Head Lice in Drawings of Kindergarten Children

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Abstract. Drawings by kindergarten children were analyzed in order to study the emotional reaction of these children to head lice. The choice of color was significant (black was used by 43% of the children, indicating that the subject of lice is associated with anxiety and fear) as were the unhappy faces and omissions of mouths in the drawings. While we know today that lice do not discriminate between clean and dirty hair, parents and professionals react very negatively to the condition, and this feeling is transferred to children as indicated by their drawings.

Cases of head and body lice (Pediculus humanus) throughout the world are estimated to be in the hundreds of millions (1). This number has increased since the mid-1960s (2).

Head lice has been very common among pre-school and grade school children in Israel since the early 60s. Today, about 15% of children between the ages of 3-14 are infested with head lice while another 30% show signs—nits on the hair—of previous infestation (3). Generally, head lice appear more often among the poor and indigent members of the community. This is probably due to overcrowded living conditions, and a multitude of children. The likelihood of lice spreading increases with each additional child as he can easily infest all of his brothers and sisters.

Pruritus is the most characteristic symptom of infestation. Strong skin reactions, secondary infections, lymphadenopathies and allergic reactions to bites are rare.

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It is ironic however that while the psychological effects of head lice on children often exceed the physical ones, little attention has been given to this. In order to gain a deeper insight into the emotional reactions of children, we analyzed their drawings of lice.

A child’s drawing is a message that explains or tells what the child cannot verbalize. This can be an important tool for parents, teachers, and others who want to understand and help the child. The child may express emotions, secret questions, aggression or fear in his pictures; usually a child is drawing himself (4-6).

For the purposes of an epidemiological study on head lice in Israel, 1989, children, ages 3-6, were asked to draw a louse, a head infested with lice, an examination for head lice, or any other related subject. The children were divided into groups of 6-8, each child was given a sheet of white paper, colored crayons were distributed among the children to share.

While some children were drawing, others were being examined for head lice. Some children were asked to comment on their drawings.

One hundred and forty-four children participated in the study by drawing pictures. Ninety-two children (63.9%) drew a child (occasionally two or three children) with lice (Fig. 1-4); twenty-five children (17.3%) drew a louse or lice and eggs (Fig. 5 and 6); six children (4.2%) drew someone examining a child for lice; and the remaining 21 children either drew a child without lice or something which was difficult to identify. This last category consisted mostly of the youngest children (3-4 years old.)

Of the 92 drawings of children infested with lice, 65 (70.7%) drew lice on or around the head, and twenty-seven (29.3%) drew the lice on other parts of the body and clothing. Sixty-two (43%) of these children used black crayon to draw the lice or parts of the child’s body. Five children drew a child with tears in his eyes (Fig. 3 and 7), and 15 children drew faces of a child without a mouth.

Lice were often drawn as black spots on or around the head (Figs. 1 and 7). In cases where lice were drawn with legs, anywhere from 2 to 40 legs were drawn (Figs. 5 and 6)

The choice of color is significant. For example, the excessive use of red might suggest excitement or impulsivity; blue is suggestive of peace and quiet; yellow, the symbol of light, suggests happiness, optimism and openness. Black, on the other hand, is viewed as a negative color, or at least it is in predominantly white communities.

Used excessively, black suggests sadness and desperation (“everything looks black”). Small black dots indicate anxiety. Black stripes or large black areas are indicative of fear (4,6). The color black is often used during short periods of emotional stress following an upsetting event or episode. It is
Fig. 3. A girl with a sad face. Head lice are red; eyes and outline of face are black.

Fig. 4. Drawing of a five-year-old girl. Lice were drawn as black spots on the heads and bodies of three girls.

Fig. 5. Drawing of lice and eggs on hair, and the comb of the examiner. Lice, hair and comb are black.

Fig. 6: A louse drawn by a six-year-old boy. Legs of lice are black.
Children who drew pictures of children without mouths or eyes may be trying to deny something. In this study, the children may be trying to say that they do not have lice. The absence of the mouth might also signify difficulty in communication as it is the vehicle for communication.

Over the centuries, lice has become a symbol for filth, poverty and shame. While more and more people have come to the realization that lice is not a disease that discriminates between social classes, the stigma still exists. In addition, some members of the older generation still remember being infested with body lice during World War II. Many also suffered from epidemic typhus which these lice transmit. Although this disease appears today only in developing countries and is not transmitted by head lice the unpleasant association still exists.

Through encounters with parents and professional groups, as well as epidemiological studies in Israel, we have found that it is not only kindergarten staff, teachers and social workers from whom the subject of lice is taboo. Nurses and physicians are also distressed by the presence of lice. Many did not want to look at living lice. When the subject was raised, their reactions were fear, disgust, anxiety, and repulsion. They vividly remembered the first time they saw lice on themselves, their children or someone else.

Most parents were horrified to discover that one of their children had lice, especially the first time. They reacted by blaming the school nurse or teacher, or the child for not shampooing his hair often enough. Words like “filth” and “shame” are used in these situations, leading the child to feel guilty. It is this feeling of having done something wrong that might be reflected in his drawings.

**Recommendations**

Interpretation of a child’s drawings may be a means of gaining insight into his feelings about having lice, and thereby helping him with the problem. The following observations may be helpful in the interpretation of the drawings.

1. Where is the child with lice positioned in the drawing? Is he near other children or adults?
2. Are the facial expressions happy or sad?
3. Are there omissions — such as mouths, eyes or ears — or distortions in the faces?
4. Where did the child draw the lice? On the head, body, clothes? Or is it somewhere in the background?
5. How many lice are drawn in the picture?
6. What is the size of the lice in relation to the head?
7. What colors are used in the drawing? Was black used to draw the lice?

meaningful that 43% of the children used black in their drawings, making the connection between the subject of lice and feelings of anxiety and fear. These emotions were also expressed in drawings through tears or unhappy faces. Children who drew pictures of lice on or around a child’s head were expressing the feeling that the problem was an external one, where they were the victims. Pictures of lice on clothes or other body parts — which 30% of the children drew — suggest that lice and dirt are connected to self-image. It may be that these children feel in some way responsible for the infestation.
To get a deeper understanding of how the child feels about the lice, the child should be asked to draw pictures on subsequent days. The child should also be encouraged to comment on his drawings.

While parents, teachers and nurses should not minimize the problem, they should be careful not to cause any psychological injury to the child by making him feel guilty for having it.

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References