If you’ve got little kids, you’ve got little-kid artwork: reams of paper marked with dots and doodles, squiggles and scribbles. “Just as the first smile, first steps, and first words are milestones, so are your children’s first scribbles,” says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., coauthor of Celebrate the Scribble: Appreciating Children’s Art. “Doodles can be symbols, and they’re the first step toward writing and reading.” Using her book as a guide, we’ve gathered drawings from kids, ages 9 months to 36 months, to chart how a child’s creativity grows from scrawls on paper to actual drawings of stuff we can recognize.

9 TO 12 MONTHS: ON YOUR MARK
It may start with food. One minute she’s picking up Cheerios and the next she’s smushing mashed sweet potatoes all over the high chair. Congratulations! Your child has swiped her way to an accidental artistic creation. “At this point, it’s all about feel and texture—babies like sliding their fingers through soft food,” says Dr. Hirsh-Pasek.

“I Did That?”: Your baby is learning that her hands can do different things—reach, grab, bang—and every so often, by accident, she might make her first dots or dashes. She’ll be sur-
prised that her actions left these marks. "At 9 months, a child doesn’t have an intention to draw—so learning that her random actions have a consequence is a developmental milestone," says Dr. Hirsh-Pasek.

**Cultivate Creativity:** Let your kid make a mess with food or thick finger-paints. It’s all about exploring, and your approval—a big smile, an enthusiastic clap—will spur her to continue expressing herself this way.

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**12 TO 15 MONTHS: ALL ACTION**

Many 12- or 13-month-olds can grasp a crayon and shove it around a piece of paper. They begin to experiment with movement, making big swooshy arcs as well as smaller jabs.

"*This is Fun!*": Toddlers really get into splattering paint or sliding markers across paper, as Aria did, at left. At this age, kids are scribbling for the pure pleasure of moving their arms and hands. A child’s scribbles are random, but through trial and error he finds he can create different effects: Pressing down hard leaves one type of mark, doing a soft sweep leaves another.

**Cultivating Creativity:** Don’t just plunk down some paper and crayons in front of your toddler and go off to check your e-mail. Have fun making art together, and talk about the scribbles you’re both making; comment on how fast his arm is moving or how big his lines are.

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**15 TO 18 MONTHS: DRAWING BY DESIGN**

Your child is now beginning to draw with intention—the marks are harder, the swirls more definitive, the dots and dashes less hesitant. Alexander’s picture, at right, shows distinct blocks of color.

“Toddlers have a little more fine motor control at around 18 months, so they begin to make different swipes that resemble zigzags,” explains Dr. Hirsh-Pasek.

"*I Can Draw.*": Your child’s scribbles are still that, but now she understands the consequences of what she’s doing with crayon and paper. “A child begins to recognize the awesome power of her own actions,” says Dr. Hirsh-Pasek.

**Cultivating Creativity:** Encourage your child’s artistic exploration by giving her lots of different art supplies—chunky crayons, thick paints and washable markers, and big sheets of paper.

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“Ian likes to use lots of colors. He’ll take one crayon out of the box at a time, scribble with it, and then set it aside. Then it’s on to the next color until he has gone through the box.”

**18 TO 24 MONTHS: SCRIBBLE ME THIS**

Your toddler’s scrawls will start taking shape now. You may see more complex scribbles—whirs and loops and maybe attempts at circles. “A child’s hand is starting to control what his mind wishes to create,” says Dr. Hirsh-Pasek.

"*I Love My Drawing!*": Toddlers scribble with enthusiasm and may sometimes tell you what their drawings are supposed to be—a sun, or maybe a tree. You might not recognize what your toddler is drawing, but he sees something in the collection of lines.

**Cultivate Creativity:** If you haven’t already, make a big deal of your child’s art—hang it up, talk about it, show it to friends.
24 TO 30 MONTHS: ART HAS A NAME
You may not be able to tell what your child has drawn—is that blotchy patch a forest, a dog, her friend Sally?—but she can now describe what she’s scribbled and she’s more likely to name her artwork. However, she may call her creation “my doggy” one day and the next day look at the same drawing and say, “This is my daddy.”

“My Picture Looks Like Things.” It may not seem as if much has changed from six months ago, but at this age your child’s drawings start to become infused with meaning. “Children take ownership of their art—they’ll tell you that they’ve made a house, a dog, or a car,” says Dr. Hirsch-Pasek. “This is a very big deal. Your child understands that what she has drawn stands for a real object.”

Cultivate Creativity: Resist the impulse to label your child’s drawing (“Is that a cat?”) or even ask, “What is it?” Instead, focus on the colors and shapes you see—“Why did you use blue?” “I like these swirls. Tell me about them.”

“Will’s drawing looks like just a bunch of different colored lines. But he describes it as a picture of his train Rosie and a blue and a yellow and a red and a green sun.”

30 TO 36 MONTHS: DOODLES TAKE SHAPE
By her third birthday, your child’s drawings will start to look like what she says she’s created. In fact, she may tell you that she plans to draw a snake, a whale (as Jane did in her picture, at right), or even her family. And thanks to her increased fine motor skills, she’ll attempt to write letters—or squiggles that look like letters even if they are upside down or backwards.

“I Did It!” In a way, your child has begun to master an art form. She enjoys practicing and probably likes watching you draw too. “At around 3 years old, some children begin to draw people figures, but they look more tadpole-ish than human,” says Dr. Hirsch-Pasek. “They’ll take on more distinct shape during the next year.”

Cultivate Creativity: Get excited when you ask her to describe her drawing, and listen as her imagination takes off.

Rock Your Kid’s Art
Don’t hide it away in a folder! Here are three cool ways to show off your children’s artwork.

“PUFF” PIECE
An inflatable Old Masters-style frame gives her scribbles the museum treatment. Instant Masterpiece, $9; brooklyn5sand10.com.

ON A CLOTHESLINE
Display several creations at a time in an informal and easily changeable way. Clips, $10; landofnod.com.

IT’S A KEEPSAKE
Turn your child’s scribble into sweet, whimsical wearable art. Doodle tags, $95; mommytags.com.