



Oficina de Defensoría de los  
Derechos de la Infancia a.c.

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for every child



**Guide to monitoring the  
emotional state**  
of unaccompanied migrant children  
and adolescents **in shelters**

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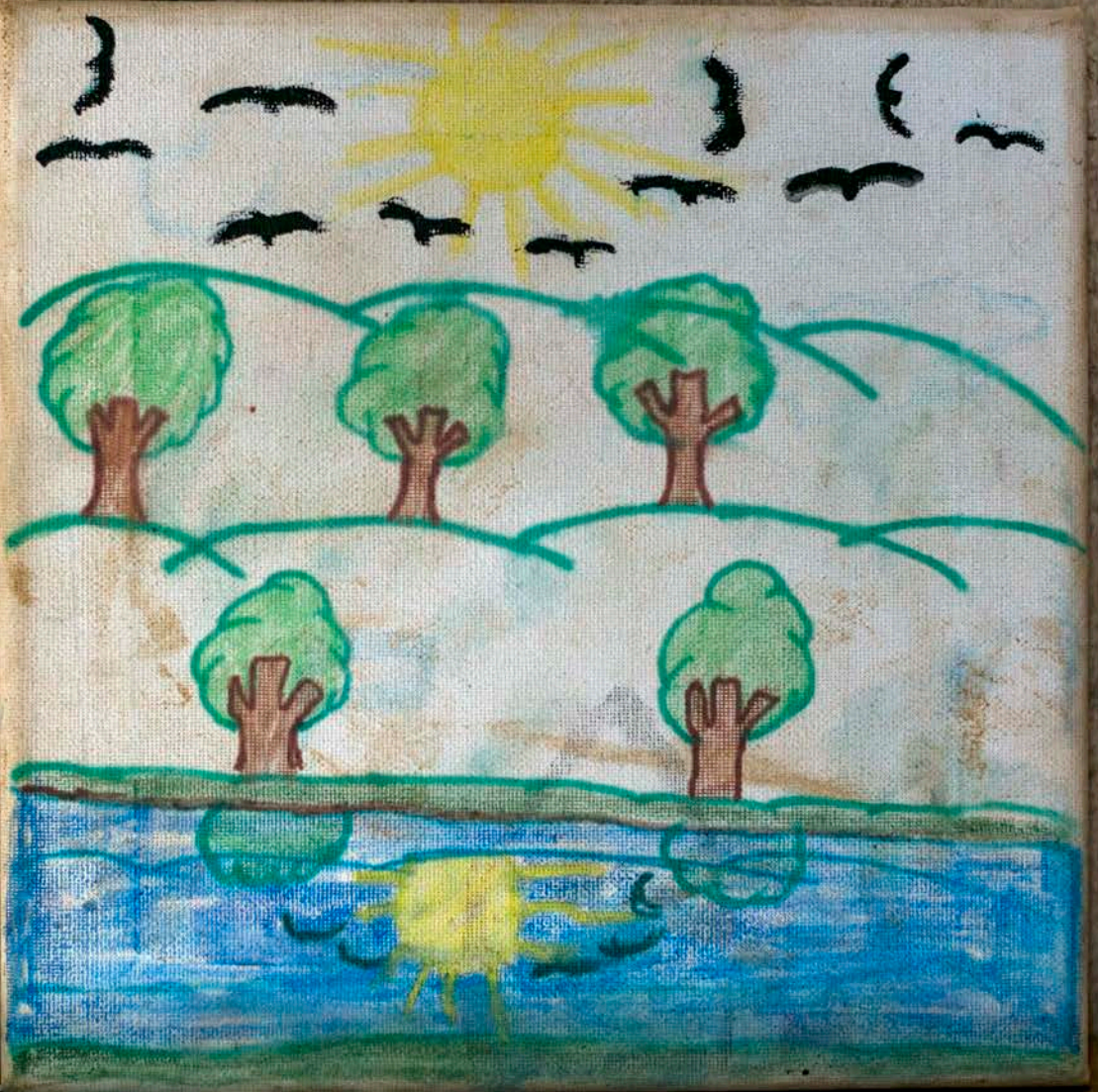
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# Introduction

Migrant children and adolescents experience complex and lengthy processes in which they come into contact with a range of authorities and face multiple difficulties. Throughout this process, it is important to consider how the actions of public servants and civic organizations responsible for providing protection impact on their psychological situation.

Since unaccompanied migrant children have intermittent contact with various different authorities, it is not easy to develop an instrument to accurately assess the changes that take place in their emotional state as they receive protection. This document presents a practical guide for unaccompanied migrant children staying in shelters, since this is where contact with them lasts long enough to observe changes in their emotional state.

This Guide is not intended to be an assessment tool, which would require the application of psychological tests. Instead, it looks at a number of characteristics of drawings and their demonstrated correlation with the emotional state of a child or adolescent so that staff of the shelters can “read” the information conveyed in these drawings.

When children or adolescents receive care and protection after experiencing a violation of their rights, their entire reality changes. This means that the ways in which they express themselves also change. Human beings have many forms of expression: verbalization, behaviour, play and drawing are some of the most important.

If the protection actions carried out are beneficial for her or his life, what the child says and how she or he plays, behaves and draws will also change.

Frequently, the positive effects on the emotional state of children or adolescents receiving protection in adverse situations can only be appreciated through specialized observation. Very often, the indicators come from their behaviours and attitudes. For example, if they are less fearful as time goes by, if they are able to connect with shelter staff and other children or adolescents, if they can concentrate on the activities they engage in, if they can choose activities they like and enjoy them, if they are able to sustain structured games, etc.

As the emotional state of the children or adolescents changes, what they express in their drawings also changes. This Guide emphasizes the way in which this happens and how the drawings can help monitor their emotional state, as well as understand the impact (positive or negative) that actions to protect their rights may be having on their lives.



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## What is this Guide for?

This Guide contains a number of indicators that come from the language of artistic expression, specifically visual production. Drawings are often a reflection of what is going on emotionally and psychologically with people.<sup>1</sup>

The Guide offers information that, without claiming to make a psychological evaluation (which is a matter for personnel specialized in psychology), can be helpful in understanding how unaccompanied migrant children or adolescents are feeling. Comparing the drawings they have made over time will make it possible to determine if the protection actions are benefiting them or not.

## So...

The Guide proposes that when children or adolescents arrive at the shelter, after they have been welcomed and once they feel calm, it is useful to ask them for a drawing that will be kept in their file. After two months, and once actions for the protection and restitution of violated rights have been carried out, it is suggested that they are asked to do another drawing, which will also be kept in their file, and so on successively while the child remains in the social assistance centre.

If we understand that the drawings are a “reflection” of what is going on emotionally in the child or adolescent, then they allow us to observe the impact of the interventions on her or his life. According to the general characteristics of the drawing, and without trying to turn the analysis into a specialized psychological assessment, it is possible to deduce whether the intervention is effective or otherwise.

Identifying progress in the protection of the emotional state of children and adolescents makes it possible to ensure that the ultimate goal, the protection and restitution of their rights, is being fulfilled. However, it also serves as an incentive for the institution, which will learn that the actions it is engaging in are producing direct results in the lives of the children and adolescents in its shelters.

<sup>1</sup> Drawings are tools widely used to make psychological diagnoses. The theory supporting this was put forward by psychoanalysis, which states that if a person is faced with a neutral stimulus (such as a blank sheet), they will necessarily “project” on to it their emotions, conflicts and other characteristics, as well as positive emotional states, for example, feeling more secure, greater self-esteem, having external support, among others. The mechanism of the projection is unconscious, that is, the person does not fully realize what he or she is conveying.

The objective of the Guide (to observe and detect the emotional situation of children and adolescents in shelters) can be complemented if the suggestions contained in *Resilient Migration* and in the *Manual of activities to promote resilience in migrant children and adolescents and refugees housed in shelters* are followed, especially for those who are in a situation of migration or are survivors of violence. These publications describe how adults can offer messages of emotional rescue and shared experiences that allow children and adolescents to perceive themselves in a different way to that forced on them by the violation of their rights; that is, as valuable individuals who deserve care and protection, with resources and possibilities to choose options for building a future.

Finally, although it is not up to the shelter staff to investigate their experiences in detail, or to produce diagnoses about the rights situations of children and adolescents, it will be useful for them to learn the techniques for approaching them contained in *Basic information for interviews and Special situations during the interview*. In some cases, they will obtain information on actions that can be carried out directly, while in others they will learn about the roles of other actors, in order to avoid duplicating interventions that force children to go over aspects of their experience more than once facing different authorities. It will also be useful to inform the child or adolescent about the procedures followed by other actors, for example, through the information contained in the *Practical guide for the protection and restitution of rights*, which explains the duties of the Child Protection Authorities.





# Steps for the **exploratory evaluation**



## FIRST STEP

### Find the right moment

It is appropriate to suggest to the child or adolescent that they make the drawing when their basic needs are satisfied (they are not sleepy, hungry, thirsty or tired), they are calm and in a peaceful environment (without unnecessary distractions and without observing something they could be frightened of).

The Guide is based on the idea of contrasting before and after drawings by the same unaccompanied migrant child or adolescent. That is, it requires them to draw a picture when they arrive at the shelter. The staff in contact with the child will decide the most appropriate time to suggest this activity and in what context it will be done.

This drawing (together with a record of what the unaccompanied migrant child or adolescent says about it) should be carefully kept in the corresponding file.

The ideal time to request a new drawing is after two months. However, because of the situation of many unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents, their stay at the shelter could be shorter. When they stay two months or more, a new drawing will be requested with the same periodicity. When they do not, they will be asked for a new drawing as close as possible to the day when they leave the shelter. The new drawing will be put together with the first one in the file, in order to comparatively analyse the changes.

## SECOND STEP

### Propose the topic

In general, children and adolescents like to draw. Sometimes they like to do it with other people. If this is the case, the person requesting the drawing could also do one in order to convey “harmony” with the child or adolescent.

Adolescents may be reluctant to draw because they interpret it as a “children’s activity” and do not want to feel that they are being treated like children. In this case, it may be useful if, before or during the activity, they have engaged in something else such as reading a comic or comic strip. In general, they find these styles attractive and this facilitates the production of the drawing.

In some cases several children or adolescents could carry out the activity at the same time and, if possible and if they so wish, they can tell the others the story of their drawing (see below).

It is necessary to tell the child or adolescent that the drawing will be kept by the institution. For this purpose, it may be useful to formulate the proposal of the drawing as follows:

“All the children and adolescents who come here leave us their drawings. We store them in these files. The drawings help us know how they are feeling and what they need while they are here. They also help us remember them when they have left. Their drawings are like the ‘trace’ they left here, that’s why they are important. We are also going to keep your drawings here.”



As far as possible, it should be suggested that the child or adolescent draws:


1. a person
2. a family
3. a journey
4. a free drawing (“draw whatever you want”)

The child or adolescent should be provided with a pencil and eraser, blank pages and crayons or coloured pencils. Ideally, the latter could cover the range of dark and strong colours (blacks, browns, reds, greys) and other brighter ones such as greens, oranges, yellows, blues, etc. The range of colours they choose can convey information about her or his emotional state.

It is important they are allowed as much time as they need to do the drawing, without being pressured to finish.

When asked to draw a picture, it is important to clarify that:

“All drawings are good, because they come from each one of us, and all drawings are different because all people are different. It is not about deciding which one is better, nor is it an exam. You can draw however you like.”



It is important not to ask them to draw themselves or to draw their family or their migration route. This direct allusion to their life could increase their anxiety and would not be useful.

## THIRD STEP

### Ask for a story about their drawing

Ask for a story about their drawing to better understand the associations of the completed drawing. It is important to ask the child or adolescent to write or tell a story about the drawing they made. Who is the person? What are they doing? What are they thinking? Where are they? etc.

The questions should be included as part of a dialogue and not seen as an interrogation; they are suggestions, not all of them have to be used, or in the suggested order. Similarly, whoever interacts with the child or adolescent can obtain information about the drawing in the way they consider most appropriate at that time.

If the child or adolescent produces the story verbally, it will be necessary for the person accompanying them should write it down using his or her own words and attach the story to the drawing.

## FOURTH STEP

### Preserve the drawing

Once the activity is finished, the date and the name of the child or adolescent must be recorded on the same sheet as the drawing (ask her or him to write it on the sheet if they have the capacity to do so).

The drawing must be kept in the file of each child or adolescent.

## FIFTH STEP

### Obtaining a second drawing

If the child or adolescent remains in the institution, the activity will be repeated after two months, with the same characteristics as described above.

Once two drawings have been obtained from the same child or adolescent, done two months apart, they will be analysed in order to understand if there have been positive changes in their emotional stability between their arrival at the institution and the time they did the second drawing.

It is important to carefully record the date when both drawings are done, as this information is very useful when comparing their evolution.

Jose de Jesus ☺☺☺

Oscar: ☺

★ Alejandro

# Triste Desepcionada





# Aspects to observe in the drawings

There are multiple standardized tests that define the types and characteristics of children's and adolescents' drawings that are useful in learning about their psychological dynamics. The objective of this Guide is not to make psychological diagnoses, but to use the information extracted from the drawings as a guide. They are not a "crystal ball," nor are they intended to be exact, or to "guess" what the child or adolescent is feeling. It is information that may be useful in probing their general emotional state, along with other information obtained by interacting with them (behaviour, verbal expression, common expressions, play, etc.).

In general terms, it is useful to remember the following criteria when observing a drawing:

- 1. General impression of the drawing.** What does it convey at first glance? What emotion does it trigger in someone who sees the drawing?
- 2. General theme of the drawing.** What is it about?
- 3. "Rigidity" of the drawing.** Do the figures look like "robots" or square, with little movement? The greater the rigidity, the greater the internal insecurity.
- 4. Colours of the drawing.** Dark colours generally convey feelings linked to fear, anxiety, or pain. Red is often associated with anger and violence.
- 5. Orientation of the figures.** Do they look like they are "falling"? The greater the inclination of the figures, the greater the instability, feelings of vulnerability or fragility.

**6. Structure of the drawing.** Does the drawing have a definite shape? Are parts arranged to form a whole? This reflects greater control and stability than figures that are unstructured, formless, or made up of separate parts.

**7. Position of the lines.** If the drawing includes a line representing the ground, it reflects a greater sense of stability and security.

**8. Figures in the drawing.** If several people are shown, greater proximity between the figures usually indicates greater affinity and trust among those who are closed.

**9. Distance between figures.** Greater distance between figures may indicate a feeling of isolation, exclusion or fear.

**10. Definition of certain elements.** If the drawing shows parts of the body emphasized or erased, those areas may be associated with conflict or physical pain.

**11. Type of strokes.** Irregular strokes, drawn pressing hard on the paper, or which have "spikes" convey anxiety, insecurity or anger. Strokes that convey less tension and are "organized" to create a figure reveal greater emotional stability.







# Illustrative Examples

Next are the “before and after” drawings of some children and adolescents who experienced violations of their human rights. Information about specific situations is not included since the intention is to present cases that show positive changes in terms of emotional stability. For the same reason, information about the age is not included. The purpose of this document is not an accurate psychological diagnosis.



Before the intervention



After the intervention



Solo una familia

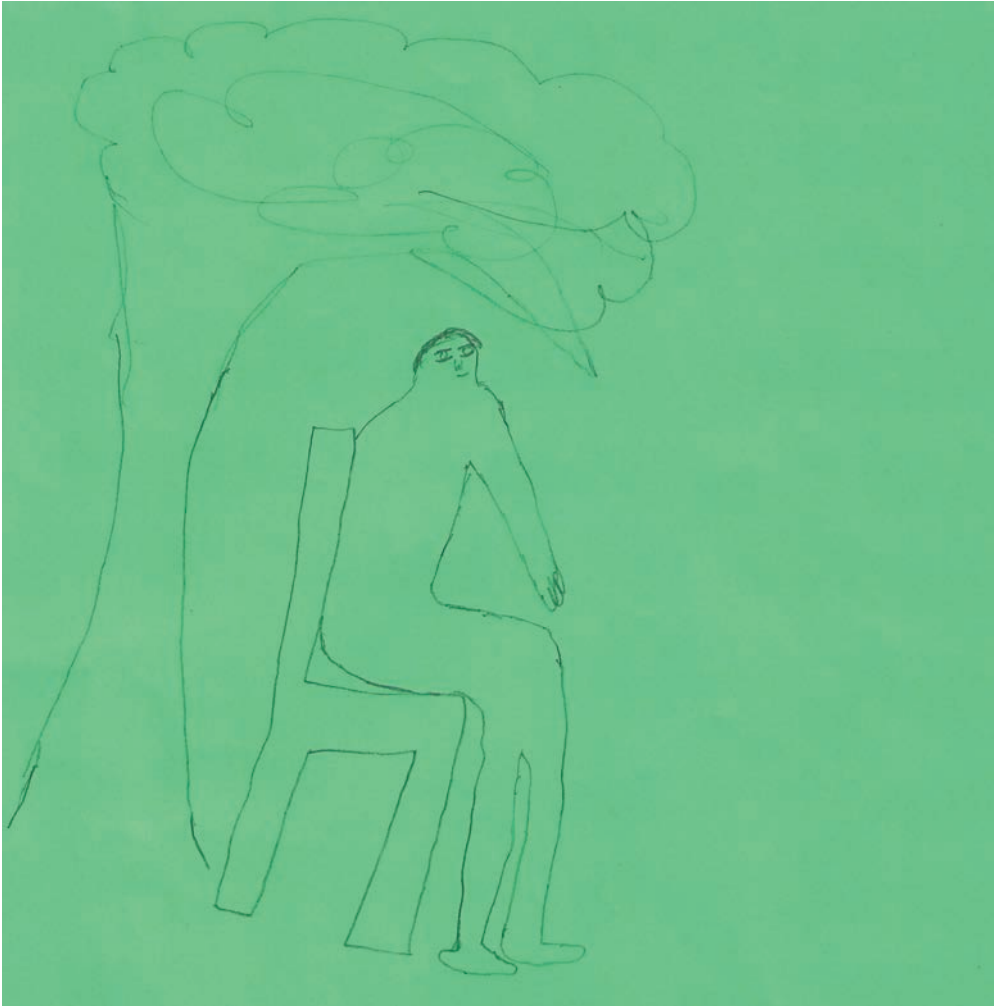
**B**

No colour (apathy, sadness)  
No ground line (instability)



A

Colourful (more cheerful)  
With ground line (greater stability)  
Presence of the sun  
Change from "only one family" to a family



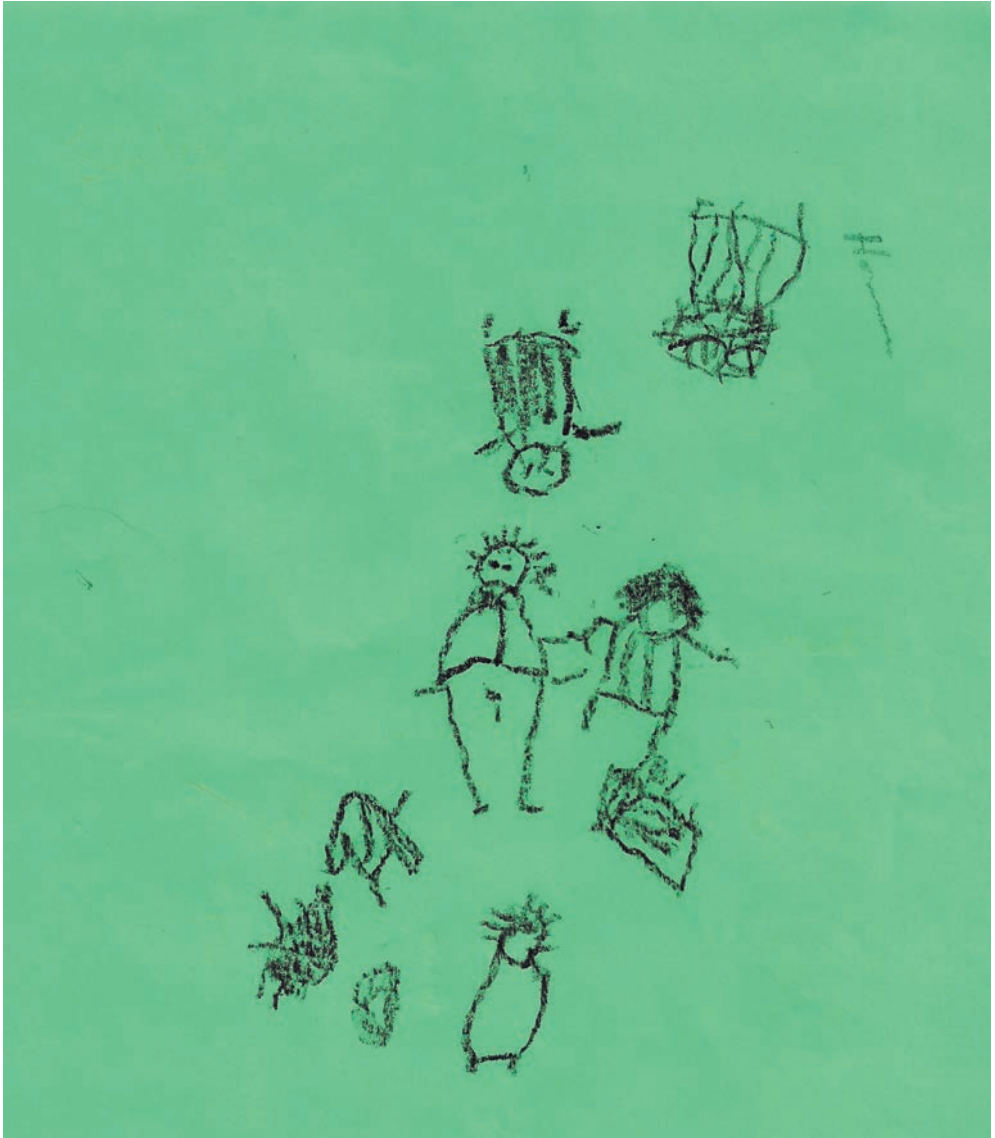
**B**

Slanted tree (insecurity)  
Tree without fruit (lack of resources, messy crown)  
Seated, quiet person (lack of energy)



A

Straight tree with roots (security, firmness)  
Tree with fruit (wealth and resources)  
Person performing an activity (energy and productivity)



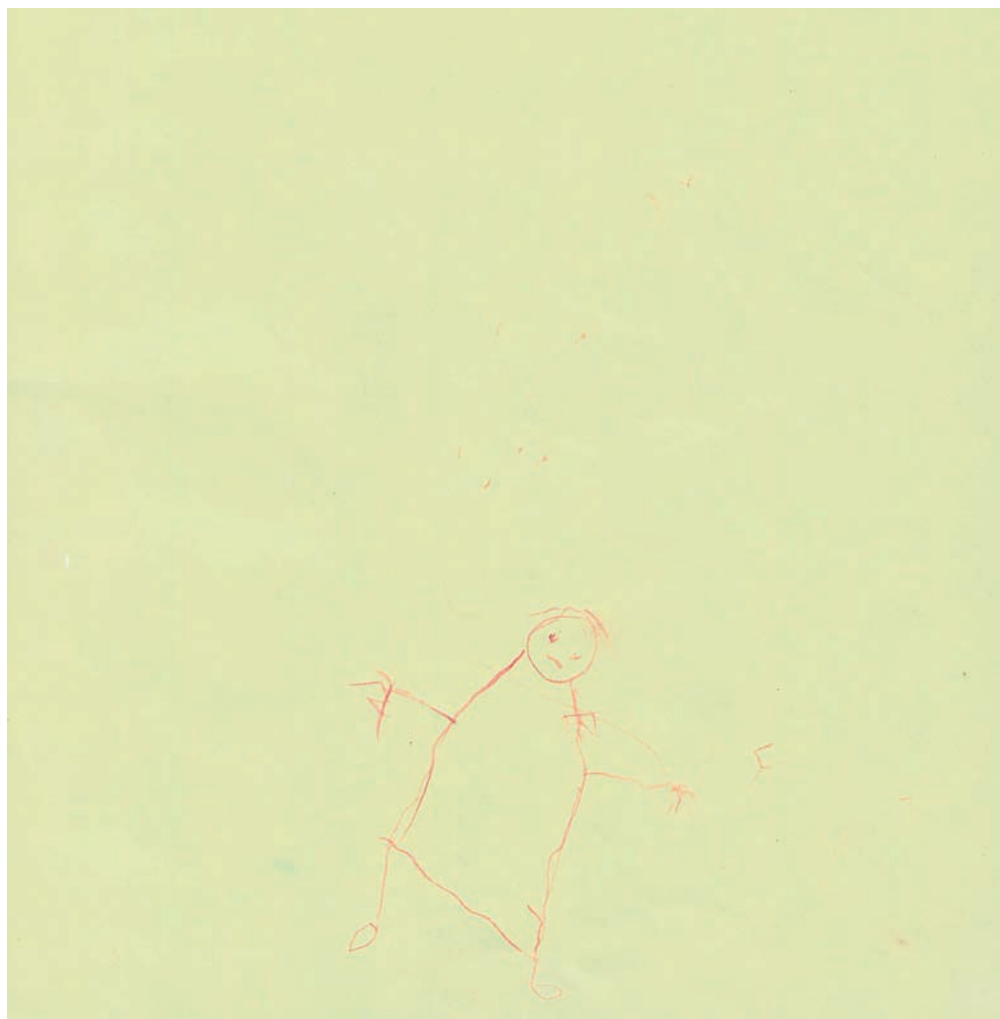
**B**

Family "upside down" (chaos)



A

Family with greater order and with identified characters



**B**

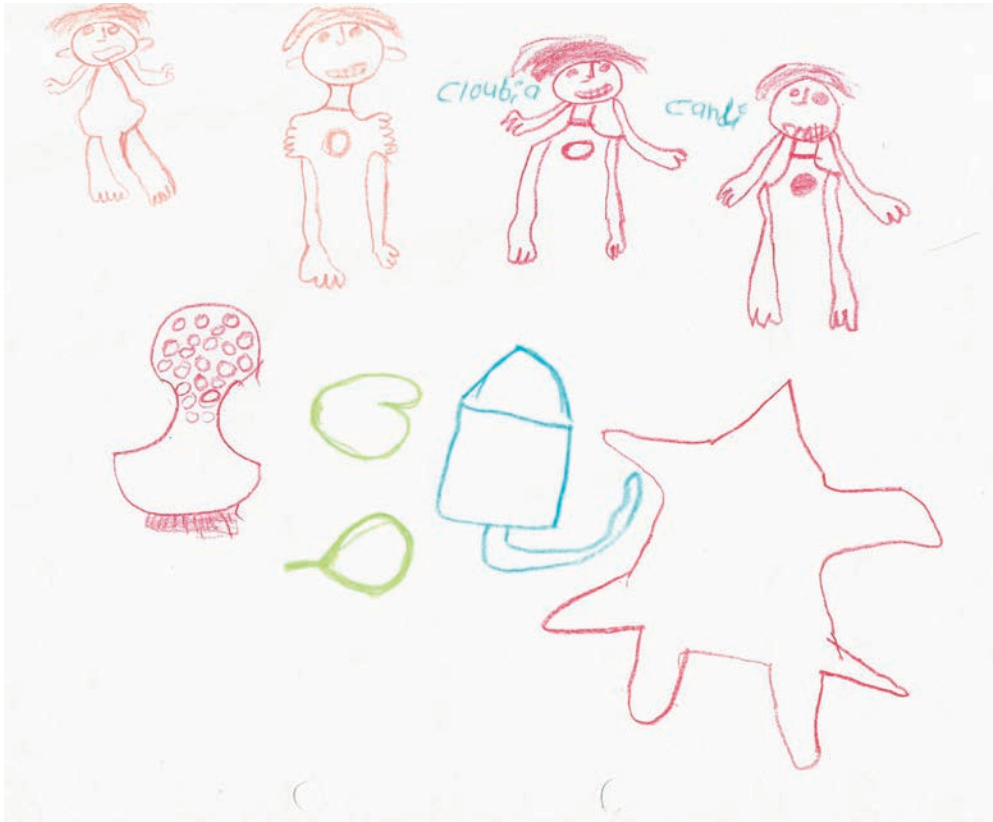
Isolation, sadness, insecurity (alone, sad face)  
Slanted figure (instability)





A

Relationship with other people (there are more people)  
Figures less slanted and in order (conveys greater stability)



**B**

Figures with stereotyped smiles, with teeth and with empty eyes  
(conveys a sensation of grotesque figures)  
Bodies open at the level of the genitals  
Highlighted genitals (area of conflict)  
No ground line (instability)



A

Smiling figures, no stereotyped smile or teeth (conveys greater stability)  
Bodies closed and wearing clothes (order)  
No highlighting of genitals (no conflict in that area)  
Ground line (stability)



## B

Loose drawings lacking clear intention (confusion, chaos)

Few colours, no colouring-in (sadness, lack of energy)

Grotesque figure (fear, anger, confusion)

Lack of order, chaotic (confusion)



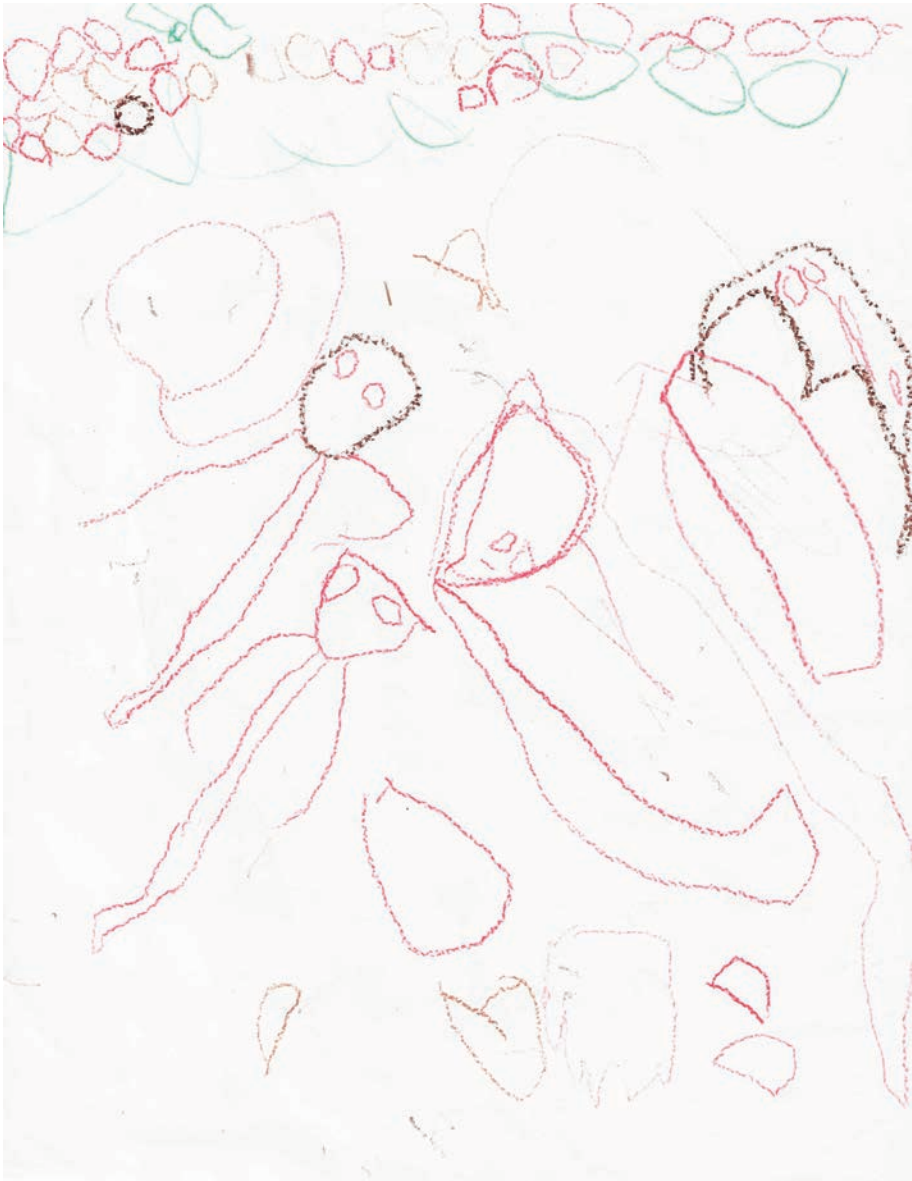
A

Intentionality and message ("I love you very much")  
Coloured-in (more cheerful, conveys energy)  
Figure that symbolizes beauty and freshness  
Integrated drawing (stability, calm)



**B**

Unstructured drawing (chaos, anxiety)  
Jagged lines (anxiety)  
Disorder (anxiety)  
Black (sadness, fear)



A

Structured drawing and more defined shapes  
Well-formed doodles (less anxiety)  
Greater order (less anxiety)  
Colours (less sadness and fear)



**B**

Doodles (ill-defined forms, chaos, anxiety)  
Disorder (chaos, anxiety)  
No ground line (instability)





A

Defined figures (greater calm, less anxiety)  
Order, the parts make up a landscape, presence of sun (less anxiety)  
Presence of ground line (stability)

# IV

## Warning signs in the drawings

In addition to the observation of positive changes in the emotional stability of children and adolescents, certain indicators of risk may appear in the drawings.

In these cases, and given that those who are in daily contact with them should not act as specialists in issues related to their emotional stability, it will be necessary for those who observe these indicators to notify the Child Protection Authorities, or staff trained to provide psychological care. Given these indicators, a more profound diagnostic intervention will be necessary.

Risk indicators may include:

**1. Completely unstructured drawings.** For example, bodies broken into pieces. The only exception to this is for younger girls or boys, who can only draw doodles and lines, according to their stage of development.

**2. Drawings that indicate transparency.** For example, human bodies in which the internal organs are seen, or houses in which the interior can be seen, etc.

**3. Permanent negative emotions.** Drawings that at first showed a lot of anger, fear and violence (with a lot of black and red, emphasized lines expressing a lot of chaos and anxiety), and showing no change in the two months that have elapsed.

**4. Anxiety when drawing.** When the child or adolescent cannot carry out the task, and the suggestion of drawing generates great anxiety. For example, if they burst out crying at the suggestion, or just stare at the blank page and cannot produce anything.



## Follow up

Wherever possible, repeat the activity after a two-month period, as long as the child or adolescent remains in the institution.



# Conclusions

Observing the drawings can be useful because the child or adolescent conveys emotions through them. In this way, those in contact with them can gain insight into how they are feeling. At the same time, observing the drawings can be useful in assessing whether the protection measures applied have improved the child's emotional situation.

If the differences in the drawing of the child or adolescent show positive changes, it can be assumed that the actions taken for them to exercise their rights and to feel protected have been successful.

If no changes are observed in the drawings after two months, it will be useful for the institution's staff to notify professional psychologists in order to identify if there is a more specific problem to be dealt with. It is important to report what is observed in the drawings to the Child Protection Authority during the follow-up visits that will be carried out by its staff, in order to verify the implementation of special protection measures in each case.

In general terms, the intention is to offer those who are in contact with unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents a tool to observe if everything that is being done for the restitution of their rights is having an impact on their lives. This is not only a measure to protect their rights but also a way to protect the emotional stability of those in their care. Knowing that the actions pursued positively impact the lives of children and adolescents always generates synergies in those who perform these tasks. In the end, this is the objective of their daily work.





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