Research about Family Perceptions via Pictures of Children from Problematic Families or Having Divorced Parents

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Abstract

Children’s pictures are very important materials because the pictures can allow us to understand the children better, whether they hide their feelings or hesitate to express their ideas. Pictures show where they see themselves in the environment and determine clearly the children’s perception level of their environment and interests. When looking at the children’s drawings, it can be seen that they express the children’s inner attitudes towards the outside world with the symbols and the shared language, which allow us to understand their drawings on a subconscious level. Besides observing the symbols used in children’s drawings, to get the better result, the method must be supported by written and oral expressions. Because of this reason, the aim is to determine the family perceptions and attitudes of the children, from primary school age, via pictures. The sample was composed of 105 students, ages 9-12, at a primary school in Erzurum. In the study, “analysis of the symbols used in the picture of family”, “the underlined expressions about families of children”, and “the children’s observations in addition to the other people’s observations” were used as the data collection tool. The data were analysed using the descriptions. Significant differences were found between the children who have a problem family and the others, in the respect of the symbols used in the pictures. The findings were discussed in the perspective of the importance of the family.

1. Introduction

Children communicate with the environment in which they live from the moment that they are born. In this emerging communication environment, children use ways of expressing themselves differently. Drawing pictures is among these ways of expression. A picture is a tool of expression with which children reflect themselves, the levels at which they perceive the external world and their interests in a clear manner. Since pictorial features exhibit parallelism with the mental and physical development of children, they differ among the age groups. It can be observed that children in the 9-12 age group have distinctive features compared to the children of other age groups and their anxiety to find a place in society emerges in this period. One of the most important needs of children in this period is finding their own personalities, understanding their own capabilities and developing their relationships in their own groups. Children’s need to discover their relationship with their environment as well as the objects and materials that constitute their environment comes second (Yavuzer, 1998). They approach pictures with a realistic

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understanding (MEB [Ministry of National Education], 2001). Therefore, the family picture which is drawn by the child offers important information regarding the child’s relationship with his/her parents or with other individuals in the family as well as family functions from the child’s point of view (Bahçivan-Saydam, 2004). It is possible to make sense of this relationship by analysing the symbols that enable us to interpret the pictures that children use subconsciously and that have a quality of a common language. In family pictures in which there is more than one figure, children mostly place the family members in the picture in accordance with their perceptions by taking their behaviours and attitudes towards them into account. Children generally depict themselves together with or in physical contact with the loved family members, whereas they may isolate the family members towards whom they have negative reactions, with different methods. Children who associate the family perception with the moments in which they are happier or with their desires in their pictures may include the objects or animals that they love in their family pictures. The 9-12 age group children, who can easily express their emotional states in their pictures, also give us important clues about their personal features.

Utilizing the analysis of the symbols in a picture drawn by a child as well as observations and the child’s expressions in determining the attitudes and reactions of the child regarding his/her family is important for crosschecking and supporting the evaluation that is made by taking the child’s mental level into consideration.

2. Method

2.1. Aim

The aim of this study is to examine children’s relationships with their parents by way of pictures, and to determine their family perceptions and problems by evaluating the differences between the pictures drawn by the children who live in a healthy family environment and the children who live in a troubled or separated family environment.

2.2. Sample

The sample of the study was composed of a total of 105 children between the ages of 9 and 12 who studied in an elementary school in Erzurum Province.

2.3. Data Collection Tool

The “Draw-A-Family Test”, “Opinion Scale Regarding the Family”, observations of different people in their environments and observations of the researcher were used as the data collection tools.

2.4. Data Analysis

The children were given 25×35cm drawing paper, pencils and crayons. They were instructed to draw pictures of their families. They were also requested to write their thoughts about their families. Furthermore, in order for the expressions requested not to be misleading, the children were reassured that what they wrote and drew would not be shared with their families. During the exercise, the interaction between the children and their environment was minimized, and no intervention was made. The data, which were obtained by utilizing data collection tools after the exercise, were evaluated. The children who lived in a troubled or separated family environment were identified. It was observed that the symbols used by these children in their pictures were different from the symbols used by the children who lived in a healthy family environment. The pictures of the children who lived in a healthy family environment were exemplified in the study. Brief information about the children who lived in a troubled or separated family environment, as well as personal features obtained by observations, was featured in the study. The obtained findings were set forth with their examples, and they were examined in detail.

3. Findings

3.1. Sample Pictures from the 9-12 Age Group Children Who Live in a Healthy Family Environment

A healthy family environment can be defined as a family environment in which family communication is effective and positive and any family problem can be easily solved.
It can be stated that the figures which were featured in the pictures drawn by the children who lived in a healthy family environment were generally depicted in a single line or hand-in-hand. In the sample pictures in which these features existed the children used clear, lively colours, as well as symbols such as flowers, trees, greenery, sun, clouds, planes and hearts. The sun in the sky, light-coloured clouds, birds and flowers are the figures that define such happiness (Paktuna-Keskin, 2003). Furthermore, the use of expressions such as “I love my family very much” by the children in their opinions about their families corresponds with the depictions of happy figures.

3.2. Picture-based Examination of the Family Perceptions and Problems of the 9-12 Age Group Children Who Live in Troubled Families

A troubled family can be defined as a family in which family communication is inadequate or unhealthy.
Information on the Child Who Drew the Picture

Age: 11.10
Gender: Female
Number of Siblings: The first of three siblings
Personal Features: Egocentric, jealous
Family Features: Negative communication among the siblings
Written Expressions about the Family: “I don’t like the others”
Relationships with Friends: Agreeable
School Success: Average

Analysis of Her Picture: The child depicted herself with her mother and father in the picture. When the literature information is examined, it is observed that the person who is drawn on the leftmost side of the page is either the person who the child loves most or the person with whom the child is in conflict the most and to whom the child has difficulty getting closer (Bahçıvan- Saydam, 2004). The fact that the child drew herself in this picture on the leftmost side of the page and in more detail than the other figures can be an expression of the fact that the child is at peace with herself. It is observed that the family members depicted by the child direct their gaze in a single direction. It is notable that the mother and father are happy whereas she is discontented. This attitude makes us think that the siblings of the child are the centre of attention in the family. The child, who can be considered uncomfortable with the fact that the attention is not on herself, expressed her refusal to draw her siblings since she did not love them. This condition can be an expression of the jealousy that can be seen to have emerged in the child’s mind.

Information on the Child Who Drew the Picture

Age: 10.11
Gender: Male
Number of Siblings: The third of four siblings
Personal Features: Egocentric, stubborn, aggressive, naughty
Family Features: He has a negative relationship with his father. His mother shows him excessive care.

Written Expressions about the Family: “MY FATHER PISSES ME OFF”

Relationships with Friends: He has a tendency to exert his physical superiority over them as a tool for pressurizing them.

School Success: Successful

Analysis of His Picture: We can state that the child is at peace with himself based upon the observation that he drew a flower symbol on himself in his drawing. He reflected his tough-naughty attitude with the gesture expressions that he used. He also reflected his tendency of angriness-aggressiveness with his hands that he drew exaggeratedly big. The child turned the directions of the family members towards himself in his drawing. Thus, he determined himself to be the focal point in his picture. He reflected the emotional states of the family members towards him with the common gestures and facial expressions that they wore. Since one of his siblings cannot talk, he did not draw a mouth for him when depicting him. He depicted the male members of the family as discontented whereas the female members of the family are smiling, reflecting their attention towards him. Due to his negative attitude towards his father and the fact that he is bored with his mother’s excessive care which I observed, he depicted himself turning his back on them, and he drew a door between them even though it was irrelevant in terms of the environment that they are in. The objects such as walls, tables, TV sets, etc. which he put between him and other family members can be an indication of the fact that he isolated himself from his family (Di Leo, 1983). The approach in the picture is not observed in the pictures drawn by the children who have a healthy family environment.

Information on the Child Who Drew the Picture

Age: 10.9
Gender: Female
Number of Siblings: Only child
Personal Features: Fragile, emotional
Family Features: Father-oppressive environment. Her relationship with her mother is positive
Written Expressions about the Family: “My mother and I always see eye to eye, but my father is always angry. No-no-no. That is why it is raining dark (black) on us”
Relationships with Friends: Agreeable
School Success: Medium Level

Analysis of Her Picture: The child, who reflected her relationship with the family members in her picture, depicted herself and her mother as smiling but her father as angry by supporting the happy-unhappy mouth expressions that she used with her manner of emphasizing the eyes of her mother and father (while she drew the eyes of her mother in detail, she painted the eyes of her father black without detail). Furthermore, with the expression “Mommy” that she wrote on her mother and the expression “My Angry Father” that she wrote on her father, she depicted the father-oppressive family environment. She concretized that moment by showing that it was raining on her and her mother with the black raindrops which were pouring from the clouds that she painted dark. This expression corresponds with the attitude of putting an obstacle between her father and herself and her mother and separating them, as well as isolating herself and her mother from her father.

3.3. Picture-based Examination of the Family Perceptions and Problems of the 9-12 Age Group Children Who Live in Separated Families

A separated family can be defined as a family in which one or more family members died or the parents divorced.

Information on the Child Who Drew the Picture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>11.2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Siblings</td>
<td>The first of two siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Features</td>
<td>Aggressive, stubborn, furious, has a tendency to behave erratically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Features</td>
<td>Separated family; father abandoned the family. The child lives with his grandmother, grandfather, sister and mother.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written Expressions about the Family</td>
<td>“I always like wandering alone and discovering things.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with Friends</td>
<td>In view of the observations conducted, it was determined that the child had an attitude of connecting only with children of separated families, supporting these children, not getting on with others and fighting them.</td>
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<td>School Success</td>
<td>Successful only in visual arts course</td>
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</table>
Analysis of His Picture: The child, who was asked to depict his family, disregarded the family members and refused to draw the effect of the trauma that he experienced when his father abandoned his family. Children who have family problems, who feel themselves under stress and pressure, who think that domestic life incorporates violence and turmoil and who have a negative family understanding can resist drawing a family picture (Di Leo, 1983). Such an approach is a way of expression that cannot be observed in a picture drawn by a child who is at peace with family members. The child, who was observed to perceive the family concept as “being happy”, preferred to paint the moment that he was happy, though it was late in the day, with lively colours, as we could see from his body language (raising his arms upwards). It can be stated that the child chose to fulfil his emotional need by showing himself with his dog in a quite cheerful manner.

Information on the Child Who Drew the Picture

Age : 11.5
Gender : Female
Number of Siblings : The first of two siblings
Personal Features : Introverted
Family Features : Father died. Mother left the children in an orphanage and she married.
Written Expressions about the Family : “I don’t want to draw my mother because she abandoned us.”
Relationships with Friends : Inadequate
School Success : Unsuccessful

Analysis of Her Picture: The child depicted herself as going to a swimming pool with her brother and father in her picture. At first glance, it can seem that this picture belongs to a child who lives in a happy family environment due to the gestures and facial expressions of the figures that she drew. However, the fact that she did not use the mother figure in her drawing makes us understand that her communication with her mother is problematic. As can be
understood from the written statement of the child about her family, which in my opinion has an important place in crosschecking the analysis conducted, the child blames her mother for abandoning her and her brother after the death of her father, and she refused to draw her. The fact that the father figure was featured in the picture, even though he died, reflected the longing of the child for him. She concretized the family concept by reflecting her wish to be together with the family members that she loved.

4. Conclusion

Family perceptions and problems of the children were examined using the data collection tools that were stated in the research. The following results were obtained:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Features That Were Observed In The Pictures Drawn By The Children Who Lived In A Healthy Family Environment:</th>
<th>9-12 Age Group Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- They used sun, greenery and flower symbols.</td>
<td>- They used facial expressions that defined the emotional states of the figures that they drew.</td>
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<td>- The colours used are lively and clean.</td>
<td>- They separated the section in which they depicted the family members to whom they feel close, by putting obstacles (doors, microphone cables, etc.) between.</td>
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<td>- The figures depicted in the pictures are ordered in a single line.</td>
<td>- They continued drawing the loved parent in their pictures even if they were dead.</td>
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<td>- The figures are depicted close to each other or hand-in-hand.</td>
<td>- The family members who were not loved and who were envied were not featured in their pictures.</td>
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<td>- The figures were depicted as smiling and happy.</td>
<td>- Egocentric children depicted themselves on the left side of the picture in more detail.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Features That Were Observed In The Pictures Drawn By The Children Who Lived In A Troubled Family Environment:</th>
<th>9-12 Age Group Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- They did not accept the family members. They refused to draw them in their pictures.</td>
<td>- They did not draw the parent that they held solely responsible for the separation of the family.</td>
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<td>- They continued drawing the loved parent in their pictures even if they were dead.</td>
<td>- They continued drawing the loved parent in their pictures even if they were dead.</td>
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<td>- A tendency was observed in the children regarding the longing - dreaming of reflecting the moment that they made them actually happy in the family drawings.</td>
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References