



charcoal

Charcoal was one of the first drawing tools for mankind and is still used extensively by artists today. It is at the top of my list of authentic art media that children deserve to experience.

The first charcoal drawings known are to be found on the walls and ceilings of caves in France. Charcoal is still one of the main drawing media today. It is even used as some artists primary media.

Let's take a closer look at some different kinds of charcoal; the tools you can use with charcoal and the kinds of marks you can make.

The tools:

thick and thin vine charcoal: These are made from willow branches or grape vines burned to just the right hardness. They are responsive and versatile and leave a softer grey mark. They erase cleanly and are economical to buy. But they can break easily.



woodless charcoal pencils and charcoal pencils (soft, medium and hard): are good for more detailed drawing. wooden charcoal pencils are difficult to sharpen.



compressed charcoal: is made from ground up charcoal that has been reconstituted and formed into a block with a binding agent. It is much harder and blacker than vine charcoal.



fireplace charcoal: you can take pieces of charcoal from the fire to draw with. It is often crumbly and scratchy.



The following tools are also for 'drawing. You can move the charcoal around the paper with them.

brushes: nylon bristles round and square.



paper stomper: different sizes



gum, putty and plastic erasure: each has a different effect



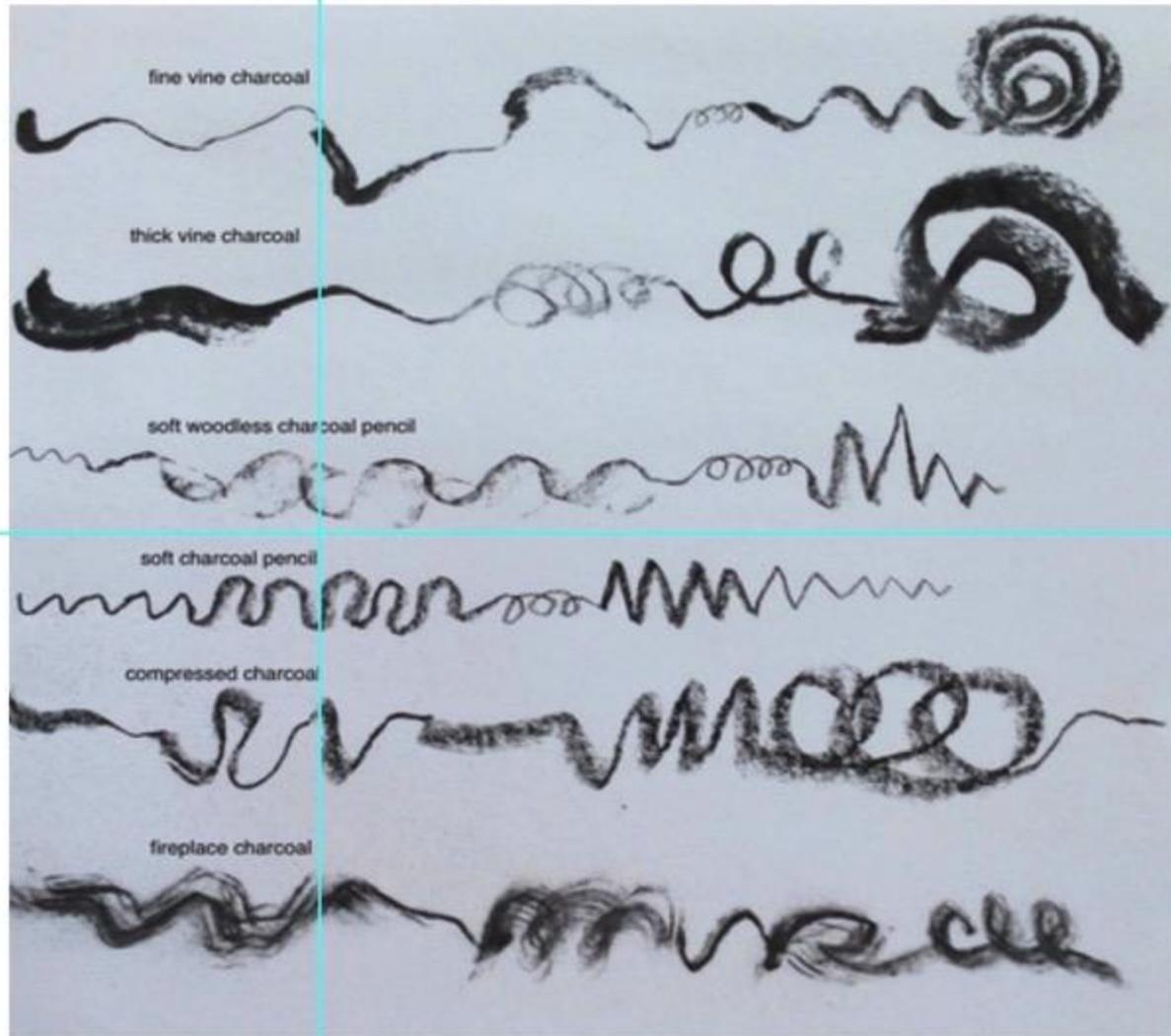
Before you rush off to work on that masterpiece you need to spend some time experimenting and playing with all the items in the box.

Each tool has different properties and affordances. We need to fully understand what these are in order to have a wide range of markmaking repertoires upon which to draw.

The wider the range of different marks you can make the better. The more techniques you have at your fingertips the better you will be able to express yourself. There is no definitive list of techniques or any set sequence for learning. Marks are created and used differently by each person. The marks emerge in response to a dialogue between the person and the drawing tool.

Think creatively about different ways to hold the tool. Use different parts of the tool to make marks. Use different pressures on the tool and think of different ways of combining marks. Try drawing on different kinds of paper and surfaces.

The next few pages have a few ideas to get you started.



Gradations of tone

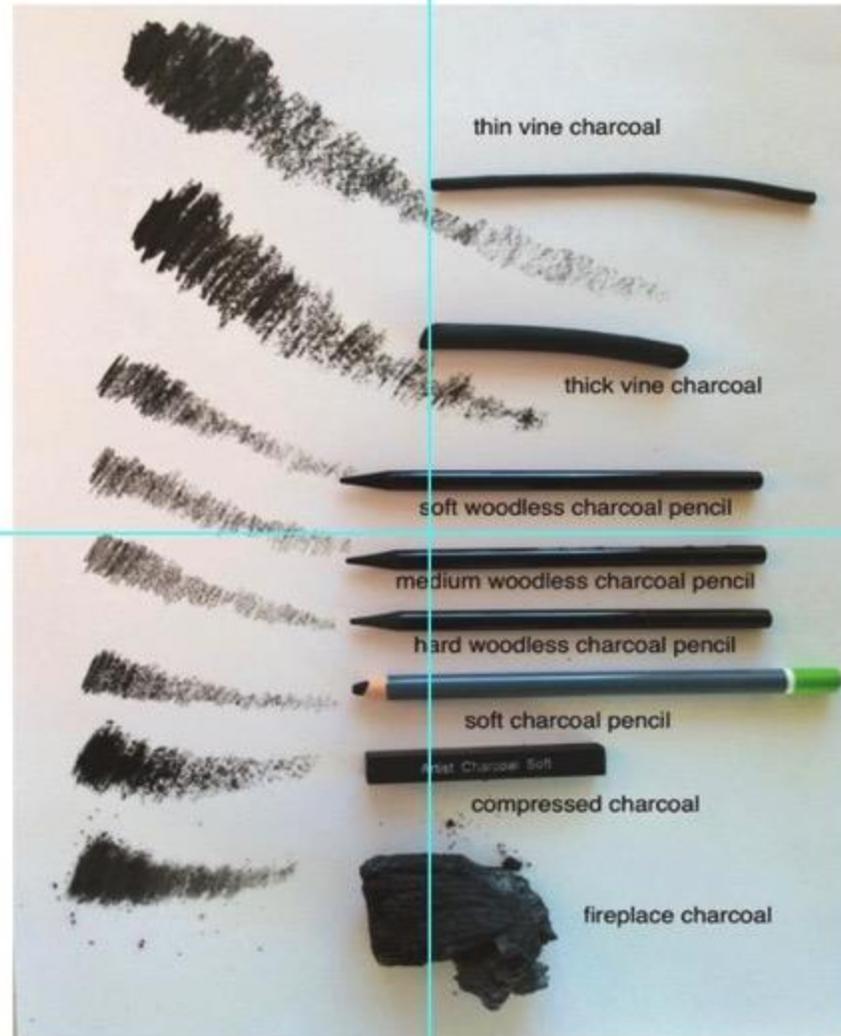
Tone means how light or dark something appears. Different tones are achieved through the amount of pressure you apply when drawing and the density of your lines.

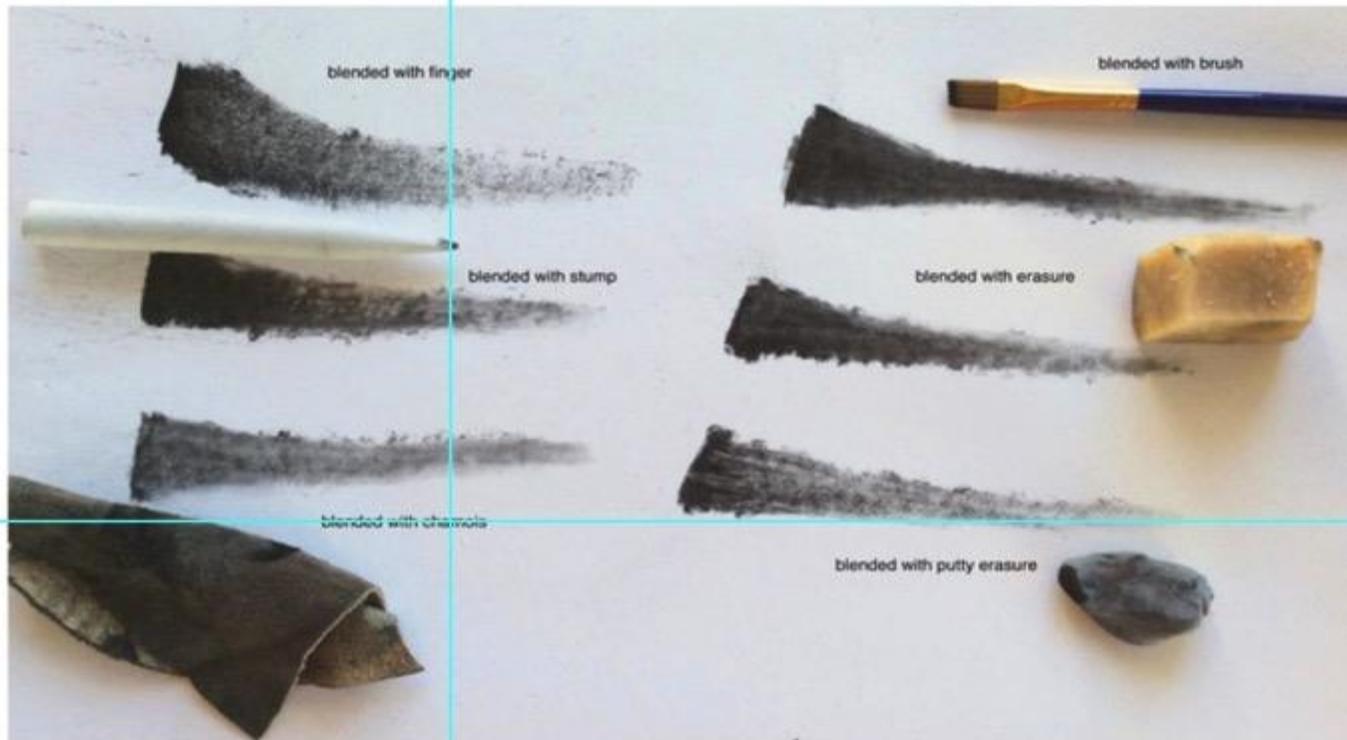
Different tools also have different tones. For example, vine charcoal is slightly lighter and more grey than compressed charcoal.

Try shading from dark to light and from light to dark.

Try drawing different shapes and fill them in with different grades of tone.

Try putting down a base tone and then overlapping other tones on top.





Blending

When you rub your finger or a blending tool over charcoal lines the lines disappear and the charcoal moves on the page to create different effects. You need to experiment with each blending tool and become familiar with what it will do.

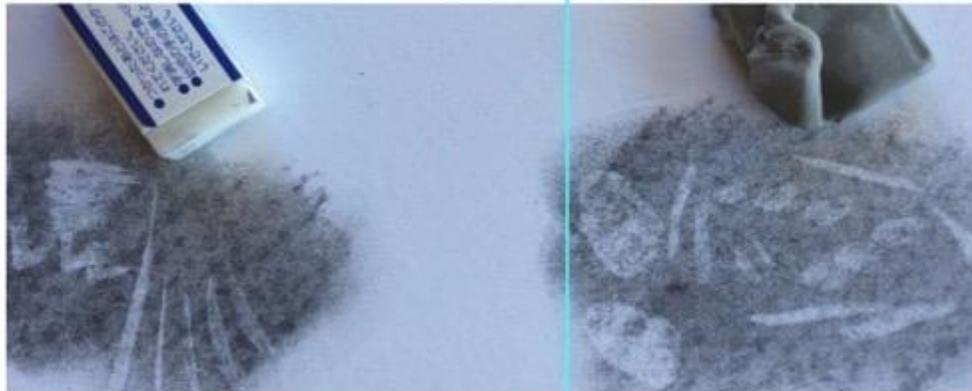
tools to move charcoal around

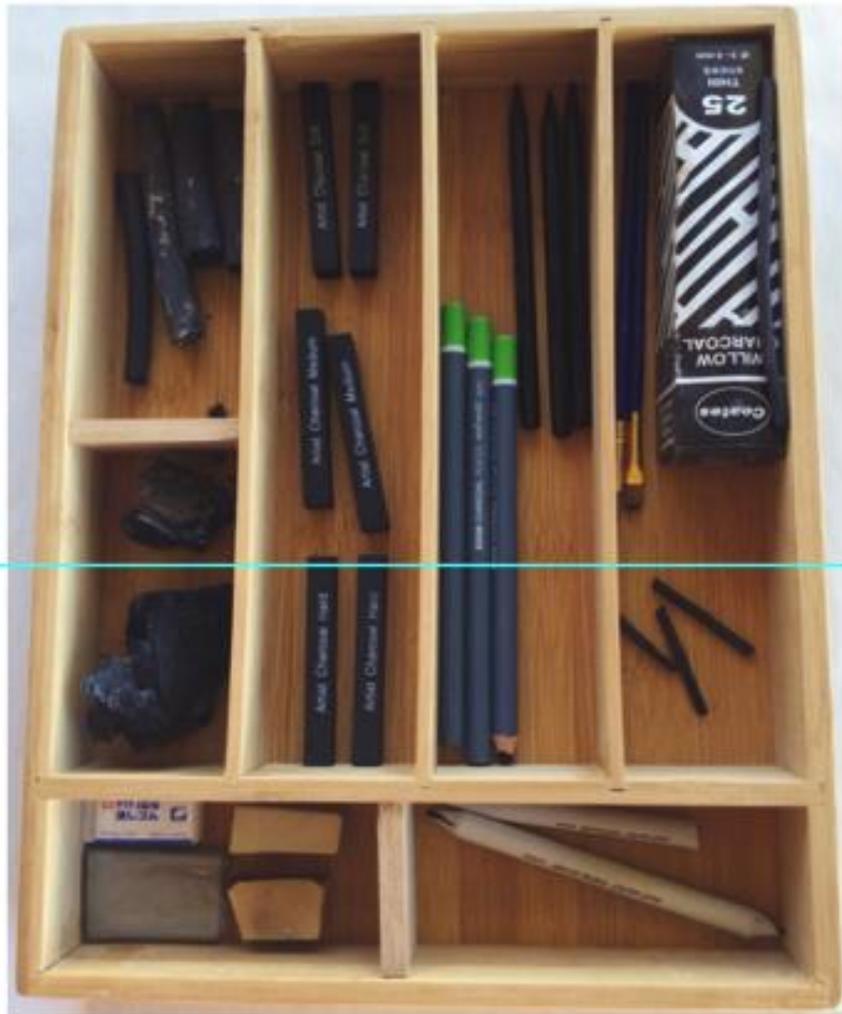
When you have rubbed charcoal on paper there are a range of tools you can use to make marks.

A brush not only blends but also paints with charcoal.



Erasers can be used as drawing tools. Charcoal can be lifted off the paper with a sticky putty erasure (see bottom right). Gum erasures can dig back to the white paper surface and create lighter lines and patches. Fine lines can be drawn with a sharp edged white erasure.



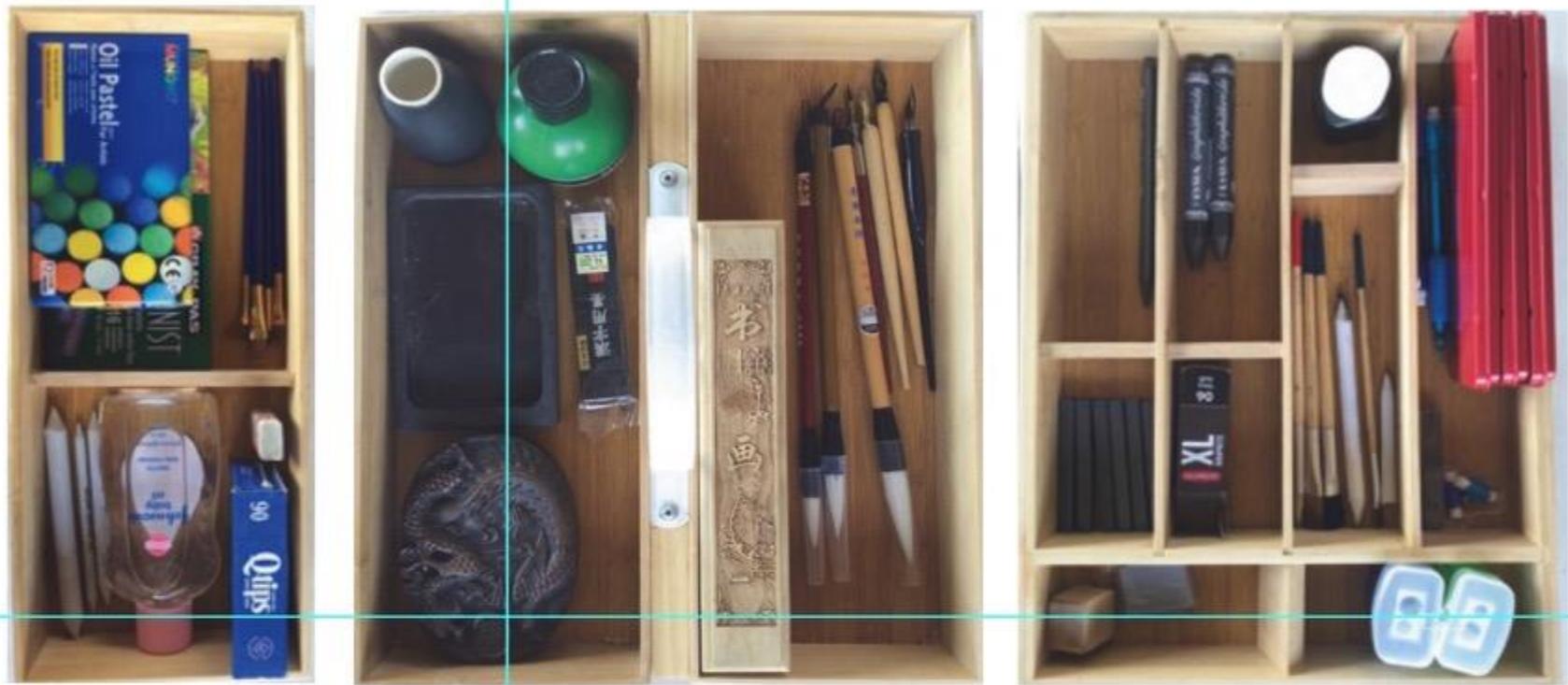


A toolbox for charcoal drawing

I adapted a bamboo cutlery box and filled it with the basic charcoal drawing materials for a small group of children to use.

(from the top left)

- thick vine charcoal
- compressed charcoal sticks (soft medium and hard)
- woodless charcoal pencils and charcoal pencils (soft, medium and hard)
- thin vine charcoal
- brushes
- paper stompers
- gum, putty and plastic erasures
- fireplace charcoal



art making media boxes:

Here three sample boxes of art media. From the left - oil pastel, Chinese brush, pen and ink, graphite. It is more convenient to keep all the materials needed for each medio in their own box. That way I can just get a box and begin working with a group of children.

I have media boxes for:

charcoal, oil pastels, watercolor, Chinese brush/pen and ink, soft pastels, color pencils, poster paint, printmaking and clay.

I am putting together guides for each media.

I am also hoping to do similar things for papermaking, ephemeral art, sculpture, IT and photography, book making and puppetry.

Care for drawings

Charcoal smudges and rubs off the paper easily. A way to fix the charcoal to the paper is needed, especially for finished drawings.

Artists use a special fixative spray on their finished work to stop it smudging. However, many of these fixatives are toxic.

When working with children I use hairspray to fix their work. Just to be on the safe side I also use the spray outside or in a well ventilated place without the children.

Working with children and charcoal: a few practicalities

Space and furnishings:

Try to choose a space that will accommodate a small group of children and is out of the flow of traffic and free from interruptions. You will need access to a well-ventilated space nearby so that you can spray the finished drawings. The children will get very black hands so you will need easy access to hand washing facilities.

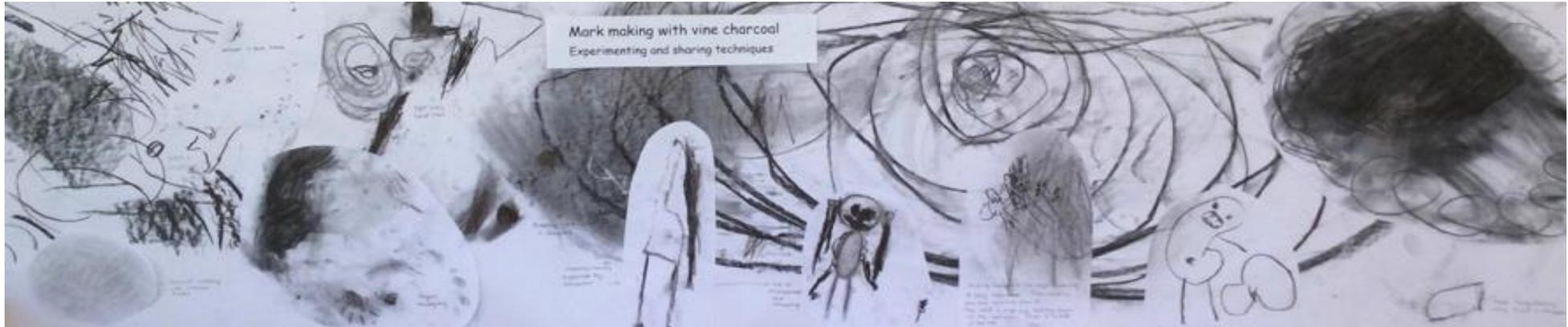
A large table provides a socio cultural context for a small group of children to work together. If the tabletop is not smooth do try to find a way to cover it with a smooth surface. Cover the whole table with newsprint off a roll to protect it. This can be refreshed as needed.

At the beginning I facilitate collaborative exploration by running a long strip of paper down each side of the table and encourage children to draw together and in multiple places. This shared space encourages discussion and sharing of ideas and techniques. Later when children become more confident I provide a range of sizes and shapes of paper for individual drawings.

Open trays, which display the charcoal and the tools, allow children to make choices about the thickness and length of charcoal they want to draw with. I begin by limiting the media offered to just vine charcoal. Over several days I gradually introduce the charcoal pencils and compressed charcoal. The use and care of each new media is carefully introduced and modeled.



A charcoal project with preschool children



I chose **vine charcoal** to begin the project because it makes the most responsive and most interesting marks. It also allows for the most experimentation with the art tools like brushes, stompers and chamois.

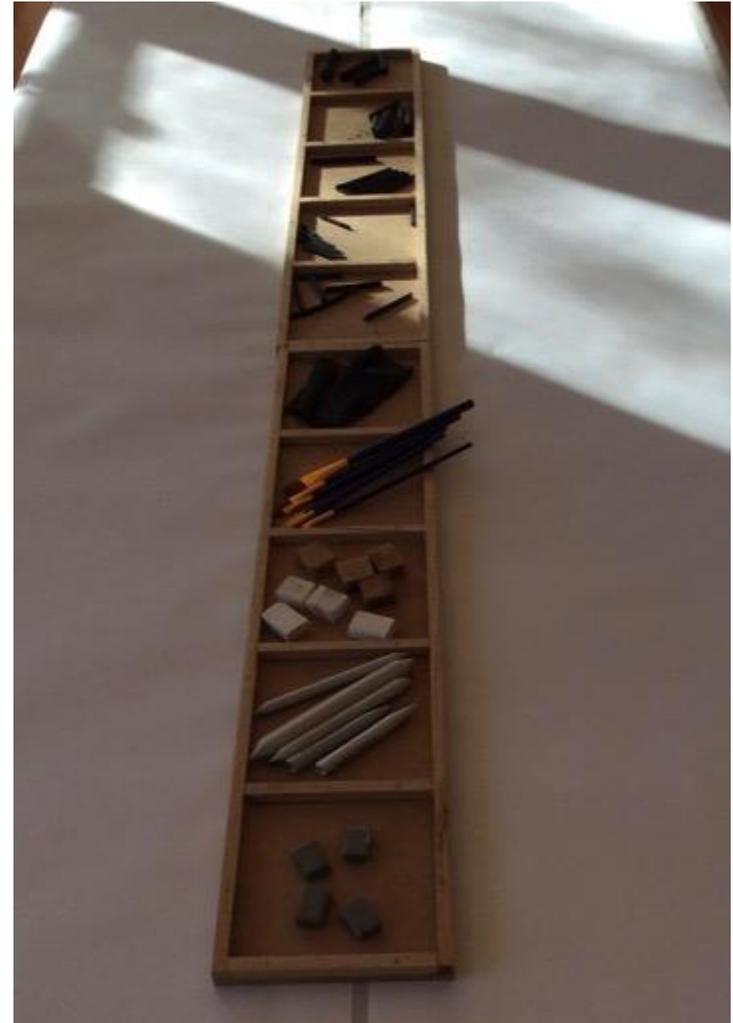
I recommend beginning slowly with a limited pallet. It is tempting to present the full range of wonderful materials at the beginning. However, it would not only be overwhelming for the children, but it would make it difficult for them to appreciate each media and tool for the possibilities it holds and the care it needs.

Introducing charcoal to young children: the set up

I have a set of open, flat display trays that give easy access to and management of the media and tools. I can carefully select a few media and tools for this tray. I demonstrate the use and care of materials before the children begin. This avoids having to correct and limit then later. It also helps the children become responsible for managing the space and materials.

The children will likely have no hesitation picking up the charcoal and making marks. However, they may be more hesitant to use the tools. Demonstrating a few simple techniques with the stomper, brush and erasure suggests the possibilities and opens up and supports an exploratory disposition.

I like to begin media explorations with a communal paper. Communal or shared paper encourages discussion and collaboration. I used a long roll of paper on a large table that will accommodate about six children. White paper is best because it clearly shows off the marks being made.



Need a clearer image here

Exploring vine charcoal

Here is a child working independently. She is exploring thick vine charcoal with the brush and the chamois.

She has discovered that you can draw bold lines with thick vine charcoal and then rub them back to a grey mist with a chamois.

Then she discovered that she could lay another layer of drawing on top so that her first marks show through.

This is an important attribute of charcoal as it allows you to see the changes you have made over time. Often we completely erase something to make a correction only to draw it exactly the same again. Having the ghosts of previous attempts helps us avoid or build on previous attempts.

She also discovered that she could move the charcoal dust around with a paint brush and achieve a similar result.



Supporting and extending

Peer support:

Children learn from each other. Here Bella is demonstrating to Thomas how to use a brush to move the charcoal around.

First you have to get an area of thick black mark. Then you take the charcoal dust and brush it to where and how you want it with the paint brush.

On the other side of Thomas, Charlotte is listening carefully and later finds a brush to experiment with.

They discovered the flexibility and responsiveness and the wide range of tone available with charcoal.



Educators and adults also play a significant role in supporting young children's mark making.

Rather than offer vague comments about children's art like 'well done' and 'nice' we need to really engage with what they are doing and engage in a dialogue with them about their art.

As we do so well in other aspects of their learning, we can give feedback through a gentle 'noticing'. In this image I am saying to Scout, 'I notice that your line is getting lighter and thinner here. How do you think this happened?'

Perhaps Scout will offer ideas like; she did not press so hard or the charcoal had a thin point.

Getting the answer right is not so important, rather it is the interest you take that lends importance to the child's task.

Working to extending the idea I suggested she try and find a way to make a line that is both light and wide.

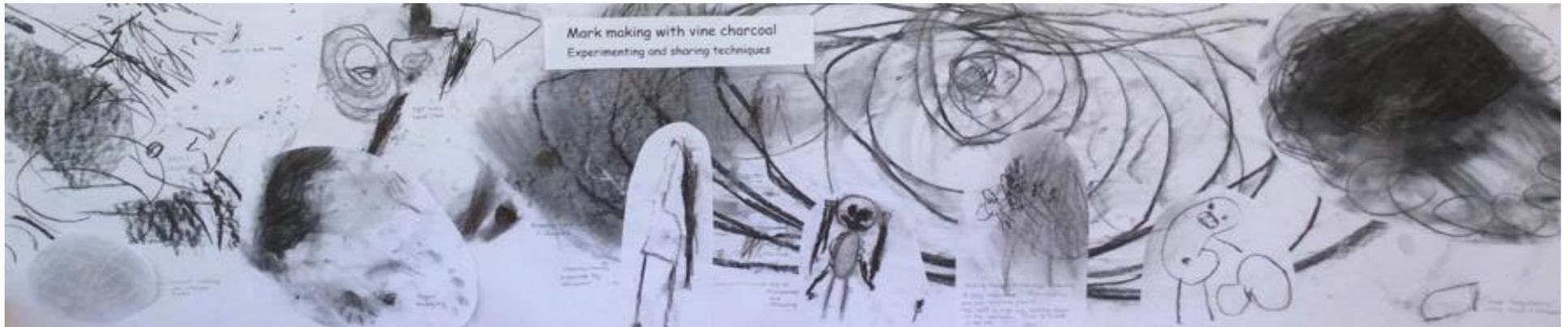


New learning first occurs in shared spaces where young children bump into the ideas and practices of others that might be different to their own. The role of the teacher in this context is to 'notice' and to help children also notice what others are doing and to perhaps try out these new ideas for themselves.

Discussions about what the invented marks resemble and how the marks might be used helps to focus the looking.

The value of drawing is conveyed to the children when educators also engage in drawing and experimenting with charcoal along side the children.

The educator also needs to manage the use and care of materials and keep the space fresh and inviting.



I took samples of the work done with vine charcoal and displayed it with a few captions. This created a point of reference and discussion for the children as well information for families about our work.

Compressed Charcoal

When I felt most of the children had explored the initial media presented I began to add a few more variations.

Compressed charcoal comes in sticks, woodless pencils and pencils. It is very black and not quite so easy to move around the paper. However it is good for giving a strong contrast of tone and for picking out finer details. I demonstrated and discussed the possibilities and care of this media with the children. Again I used communal paper.

I have found that compressed charcoal sticks often prompt explorations of 'blackness'. It is so black and so punchy that it is visually stimulating. It is attractive to those children who confidently make big sweeping marks and bold statements.

The woodless pencils are perhaps the easiest form of compressed charcoal to use. They resemble a pencil and can easily be sharpened to a point. The wooden charcoal pencils break up under pressure and do not sharpen easily in a pencil sharpener.

I keep the pencils in a box with the points sticking up so they don't get damaged. The visible point also allows the artist to pick the most suitable point for the drawing.

The pencils tend to invite drawing rather than mark exploration.



More adult support

Another way the adult can support art making is through parallel events.

I like to sit next to children who are drawing and do my own drawing. It lets children know I value drawing enough to do it myself.

As I draw I often talk aloud about my drawing process – what I am thinking and doing. This lets children hear that there are many things to consider when drawing, and that I am in a process of trial and error and evaluation.

The children next to me watch with interest and are free to copy what I do or not. Often they offer suggestions to my dilemmas.



Young children usually enjoy talking to you about their art work.

Here we are discussing the details of what she has drawn.

I asked her to tell me more about that bit of the drawing.

It was a story about three mermaids swimming under the ocean. One of them was getting tangled in the seaweed.

They have very long hair and special flippers so they can swim fast.



Talking with me reminded her that she had not yet drawn the hair on one of the mermaids. She confidentially told me that their hair was just like seaweed and they used this attribute to disguise themselves and hide. I wondered what they were hiding from and she told me they were hiding from a big octopus and did I know that octopus are super clever. But mermaids have a little bit of magic.

I could see she was deeply involved in creating her story. She spent at least an hour at the drawing table. This disposition of self motivation, elaboration on an idea and persistence has been nurtured by allowing large blocks of time for play based activities.



Black!

Several children pushed the concept of black – however I think this is the most intense black I have seen. It is quite beautiful.

Oscar spent a long time rubbing layer after layer of compressed charcoal. He told me his hands felt hot from rubbing.

He wanted to make the blackest black ever.





I collected samples of the work done with compressed charcoal. Display is noticed and appreciated by the children. They show their parents what we have been doing. They gather in small groups and discuss what they have done. As an educator I use it as a point of discussion about what they have learned.

Building on children's interests

The following week, I responded to the children's narrative drawing by setting up a small 'scenario' with a boy and girl wooden doll, a cat and a dog, lazing under a tree.

I let the children know that this space was still the 'drawing table' and the figures had been put there to draw, although they were encouraged to move the figures around and set up their own scene to draw.

The same media and tools were provided and the children encouraged to continue to build their mark making repertoire. Now, with the added figures, they had a focus to work with in relation to their mark making and their narrative. The marks they made needed to have some references to what they were looking at. As well as imaginative 'narrative' drawing, this introduced the concept of 'observational drawing'.



Drawing from observation.

Observational drawing supports many important skills, dispositions and concepts. The ability to draw involves the ability to see and lots and lots of practice. The opportunity to draw should be integrated into every learning area.

Observational drawing focuses attention and requires intense looking of the discovery kind. When children draw they demonstrate concentration and thoughtfulness. When studying a topic of interest, drawing elements of the topic is crucial for a deeper understanding of the topic. Drawing engages the child in active exploration of the topic much more than just talking about it.

Observational drawing slows and intensifies the 'looking' and holds the attention. Details are noticed and recorded and drawings become more considered, richer and more detailed. Children's thinking is extended beyond the immediate first encounter to a more complex, scientific of thinking that supports higher orders of thinking.

Bella loves to draw and is one of the first to draw the doll, Lisa, under the tree. She drew three versions of Lisa under the tree. Each time adjusting the drawing slightly to bring it closer to her aspirations.



Thomas often draws at the same time as Bella. They seem to like to share ideas and techniques.

Thomas drew the boy doll, John, complete with striped t-shirt and cap. Then he decided John needed something to play with and added a swing and monkey bars. Bella reminded him to also draw the tree.



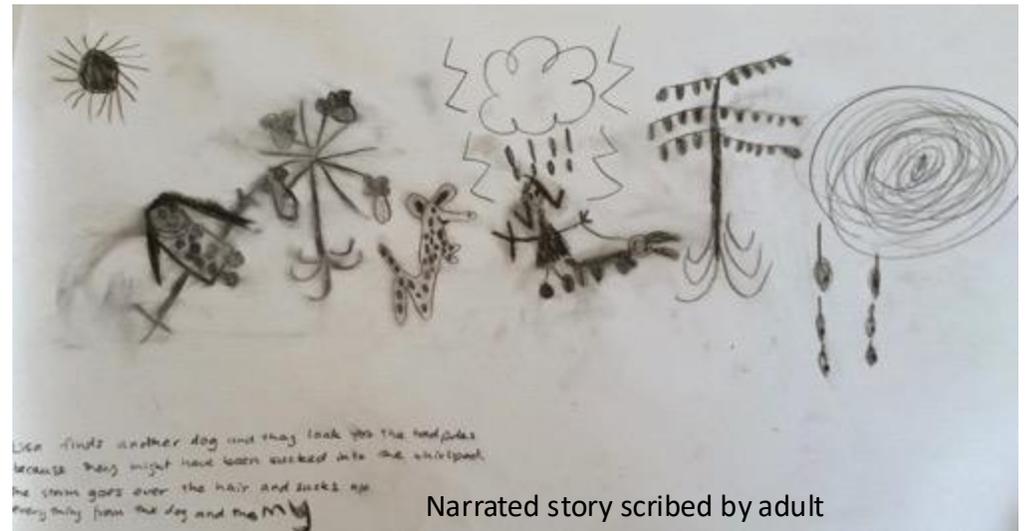
Felicity began drawing the tree. She elaborated on the tree by drawing pineapples on the tree. Lisa and Spot are running around and around the tree trying to catch each other.

She used the brush to 'soften' bits of her drawing.

Felicity then elaborated on the observational drawing by creating a girlfriend with a dog on a leash, a thunderstorm and a whirlpool with tadpoles. She asked me to write the story on her page as she dictated it to me.

Felicity spent almost two hours doing six detailed drawings, each with a different story inspired by Lisa.





A collection of some of Felicity's drawings.

Narrated story scribed by adult

Another child decided to do an observational drawing of one of the trees in the display.

Next a toadstool was drawn under the tree. She 'found' the toadstool in her previous marks that sit under her drawing.

A bird flying down to its nest in the tree was drawn next.

She told me that the drawing was what the bird would see. In other words, from the perspective of the bird.



Emma drew a very happy dog under one of the trees.



Further extensions

Drawing the figures and animals was very engaging so I added two more figures and a wooden horse. This allowed more children to participate. The children worked in pairs or small groups drawing, sharing ideas and techniques and developing stories around the figures.

Adding different paper:

As the drawings became more personal and detailed I offered them the choice of individual paper. I had divided A4 paper into different sizes and shapes. I also added some brown paper for a change. Of course I kept the long roll of paper and large sheets of cartridge paper are available.

What we draw on is as important as the media we draw with. Different papers have different effects on the charcoal and mark making. Different sizes and shapes of paper encourages children to plan their composition and think carefully about the space their drawing takes.

Providing small pieces of paper also invites sequences of drawings. These sequences can be compiled in a book that tells a story or can be joined as a long fold out.



Drawing dialogues

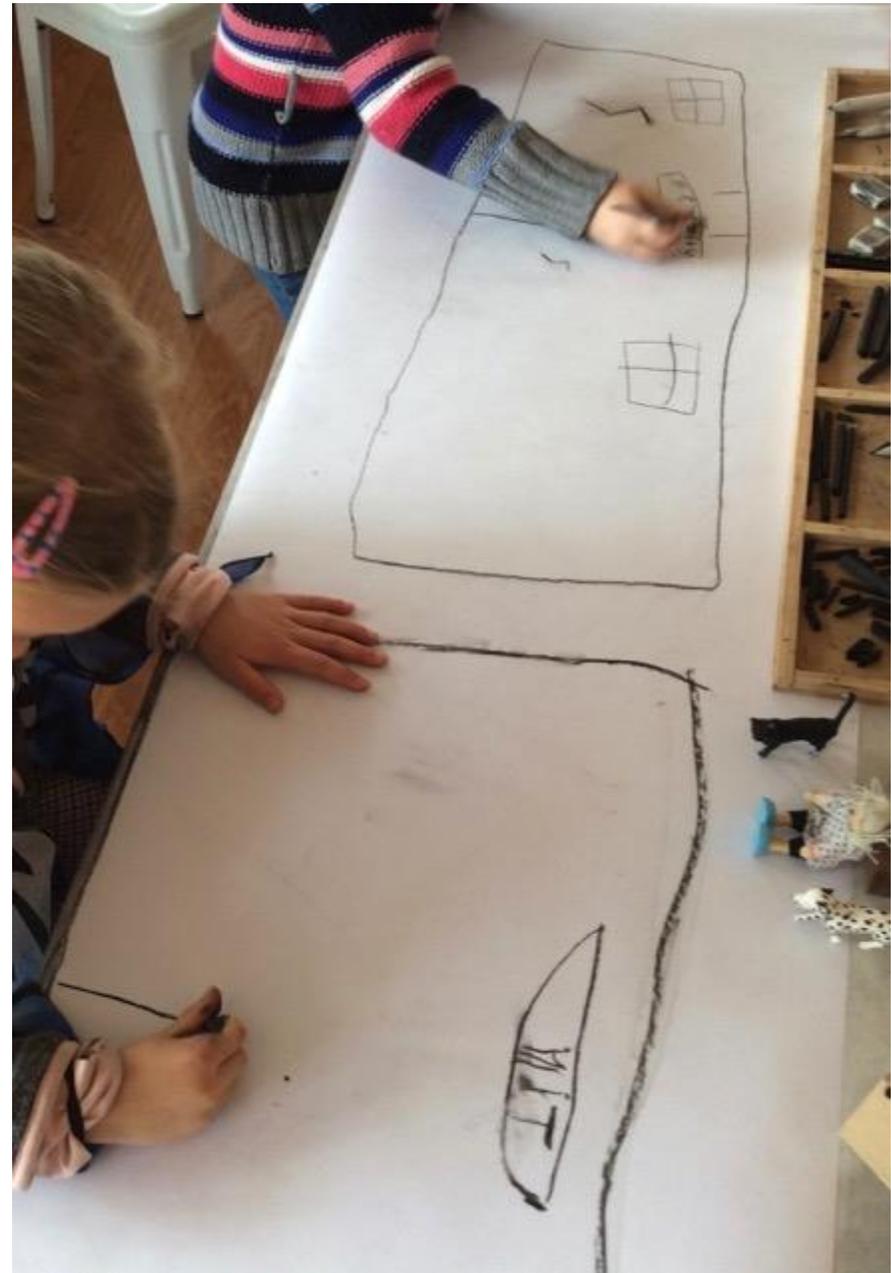
Felicity (top) confidently drew a large rectangle announcing to me at the same time that this was a shop.

Tilly (bottom left) had been watching Felicity's previous series of drawings with admiration and decided to sit right next to Felicity and collaborate with her.

She too drew a large rectangle and the same front door. Then she made a sign over the door that read 'Tilly'. Felicity liked that idea and also added a shop sign that said 'Felicity'.

I asked what kind of shops they were going to make. Tilly wanted to draw the cat and dog so she said it was an animal shop, where you can buy cats and dogs.

Felicity ignored my question and drew some cracks in the wall to show that this was a very old building.

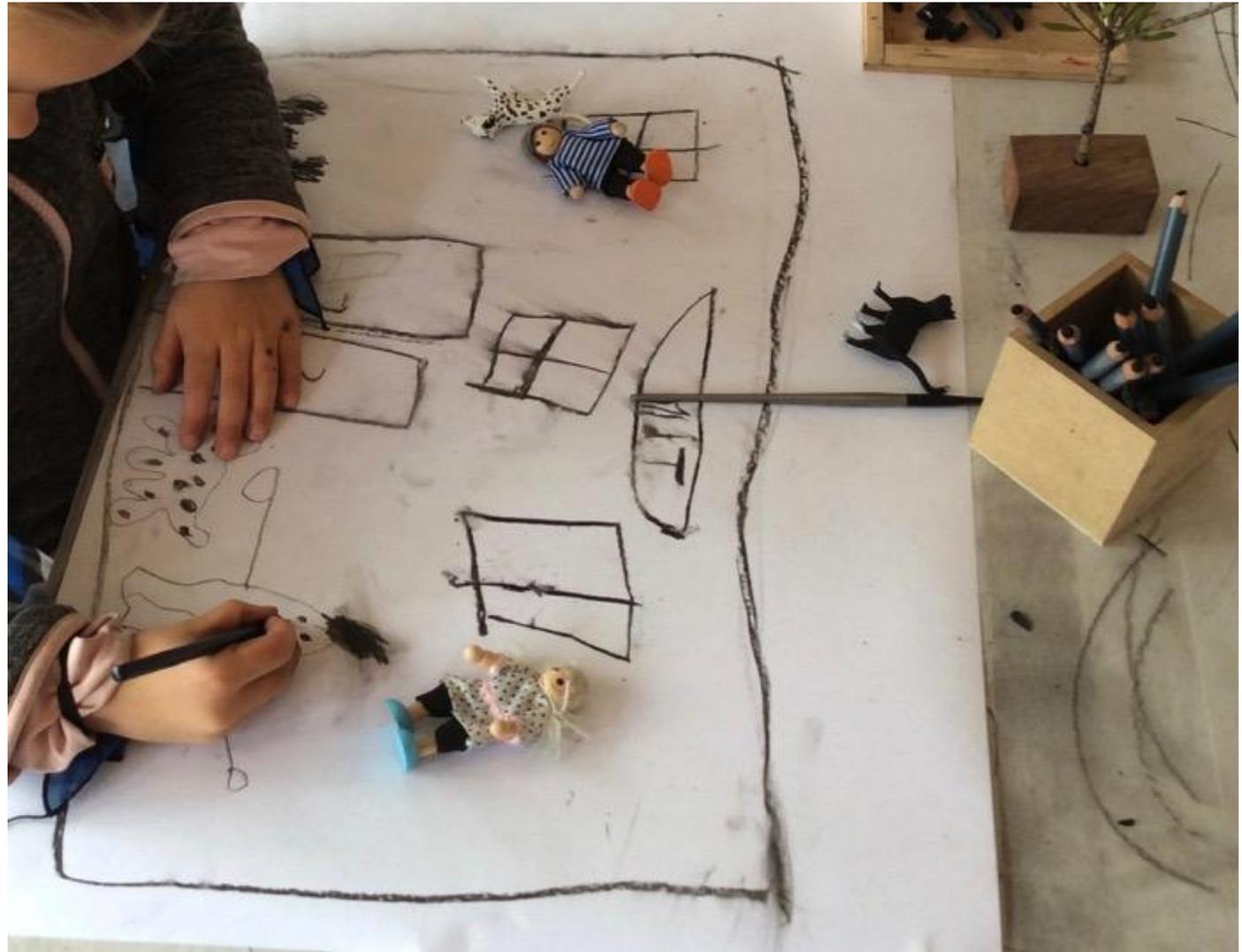


To my dismay Tilly set about tracing around the cat and dog figures. Tracing around small figures like these not only produces an unsatisfactory equivalence it also compounds the child's sense of insecurity about drawing and does not support drawing skills.

Felicity decided to draw the same dog Tilly was drawing. However, she drew the dog 'from observation'.

Tilly stopped what she was doing and watched Felicity 'Maybe I can do that when I draw the doll', she said tentatively, laying the dolls close to her and looking at them carefully.

She managed a pretty effective rendering of John, complete with his cap on his head. 'He is going to be the shopkeeper', she said.



Playing with the figures in the context of the drawings often gave the children ideas and possibilities for extending their drawing.

Here Tilly was playing with the doll looking in the window she had drawn. This prompted her to draw the doll at the window.

‘She is a customer looking in to see if the shop is open’, said Tilly.

As an adult supporting and extending the drawing I sometimes talked through the figures to help children see things in a different way and to elaborate on what they they have done.

For example, I might have a doll take on the roll of a customer and come and buy a pet. This might prompt the child to consider what the shopkeeper might need that has not yet been drawn.

As an educator I am always looking for ways to extend children’s thinking and help them to elaborate on their first attempts.





Tilly drew the customer's face looking in the window. Prompted by Felicity, she also drew a bunk bed, with a ladder that went right to the top bunk because she noted that Felicity's ladder did not look long enough.



Felicity decided to create a lolly shop and drew a row of six different flavoured lollypops. I asked if I could buy one and was told that actually they were free and I could choose which one I wanted. She explained that the shopkeeper was tired and she was drawing a bed for him. It was a bunk bed like the one she had at home.

Felicity had noticed Tilly draw a face at the window so she drew Rapunzel at the window and extended that idea further by conveying night by the dark color in the windows and the moon outside.

Talking children through an observational drawing

This child had just traced around the plastic animals and I wanted to steer her into trying an observational drawing.

First I pointed out the fact that the horse would get dirty if she traced her. Then I offered to help her draw the horse.

In this case the help was in the form of talking through the process.

'You need to decide what to draw first – where to begin', I said.

'The legs', she replied.

'OK, the legs area good place to start.

They are just rectangles. Draw two rectangles at the bottom of the page – here'.

I pointed and 'air drew' two rectangles.

She drew these with confidence.

'Now the body is another rectangle – here'. I pointed and 'air drew' again.

She turned to me smiling – 'I can do the rest myself'.



Rose told me that she planned to draw the two girl dolls and all the animals.

She took each doll and carefully drew as much detail about them as she could. One was smaller than the other and I asked why. She showed me that one is actually taller. 'She is the oldest', she told me.

Rose did not hesitate to draw from observation and was happy with the outcomes. She noticed important details that differentiate between the dolls. As she drew she talked animatedly between the two dolls. They were best friends and were planning a camping trip.

Prior to drawing the figures she had spent about twenty minutes playing with them. The playing had not only given her a real physical sense of what the dolls were like but it had also given her a story about which to draw.

Rose was self motivated and persistent. She recognized the huge task she had set herself. 'I get tired drawing but I like it so I still do it', she said to me. 'This is taking me a long time'.



There was not enough room on the page for the horse so she got another piece of paper.

'I have to draw the girl again because someone has to look after the horse.'





Josie was working next to Rose and announced that she could do a very difficult drawing. She could draw the dog standing front of the girl. Rose watch in fascination.



When she had finished I suggested she set up the figures and the drawing to demonstrate what she had done.

Rose did the same.



Extending and challenging higher levels of representation

Building on the children's interest in drawing houses, shops and their bed and playrooms, I created a simple house interior with a few bits of basic furniture. I wanted the shape and space to be the focus of attention so I left everything plain cardboard brown.

Representing three dimensional objects and spaces is challenging even for adults. I was not sure how the children would respond to this.

I did not put the figures in the house sets as I was concerned the role play would distract attention from the model. I wanted to shift the thinking from the figures to a context for the figures. I planned to return the figures later.

I limited the media to vine charcoal to simplify choices so they could focus on the model.



The first child to draw told me she had drawn the door and windows and then she drew the table and the chairs.

'Phew, it is very difficult' she said. 'It is hard to draw everything.'



She decided to focus instead on the furniture.

She drew the bunk bed with three children in it and the double bed with a mum and dad in it.

It was interesting that she had a plan view of the double bed and an elevation view of the bunk bed.

She confidently drew the people in the bunk bed lying down.



Ellen had been watching the drawing of the beds and decided to do her own drawing.

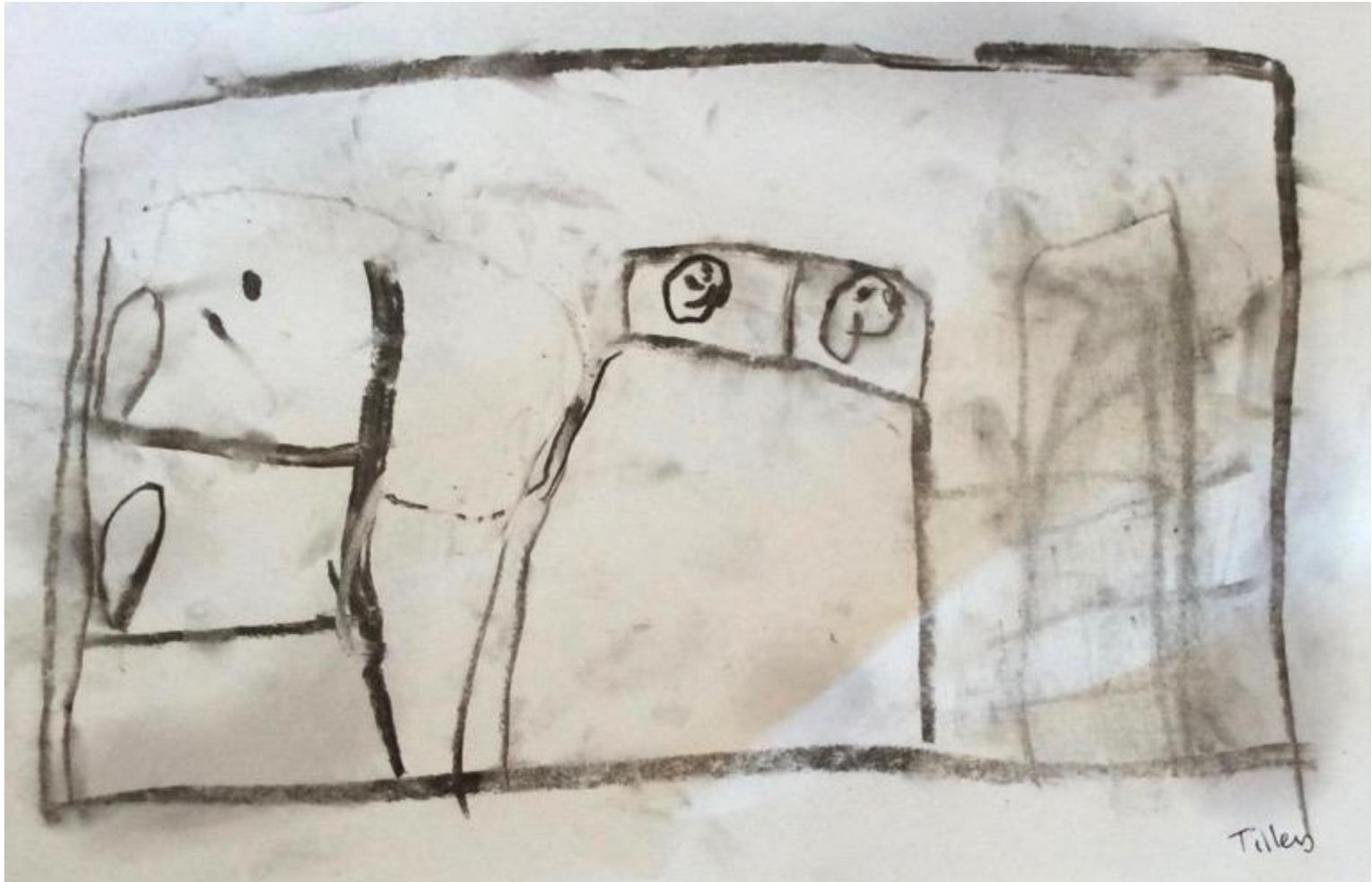
She carefully placed the cardboard bunk beds near to her so she could reference them. She also put children in the beds telling me that she had bunk beds at home and she slept in the top one.

She added her toy box and her bookshelf that was in her room.

Bringing elements from home into drawings is very gratifying and for the educators brings a link to home and a personal touch to the activity.

Ellen used a brush to soften parts of the drawing and move the charcoal to where she wanted it.





Tilly admired Ellen's bunk beds and tried to first draw them on the right of the double bed. Dissatisfied she tried again on the left. She asked me to help her draw the children lying down in bed. 'I can't do lying down', she said. First I tried to talk her through the drawing but she needed a visual reference. So I showed her how to draw a person lying down by drawing one myself. I demonstrated how the head, back and feet all had to be touching what she was lying on.



This new drawing was done with much more confidence. She has not only managed to draw people in the bunk bed, she also had the confidence to draw the light above the bed, the closet and the toys in the corner of the room. Acknowledging that she had real difficulty imagining a person lying down, and modeling how to draw that, were important components of the process. If I had refused to draw with her or for her, as many educators believe is the correct thing to do, then she would never have understood how to draw a person lying down. This simple demonstration has given Tilly a new skill and understanding as well as boosted her confidence in her ability.

Art history references:

My favorite contemporary artist who uses charcoal as his primary medium is William Kentridge. Listen to him talk about his art process and the joys of charcoal here:

https://youtu.be/5_UphwAfjkh

Edward Hopper has some interesting charcoal drawings.

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/HopperDrawing>

Children's books on art making:

Peter Reynolds, 'Ish' @ <https://youtu.be/vplCaczeQ9o>

Evaluating the charcoal project

The documentation of the project highlighted many aspects of learning that are described below in **the importance of drawing.**

The Importance of Drawing

Drawing is an important tool that children use to represent what they know and what they are discovering about the world in which they live. Drawing helps children make connections between their experiences, their memory and their imagination.

Children use drawing to:

- strengthen their perception of the world through the ordering of their sensations, feelings, ideas and thoughts;
- communicate by making their ideas, thoughts and feelings available to others;
- invent, manipulate ideas and support creative thinking;
- solve problems and develop their intellectual curiosity;
- plan, sort and evaluate their ideas;
- develop intentionality that supports their executive functioning;
- remember, revisit and reflect upon their experiences, and
- imagine, play with ideas and visualise possibilities.

Links to The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia: Learning Outcomes

Below is a summary of the learning outcomes and in italics are a few criteria that were addressed through this art project.

OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

Children feel safe, secure, and supported

Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency

Children develop knowledgeable and confident self identities

Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect

The charcoal project supported children's sense of identity and autonomy through the collaborative and interactive nature of the drawing experiences. The open ended nature of drawing allowed each child to express their ideas and respond to each others ideas respectfully.

OUTCOME 2: CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation

Children respond to diversity with respect

Children become aware of fairness

Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment

Drawing poses many problems for children and they learn to explore, experiment and participate with others to solve these problems.

OUTCOME 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing

Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing

The drawing project encouraged and supported children to seek out and accept new challenges, make new discoveries, and celebrate their own efforts and achievements and those of others. Children were able to make choices, accept challenges, take considered risks, manage change and cope with frustrations and the unexpected in the context of drawing.

OUTCOME 4: CHILDREN ARE CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LEARNERS

Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity

Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesizing, researching and investigating

Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another

Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials

The children demonstrated that they can create and use representation to communicate ideas and concept. The project allowed children to explore the purpose and function of a range of tools, media and graphics. Drawing processes that I have described supported children to develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity

OUTCOME 5: CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes

Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts

Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media

Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work

Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking

The drawing project enabled the use of creative arts to express ideas and make meaning. Children were able to experiment with ways of expressing ideas and meaning using a new media. They began to use images and approximations of letters and words to convey meaning.