into consciousness. It is evident in the use of realistic themes, conventional content, stylization and in copying the drawings of other children. Repression is at work in the common representations of some girls who never seem to tire of drawing, in a very stylized manner, people, houses, flowers and smiley faces; and in the common representations of some boys who similarly are driven to drawing, again in a very stylized manner, airplanes, cars and motorcycles. Regardless of the content, stylization is often an indicator of repression. Some children may be very proud of their ability to draw appealing cartoon-like characters. In therapy, it often takes some time before their repression gives way and they begin to produce representations of more expressive, if not awkward, figures devoid of the previously emblematic style. In some circumstances repression is evident not by what is in the scene but by what was left out. This, of course, requires a deeper knowledge of the specific child and the analytic process in which he/she is engaged.

In contrast to conventional and realistic images drawn by those using repression and rationalization, there are others who draw wiggly forms of other-worldly creatures which may reflect their disdain for conventional thinking, their inability to participate in social conventions and their preference for denial in fantasy. They avoid external threats, such as social interaction, by retreating into fantasy and drawing figures that meet their internal needs.

While denial in fantasy is one of many unconscious efforts to not think about something, suppression, is actually a conscious effort to not think about something in particular. It may be reflected in the overt refusal to draw, the use of stick figures, and the covering over of images with pencil or crayon. For example, a five year-old boy, enrolled in a regular classroom was doing poorly socially and academically. He was enuretic and really quite disturbed when I first met him. At the beginning of our work together he was often overwhelmed by his flooding impulses. He drew pictures and told stories about Spiderman in his hideout (a triangle) and the waters and fires that invaded it. As he drew and narrated the drama, he feverishly described the way Spiderman "threw a circle web" around each of the masses of invading forces until they had all been successfully dealt

with, leaving him thoroughly out of breath. His efforts at suppression, putting protective circles around the danger, were obviously only marginally successful. And in fact, one could easily see how he had used therapy to deal with something that he needed to deal with but in another way didn't want to – a common experience of many patients in therapy. In Erik Erikson's 1937 paper Configurations in Play – Clinical Notes, he reports the case of an eight year-old boy, J, whom he saw in psychoanalytic treatment. He says, "His first drawing pictured a woman with some forms enlarged so as to represent large buttocks. In violent streaks he covered her with brown paint." (Erikson, 1937, p.98) In this anecdote we can see the way that the defense of suppression both conceals the anal concerns - covers the large buttocks - while at the same time revealing all the feces about which J. was so concerned. Another boy, a patient of mine, became so distressed with the battle-field scene that was taking place on his paper that he was at last only able to frantically suppress his impulses, by covering each in-coming plane with a mass of brown crayon that he referred to as "dookie" and "caca."

While suppression is a conscious effort to not think about something, denial, is an unconscious effort to manage external threats by, in a sense, saying, 'they don't exist.' Denial may be expressed in ways similar to suppression and repression but may also be expressed in minimizations, absent figures and graphic boundaries that effectively reduce the threat of figures in the drawings.

Depressed patients commonly suppress and repress their anger and then redirect it toward themselves. We call this turning against the self, or the intrapunitive stance. It is a way of managing aggressive impulses and the fear of retribution, by attacking oneself in the name of the other. It is a commonly used defensive strategy of depressives and others with low self-esteem. We see turning against the self in frankly suicidal themes, in scenes in which the protagonist meets with obstacles and succumbs to them, and in images that are declared ugly and covered over with additional markings. Turning against the self is also reflected in some refusals to draw, in harsh self-criticisms of one's ability to draw, in declarations that the pictures are ugly, and in tearing up the pictures or throwing them away.

While turning against the self is a way of managing one's own aggressive impulses, we often see patients turning away from the world outside or their impulses within by regressing. Regression is the tendency to deal with threatening stimuli in manners associated with earlier levels of development. It can be recognized in defensive strategies such as infantile themes, decreasing levels of pictorial complexity, and other forms of infantile behavior including acting out. Regression in the service of the ego, on the other hand, is evident in the child who can allow him/herself to enter into the drawing activity and let go to it enough to be able to say, as one child once said to me with genuine enchantment, "I wonder what I'm going to draw today!" When regressing in the service of the ego, the child loosens some defenses and in doing so draws on the well-springs of the unconscious to awaken conflicts and seek resolutions in creative new syntheses through the metaphors expressed in drawings and the stories about the drawings.

Acting out is the tendency to unconsciously go into action and live out problematic dynamics rather than seeking solutions through cognitive and affective channels. We

often say that people act out rather than remember but with impulsive children, their acting out may simply be a problem of never learning how to canalize experience through cognitive and affective channels. Acting out is obvious in the child that tests the limits of the therapy situation. In these circumstances, the child may disown his/her superego and provoke the therapist to fulfil this role. But we can also recognize subtler forms of acting out in the child that splashes color across the paper, uses broad strokes in the drawing, breaks the crayons, cannot confine the drawing to the page and routinely ends up marking the table or floor where he/she is drawing, or when the child cannot plan the drawing well enough and seems to always need a second or third piece of paper taped onto the first to contain all that is being expressed.

Enlarged images, including those that may be too big for the page, may reflect a tendency toward acting out and grandiosity but similarly may be reaction formations against feelings of inadequacy. But then again reaction formations can take many forms including the minimizations referred to earlier. Reaction formation, the warding off of forbidden wishes by taking the opposite attitude or moving in the exact opposite direction, may also be revealed in the details of the stories children tell about their drawings.

As mentioned previously, in the discussion on defenses in play, when acting out, the pretend status of the play is lost and the child's impulses seek direct gratification in actions that stop the imaginative play and become dangerous, destructive or inappropriate. This naturally applies to children's drawings, as well, where acting out forecloses the pretend status of the drawing and in doing so avoids opening the Pandora's Box of suppressed, repressed or split off material. But the pretend status of drawing, and playing, can also be lost in other ways. If we set up a dichotomy between the real and the imaginal or purely fantastic, the pretend might be said to be the optimal potential space between the two, where play or creative drawing happens. If the child is sunk in the imaginal or purely fantastic with little or no relation to reality, he/she may rely heavily on defenses such as denial in fantasy or abstraction at the psychotic level. Using these strategies to the extreme, the child obliterates the conflict ridden world or even attempts to assert omnipotent control over it by making drawings imbued with magic. On the other hand, those that cleave to denial and rationalization seem to glorify the real and the realistic in an attempt at representing a desolate, perfect world devoid of people, animals, emotion and other sloppy things too difficult for them to deal with. They demonstrate a depressive pseudomaturity that covers their inability to pretend and their omnipotent but brittle attitude toward their creative efforts and human relationships. Their realistic representations, like hard fetishes, cap the perverse or frankly psychotic sentiments embedded in and beneath the surface. This is quite common in children who have a particularly strong obsessive compulsive style. More recently I have encountered children like this who initially appear extremely creative until I discovered they were representing and recounting, quite reliably, every single detail of a veritable pantheon of video-game superheroes and their respective strengths and abilities.

While my presentation, covering a great deal of material in a short space, may seem formulaic, I do not intend this material to be used as a set of simple formulas but rather as a set of observations that may attune the therapist to recognizing the defenses in

children's drawings. The reader will have noticed that some strategies are associated with more than one defense and that other defenses are only revealed or elaborated in the stories children tell about their drawings. Furthermore, in many circumstances the defensive strategies are recognized not as individual defenses but as constellations of defenses. Nonetheless, the clinical implication is that the therapist needs to interpret or manage the defenses to allow the child to move, for example, from acting out, restriction of the ego and inhibition up to intellectualization, rationalization, and repression and on to humor, regression in the service of the ego and sublimation in order to express and come to terms with the unconscious fantasies behind the conflicts and deficits that brought the child to therapy in the first place.

As noted earlier, Merton Gill (1963) called our attention to the ways in which defenses have both impulse and defense aspects and Roy Schafer noted that defenses are not simply "wardings off, renunciations, and negative assertions" but are also "implementations, gratifications, and positive assertions." (Schafer, 1968 p. 58) Their comments were made in the 1960s but more than 30 years earlier, Melanie Klein, in a discussion of ego restriction in children, wrote: "Moreover, such activities as monotonous obsessive drawing, building, sewing or making things – especially when we obtain few associations to them – seem to offer no means of approach to the life of the imagination. But we need only recall the examples of Greta and Egon to remind ourselves that even activities and talk so completely without phantasy as these do open the way to the unconscious if we do not merely regard them as expressions of resistance but treat them as true material." (Klein, 1932, pp. 113-4)

### **Carl: A Case Vignette**

The following case is illustrative of what we have been addressing here. Carl was a timid and somewhat isolated seven-year-old boy who was academically functioning below his ability in school. In our first session I invited him to draw absolutely anything he wanted to draw. He was impressed by the explicit openness of the offer, as though it opened additional opportunities for him. He drew a multicolored roller coaster track with two roller coaster cars. The roller coaster was drawn like an "S" on its side. It descended from the upper left corner, dipped at the bottom, rose up in the middle again, peaked, and then descended in the lower right hand corner. His ability to sublimate was evident from the first session but he was also plagued by his own use of projection which made it practically impossible for him to allow me to watch while he drew. I didn't interpret his projecting but rather managed it by averting my gaze until he was ready to show me what he had drawn. In the second session he drew two more roller coasters with the tracks in the same position on the page. These roller coasters, however, were more hastily drawn and monochromatic suggesting an inhibition or restriction of the ego, which seemed to indicate that he was straining under the pressure of his 'roller coaster-like' impulses. Then he drew a third picture – a fight between Godzilla and King Kong. The end of Godzilla's tail was in the upper left corner. Following the contour of its body the tail slopes down into his back and then re-ascends up to his neck and head at the top and middle of the page. The line of action then descends again, in a blast of fire emerging from his mouth onto King Kong below. In other words the swirling impulses metaphorized in the impersonal "S" shaped roller coaster had been differentiated into a conflict between two animate forces in battle - Godzilla and King Kong. In the third session he drew three

pictures - another “S” shaped roller coaster, a rocket and finally three multicolored rectangular boxes said to be containing monsters. He was making efforts to manage (suppress) his impulses, metaphorized as monsters in boxes, and was clearly straining in the effort. We could see in this drawing his monstrous impulses trying to get out while his defensive boxes tried to hold them in. Again I made no interpretation of the defense or the impulse directly but rather interpreted within the metaphor (Ekstein, 1966, p. 158) “Those are big strong monsters you have in those boxes. It looks like they want out and you want to keep them inside.”

I met Carl twice a week in a school setting. He was always glad to see me. He would always refer to me as Mr. Daniel’s, walk toward me with a smile on his face, and take my hand. Then together we would walk down the hall to our “picture time” room. Walking down the hall, I was always quite aware of his soft, warm hand resting in mine and the deep affection he showed toward me. As soon as we arrived in the room, he would sit at the table and demand that I give him a piece of paper, insist that I give him his crayons, tell me to shut-up, growl at me, get exasperated with me over nothing at all and draw his pictures with great intensity. If I asked about his picture before he was ready to discuss it, he would become enraged and tell me to shut-up. When he was ready he would tell me his story, often with great irritation. At the end of our session we would put the crayons away and file the picture with his name and date on the back. Leaving our “picture time” room he would take my hand again, lean gently into me and together we would return to his class where he would tenderly say good-bye until our next meeting. I contained his love and aggression without acting on it or ‘taking it personally’ and in doing so helped him to talk about that which was difficult to talk about and draw that which was difficult to depict.

Then one day his rage was peaking so much that he was barely able to organize himself enough to draw. He growled at me, slashed at the paper with his crayon and in one jab, his crayon ripped a hole in the paper (acting out). He continued to slash at it and when I asked about his picture he said “No. Yucky and junkie and bootie and poo poo and pee pee and boo boo Andrew (a friend of his).” Then he angrily demanded another piece of paper. I gave him the paper and to both of our surprise, an aesthetically pleasing image emerged before our eyes - a house with colorful Christmas lights, a garage, a truck, clouds, snow and stars. His mood shifted from rage to enchantment. “It’s raining outside” he said, “Its green snow coming down. I like this picture! The snow is gonna be everywhere. A house with two garages. I’m gonna have to decorate it. It’s Christmas time. I want it to shine at night. If I do it real bright I’ll bet it will shine at night. Mr. Daniel’s house. That’s your truck. That’s your snow. That’s your clouds. That’s your light bulbs. These your two garages. That’s your door. That’s your star. That’s your star up here. Those two stars is your stars.” (Benveniste, 1985) Embedded in this drawing were forms similar to those in the roller coasters and figures of Godzilla and King Kong he had drawn previously but in this drawing were reorganized aesthetically and personalized in the name of the transference. Without suggesting an instant cure or even a long-lasting shift, we can say that we had witnessed a movement from representations of the inanimate to the animate to the personal; and from restriction of the ego, projection, suppression and acting out to sublimation and regression in the service of the ego.

## **Conclusion**

In Freudian dream interpretation we seek to identify the drive derivatives but we also attend to the mechanisms of revealing and concealing the drives, the secondary elaboration, and the manner in which the dream is told. In the interpretation of children's drawings there is often a tendency to focus on only the drive derivatives rather than recognizing that the child's graphic representations are, just as in the reporting of dreams, a compromise between the drive derivatives and defenses used to manage them. This means that the image is never simply a symbol with a meaning but that the image itself is both drive derivative and defense in one. We listen for what the adult patient is not saying in the way the patient speaks and the way the patient does not speak. Similarly we need to be able to look for what is not represented in a child's drawing in the way the drawing is drawn and the way it is not drawn. In doing so, we orient ourselves to helping the child draw what is difficult draw and say what is difficult to say.

When we forget the defensive component of a dream image or a drawn image, we are more inclined to interpret the drawing simply as a drive derivative. While such interpretations are often illuminating, after a while these interpretations to the body metaphor tend to fall with a dull thud. Furthermore, when the image explicitly represents bodily based wishes, we often find it difficult to interpret beyond the manifest content. But with an awareness of the defensive component of the image, nothing is taken at face value, not even the explicit representation of bodily desires. And when the image explicitly presents the bodily wishes we can often further elaborate it by recognizing the defensive nature of its presentation and by recognizing the additional metaphors embedded in the story describing it. Thus, what we need in order to interpret a child's drawing is an understanding of the theory of infantile sexuality and the symbolic function, the ability to recognize drive derivatives, the ability to recognize defenses in drawings, and the ability to play with metaphor.

**FOOTNOTE (1)** Throughout Hermine Hug-Hellmuth's book A Study of the Mental Life of the Child and many of her other articles on psychoanalytic child observations and child analysis, she describes the sado-masochistic, onanistic, and exhibitionistic behavior of her patient/nephew Rolf Otto Hug. In doing so, she made no effort to hide his identity or in any way maintain his privacy. She describes his anal-urethral eroticism, his sexual curiosity, his aggression and his murderous impulses. In her 1912 article, The Analysis of a Dream of a Five and a Half Year Old Boy she describes his fun at waking her up while she slept in the same room with him. Speaking of this game to another, at age three and a half, Rolf said, "She should not sleep when I am awake." Two years later, still playing the same game, Rolf said to his Aunt Hermine, "You know, if I am going to sleep at my mother's again, I am going to jump on her in the middle of the night so that she cannot sleep." Hug-Hellmuth replied, "Oh come on, you are a horrible boy if you don't let your mother sleep. She is so good to you." And five-and-a-half-year old Rolf replied, "She should not sleep when I am awake." (MacLean & Rappen, 1991, p. 51-2) One could easily imagine that he may well have been desperately changing places with his own demons – turning passive into active – to manage his own fears through this little game. But Hug-Hellmuth was misreading the message and so her intervention provided no relief. Thirteen years later, in 1925, at age eighteen, after virtually every detail of his psychosexual development had been published, Rolf Otto Hug, a very troubled young

man by that time, crawled in through an open window of his Aunt Hermine's apartment at midnight, awakened her briefly and strangled her to death. (MacLean & Rappen, 1991)

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*Abstract*

**Recognizing Defenses in the Drawings and Play of Children in Therapy**

Children’s drawings and play have long been recognized as rich repositories of symbolic material derivative of infantile sexual fantasy. That view is based predominantly on the early drive theory approach to the interpretation of dreams with an almost exclusive focus on symbolic content. In an effort to broaden the interpretive skills available to the child therapist, this article places the content of children’s drawings and play into the background and brings the defensive processes into higher relief. It addresses the defenses in children’s play and even more so the defenses in children’s drawings. Without creating a simplistic formula, the author offers examples of ways to recognize defenses in children’s drawings and play based on observations from clinical practice.

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