

## Scribbling, Drawing, Reading and Writing. Are these skills connected?



A Parent's questions, a teacher's answers



*Michelle Koross, seven year-old Robbie, and three year-old Aliza*

By Susan Rich Sheridan, Ed.D.

### **Background**

The eminent Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, believed that speech, play, drawing and writing are connected steps in the child's life. Parents should know about these developmental stages. If parents support the natural unfolding of speech and marks, they will encourage brain growth necessary for writing and reading as well as positive attitudes about literacy over a lifetime.

Little children may have a "language gene," but the gene will not help children talk unless they hear people talking. Little children also have a "literacy gene." Still, children will not learn to write and read without instruction. But children **will** scribble and draw on their own. Mark-making is a powerful language instinct in children, and scribbling is where writing and reading begin. Because the marks we make with our hands are read by our eyes, these marks enter our brains. Then, we use these marks *to think with*. That is an amazing idea, isn't it! How we learn to think using these marks inside our brains structures the architecture of our brains. Marks are invisible brain-builders.

### **July/August 2002 Life Learning article on scribbling.**

In my July/August 2002 article in *Life Learning Magazine* (P.O. Box 340, St. George, ON, NOE 1NO Canada 1-800-215-9574), "The Scribble Hypothesis: Invisible Brain Building," I emphasized the importance of scribbling as a

developmental milestone in children's lives --- as dramatic as crawling, walking, or talking. I suggested that among the most important things parents can do with small children besides reading to them and talking with them, is scribbling and drawing and writing with them. I concluded, "All of our brains are programmed to make marks of meaning. That's what 'art' is, what literature and writing and mathematics are: marks of meaning. And it all starts with scribbling."

One of the hardest things for parents and teachers to understand is that children's scribbling and drawing is not "art," in the sense of a piece of work meant to be hung in a gallery. "Art" is what the hand of the very young child does with paper and a drawing tool. "Art" is mark-making *behavior*. It is behavior with a destiny: literacy. All children are draw-ers. All children teach themselves to be *visually* literate by drawing. Most children can learn to be writers, over time, becoming *verbally* literate. It is my position, held over the past twenty years, that drawing is a universal visual language instinct, and that drawing provides a helpful bridge into the more difficult, sometimes troublesome mark-making system we call writing.

#### **A mother's response to the theory about scribbling and drawing**

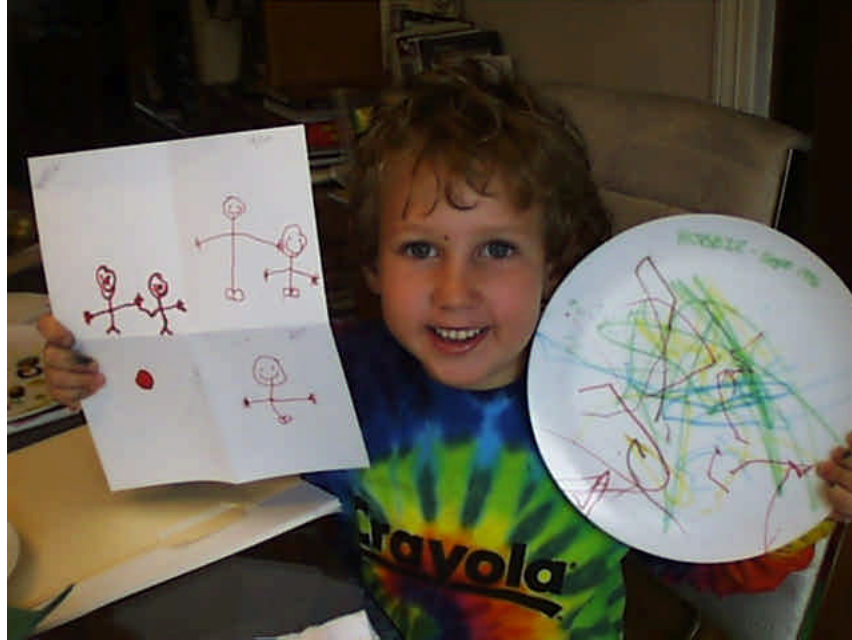
A home-schooling mother, Michelle Koross, read the July/August 2002 article, and responded by email. She wrote, "My seven year-old has never been one to pick up a pencil, marker, crayon, paints, , on his own. The only time he does is in religious school or camp when the activity calls for it. He can write all the letters but only writes his name, albeit slowly and with pressure, when he has to. ....He crawled at 11 months and walked at 19 months. He tested fine for fine motor skills at that time."

Michelle continued, "Here are my questions: How has not having done much scribbling, drawing, and writing at a young age affected his development? Can he 'catch up' with proper intervention or did he lose out permanently since he didn't do these activities at the proper time in development? What can I do, as a homeschooling parent, that can encourage (not force) drawing, writing and other art activities?"

#### **A mother and an educator team up to write an article, applying the Scribble/Drawing theory**

What Michelle Koross and her son Robbie Liebowitz and I found out together is that the "proper intervention" period required for encouraging drawing is an hour or two of interested support for the marks the child has made over his short lifetime, with a bit of specific instruction thrown in. We also learned that Robbie had in no way lost out on his development. Here is what happened when Michelle and Robbie and I agreed to meet to explore drawing with Robbie, and write an article together.

#### **The story of what happened with Robbie and drawing**

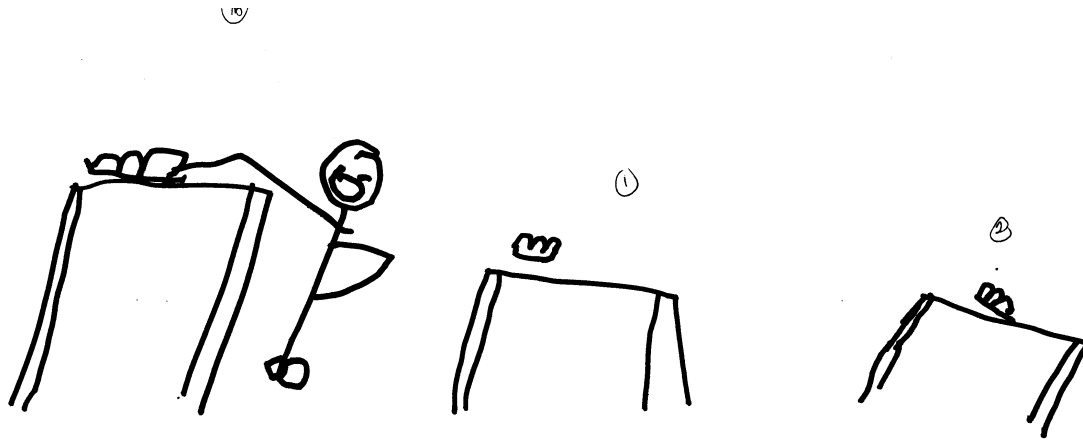


*Robbie with scribble plates*

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I drove to the Koross/Liebowitz house in Newton, MA, about two hours from my house in Amherst. I brought my D/W objects, markers, paper, and my interest in Robbie and his mother. Michelle had gathered up examples of Robbie's scribbling and drawing work since age 15 mos.: two scribble plates (one from age 15 months and one from age 4 years, a birthday card done for his grandpa (Oct. 2002), a picture of himself singing at religious camp (July 2002), a t-shirt done at a birthday party (Oct. 2002), a fish drawn in a homeschooling art program (October 2002).

### **What we did first**

To build some confidence with Robbie around marks, he and I started to talk about the items on the table. Robbie looked at the black and green scribble plate he did at age 4 in 1999. He said he had "nothing to say" about the marks. We looked at his discarded card for his grandpa featuring stick figures of his grandpa, and himself, with a ball. The figures had been drawn with a fat marker. Robbie indicated displeasure with them. I suggested he try drawing stick figures with a fine marker. He tried drawing the figures again, using a fine marker. His interest was piqued. Then, we looked at a drawing from summer camp showing Robbie as a stick figure with his mouth open, singing the prayer over a loaf of bread (the challah) on a table. Robbie looked critically at the open mouth which he had drawn with a fat marker, as well as at the bread, which was hovering above the table. By changing to thin markers, Robbie made a wide-open mouth, and after three tries, a loaf of bread that was touching the table. He drew himself reaching for the bread.



*Robbie's drawing of himself, bread, and table*

### **An educator's observations**

In a few minutes of work with drawing, Robbie showed willingness to change to a finer marker, as well as willingness to re-draw until he got the drawing right. What more could you ask for in terms of courage and flexibility from a seven year-old, or from anyone else, for that matter?

As I worked with Robbie, I discovered a bright, capable, articulate, "game" child who could tackle a mark-making system he felt very unsure about – a system which only his little sister, Aliza, was interested in. Clearly, his mother had nothing to worry about. Robbie's brain was working fine!

**What Robbie and the author did next. Drawing and a vivid verbal imagination.**



*Robbie's birthday party T-shirt*

Then, Robbie and I spent quite a lot of time talking about the t-shirt he had drawn. He told me that he and his friends had started a club, and that “We were making up these things... a pretend lab, with two machines on top, higher in the air, with invisible supports... one's bigger. They do the same thing. They change the color of your skin. You can pick your color. This is useful because if you are painted all colors and you are arrested for stealing a diamond, then the people arresting you would all fall down laughing and this would make the arrest easier.” ( I assume Robbie meant that the arrest would be easier *emotionally* for everyone.) Then, Robbie talked about the rectangles on the t-shirt. He said, “You push a button on the side of the box, and go into a chamber (in the sense of putting something into the chamber). Someone pulls a lever on the outside and the dots disappear and change the colors (of the thing inside the box). The one on the left works for smaller things and the one on the right can be expanded and used to change the color of a car.” Robbie said that the figures in the middle of the t-shirt are him and his friends. Robbie is in the middle and the friends on each side are working in the distance. “That is why they are smaller and higher.” One is slightly closer. At the bottom of the shirt is a machine on a cart to wheel it around because it is “so heavy.” The machines make other machines. The large rectangle around the drawing on the t-shirt is the room, or the main part of the lab: the floor, walls, and ceiling.

### **An educator's observations about reading readiness in the context of talk about drawing**

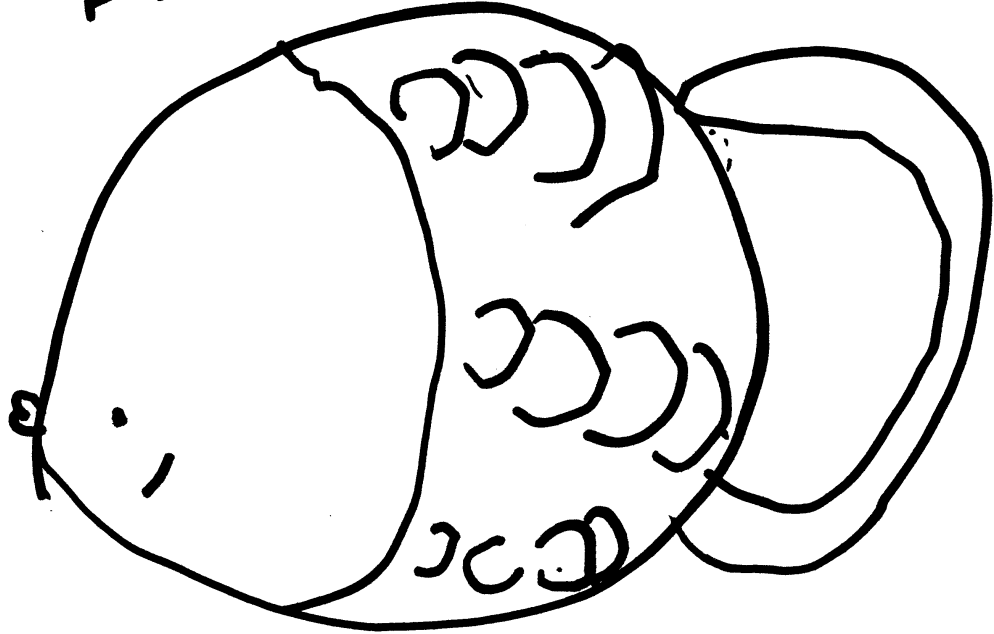
It was clear to me from Robbie's conversation, whether or not it included new invention beyond the original intent of the drawing (new invention about an old drawing does not mean something bad is going on, like "lying," for instance; it simply means that the child is able to read new meaning into old marks), that Robbie is ready to read, eager to read, and that, in addition, he knows some of the conventions of drawing. For instance, he knows how to show objects that are closer and farther away. Robbie has a vivid, detailed, organized visual imagination. Robbie is visually literate, even with scant exposure to drawing and art. Robbie has a lot to say, or to *read* about, in his own t-shirt drawing of a "pretend lab."

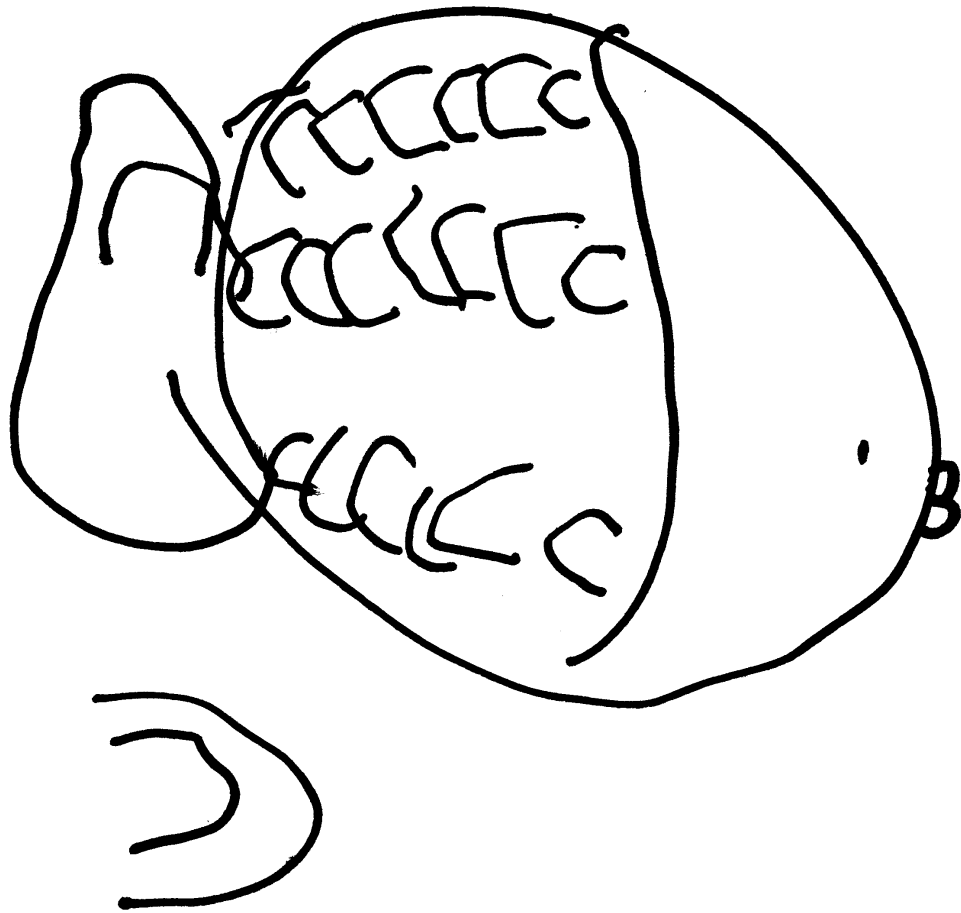
### **Robbie's comments about drawing: positive emotions around mark-making, or the beginning of literacy.**

I asked Robbie how he had felt about drawing the t-shirt. He said, "I kinda liked it." The point to note here is that Robbie, like most children, feels good about drawing. Children like to draw. If these good feelings can be transferred to writing and reading and mathematics, then children will be truly launched into lifetime literacy.

I asked him if he would like another t-shirt to draw. He said, "I wouldn't know what to draw." He paused. Then, he said, "I drew a fish before." I asked him if he wanted to try to draw the fish again. He paused, hesitated, then agreed. First he put the paper horizontally. Then, he said, "No, I want it this way," turning the paper vertically. First, he drew a circle, moving from left to right. Then, he said, "Wait," and laughed. He made a hissing sound. Then, he added a double loop under the circle for the tail. Then, he said, "I don't think that is right. This is the fin. I really don't remember." Robbie was trying to draw a fish from a once-practiced mental image of a fish. He was clearly trying to see that image in his mind's eye and put it on paper. He could add the eye, and the scales. He told me that "the art teacher asked me if I wanted to draw an armadillo, but I said that was too hard. So she said, 'We can draw a fish,' and she showed me how." Robbie was trying to replicate the fish the teacher drew. He said he was having the same trouble he had in the art class with the double crescent curve of the tail/fin. He said, "It looks like a handle. You can hold it and use it like a bag." He added the scales from left to right, working back and forth in efficient columns. Then, he added dots, saying, "I messed up on that part. That was supposed to be the eye." Robbie drew the fish vertically, then turned the paper horizontally to the right, and then to the left. He was puzzled by the tail which he called the fin, and which he drew as two nested curves, which looked like a handle on a ball. He knew he needed to change the nested curves from concave to convex. He struggled, and he succeeded.

Robbie





*Robbie's fish*

**An educator's observations: We all need something to draw about, and to write about. The trick is helping children discover subjects for both activities.**

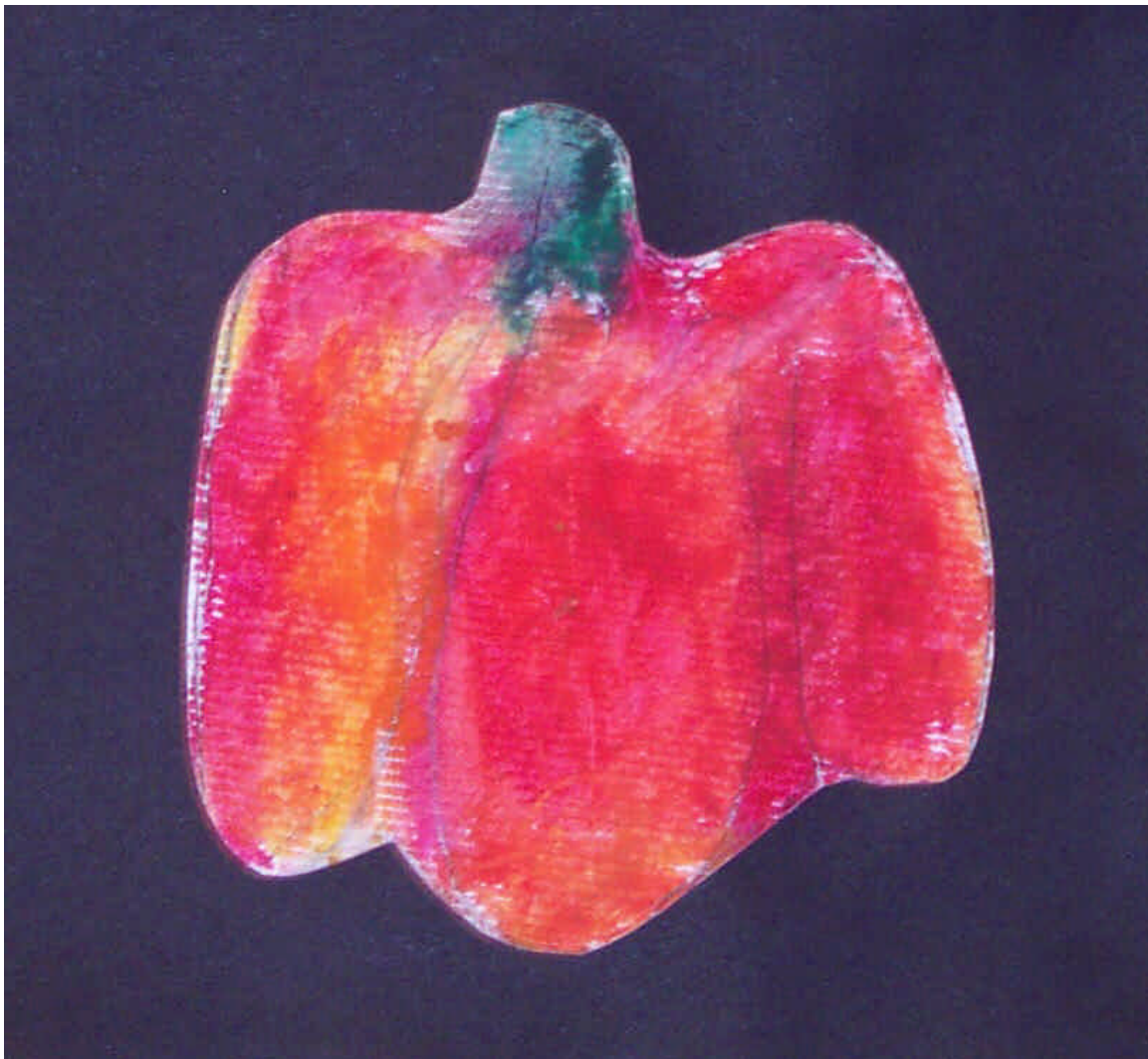
What this fish drawing showed me is that Robbie, like all of us, needs to have something to draw if he is going to draw. It is easy to provide objects to draw. It's the same with writing, isn't it? We need something to write about. (My Drawing/Writing method makes sure the child has something to write about; his drawing.) Robbie knows when he has come across a drawing problem. He can describe it using a simile, and he can project a use for the object as it is incorrectly drawn. He can see it as a totally new thing: a bag in the sense of being a purse: a carrying item with a handle. He is self-critical, but he does not despair or give up. He simply says, "I messed up." All of these comments and actions show a child with a resilient, confident, willing attitude. Robbie's attitude toward drawing provides a window on his brain as it will relate to writing, reading, mathematics, and music. What better attitude and actions could you wish for, as a parent?! Michelle Koross and her husband, Jay Liebowitz, should congratulate themselves as parents.

**How Robbie and I ended our time together with specific training in drawing which children absorb quickly and apply on their own. This kind of response is called**



**learning. We do not expect children to learn grammar of writing on their own. Why should we expect them to learn the grammar of drawing on their own?**

After a snack, Robbie and I did a bit of work with contour, basic shape and light-medium-dark drawing. Robbie chose to work with the hose sprayer. He also looked at the geode, and said, “This would be a really challenging object, flat, bumpy.” He added, “I think practicing drawing has helped me see how hard this thing would be.” When Robbie tackled the hose sprayer, at first, he was buffaloed. Where to start on such a complicated object? I showed him how to do a contour drawing, starting at one point, then drawing all the way around the object, back to the starting point. Robbie tried again. His spirits rose cautiously. Now, he had a system for drawing something very complicated. He could make it simpler, he could work with it. After trying the contour drawing of the hose sprayer several times, I asked Robbie how he felt about drawing now. Robbie said, “I feel more into drawing and stuff. After I started to draw a little bit, I started to like it.”



*Robbie's red pepper*

Robbie's mother's reported that, at his homeschooling art class *the very next day*, Robbie's teacher described him as a child who was “definitely going to *go to art school*.”

*He is so into it!*” What a short “catch-up period!” Look at Robbie’s drawing of a red pepper done 10 days after my visit to his house. What gains this child has made as a mark-maker! Robbie’s gains in drawing will become, with understanding support from his mother and father, increased interest and confidence in writing over time. Drawing has a grammar, just like writing. If a child learns the grammar of drawing, easily, in an hour or two, just imagine what confidence your child will have when it comes time to learn the syntax and grammar of writing!

### **Conclusion**

Michelle wrote, “ If I can better understand where he currently is in terms of reading, writing, and drawing, I can better meet him at this level and not push him beyond what he is capable of doing at any given time. As a homeschooling parent, there is a fine line between encouraging and pushing, which is likely to turn them off that subject. It’s an on-going internal battle.”

My visit to the Koross/Liebowitz household appears to have helped Michelle Koross with her internal battle over how much to push, and how much to simply encourage her son’s mark-making skills. She has a new appreciation for what “art” really is *in children* – the beginnings of literacy. Now, she can feel comfortable supporting her son’s drawings, knowing her son is on his way as a mark-maker, working his way toward words, numbers, geometry, musical notes and computer languages.

Jay commented, “Seeing Robbie's recent drawings -- the tee shirt that demonstrated perspective and the red pepper that showed a sensitivity to subtlety and fine motor control -- was encouraging. I could see Robbie had artistic and dexterity skills well beyond any he had previously demonstrated. Robbie has already demonstrated a strong sense of mechanical intuition, being able to explain how simple machines work, to invent them himself, and to dismantle mechanical assemblies. To me, trained in physics and the humanities, I saw Robbie's drawing skills, married with his mechanical intuition, as making possible for him a career as a mechanical engineer. In this field, one needs to have an innate grasp of how things work as well as the ability to communicate ideas visually. Moreover, since people internalize the external world by drawing it, the finer these drawing skills are, the more understanding of the world one can gain. My reaction that Robbie could be a mechanical engineer was a way of expressing in shorthand the possibilities that his wide range of talents open up for him.”

### **Out of the mouths of very young children...**

I have just spent time in Southern Arizona in the small village of Patagonia. The superintendent of schools, Susan Stropko, accepted my offer to work with grades 1-5 in five 45 minute periods. A couple of third graders summed up the connections between drawing and writing: They said, “Drawing is fun. Drawing feels good. Drawing feels good because it exercises the hand. Exercising the hand lets the head get ready for writing.”

Drawing is fun and feels good. We now know that how children feel emotionally affects how they learn. If a child feels good about himself and what he is doing, he is likely to be

successful as a learner. Parents can help children feel good about learning to write and read by encouraging drawing in their young children. Drawing, after all, gets the head ready for writing.

**Is it important to “catch up” with an interest in mark-making? Literacy is more than words.**

If we want our children to read and write over a lifetime, I believe that work with scribbling and drawing, even at the age of seven, or ten, or fifteen, will be useful to young brains. Do we want our children to be visually literate as well as verbally literate? In a society where media literacy and information technology call for brains equally adept at reading and writing and integrating image and text, yes, we do.

For specific instructions on how to use scribbling and the Drawing/Writing program with children at home, consult the [www.drawingwriting.com](http://www.drawingwriting.com) web site.

**Summing up Robbie Liebowitz as a mark-maker right now**



*Robbie playing the violin*

Robbie Liebowitz is exposed to two hours per week of clay and two hours per week of other mediums in a homeschooling art class. He has also been taking violin lessons for several years. Robbie is learning to write musical notation from his violin teacher. As a seven-year-old mark-maker, Robbie has a little experience with scribbling and drawing; he can write his name, numbers, and the letters of the alphabet. When I asked Robbie's mother about her own experiences with drawing and art, I found out that she did not have confidence in herself as a draw-er, nor was she particularly interested in “art stuff.” Why should anyone expect Robbie to be a draw-er? His family values encourage other mark-making activities. Still, if Robbie's parents value writing and reading *words*, and if Robbie seems a bit reluctant to jump into writing words, then drawing may provide a

natural bridge for Robbie. Wait for installment number three of these Scribbling Papers in a year or so to see how Robbie's writing skills develop!



*Robbie playing the violin*



*Author reading with grandson, Ben*

Dr. Susan Sheridan is an artist, writer, parent and teacher. She received her undergraduate degree in Classics and English from Harvard College and her MAT and her doctorate in

education from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Dr. Sheridan has taught English and Art at the middle school, high school and college levels for the past twenty years. She lectures on her theory of education Neuroconstructivism, and offers workshops on her cross-modal practice Drawing/Writing, as well as multiple literacy strategies, supported by the textbook *Drawing/Writing and the new literacy*, 1997. Susan is currently working on a book for parents, *The Scribble Hypothesis*.

A new handbook for parents called “The Thinking Child” is downloadable via the web site [www.drawingwriting.com](http://www.drawingwriting.com), or can be ordered for \$10 including shipping and handling from [ssheridan@drawingwriting.com](mailto:ssheridan@drawingwriting.com).



*Author scribbling with grandson, Ben*