

From tiny crayons come horrid secrets

By CHRIS E. GRAY
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Karen Stabley shivers when she looks at the drawing. It's a picture of a house, with stick people inside the different rooms. The people are in pain and are yelling at each other. One room shows two people in bed. There is a gun lying on the floor in another room. Red slashes and scribbles cover the paper.

"And you wonder why there are people out there killing people," said Stabley, one of York's few licensed art therapists. One of her clients, a 15-year-old abused boy, drew the picture.

Between 60 percent and 80 percent of her cases are children who have been physically or sexually abused, she said. Sometimes, through the art, Stabley is the first to learn of suspected abuse.

The boy's other drawings are equally sobering. He drew a picture of a tombstone with his father in the grave. Stabley turns the picture upside down. It's an exact replica of a gun.

Stabley points out warning signs of abuse. Distorted stick figures, splayed legs, lines drawn through the body, sparse and bare-limbed trees. Houses with no windows. Children crying.

"One of these symbols could mean nothing. Combine it with the color and the severity and you

get a lot of red flags."

Stabley works at the Lehman Center. She also does diagnostic analyses for the Children's Home of York and for private clients.

In a typical 45-minute session, Stabley has children draw pictures: a self-portrait, a landscape, a secret, a family picture.

Once Stabley reads the drawings, she writes an opinion paper based on what she has seen. At the Children's Home of York, her opinion is part of a team analysis, which includes treatment recommendations. For her private clients, her analysis occasionally ends up in court, as part of a divorce or abuse case.

Her background mixes art school training with solid psychiatric experience at Philadelphia's Hahnemann University Hospital and York Hospital.

Artwork from kids covers her walls. She tacks up only the drawings that the children make in their spare time, she said. "Art is so personal, it would be like hanging up their dirty laundry otherwise," she said.

Art therapy is still considered a new field. York psychologist Mike Ditsky calls it a tool and a technique. He considers art therapy valuable when used correctly.

Stabley often runs into people who trivialize what she does.

"There are people out there



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Art therapist Karen Stabley can spot signs of sexual abuse in a child's innocuous drawings, even before the child has told anyone what has happened. Here, she works with a child who has not been sexually abused.

who don't believe children have anything to say in their drawings. Anything you draw is reflecting a part of you. It's a self-portrait."

And her work is often frustrating. Unless the child talks about the abuse, Stabley can't report the case to the authorities, even if the artwork shows all the abuse warning signals. "When you see it and you know it's happening and there is nothing you can do . . ." she said, her voice trailing off.

Stabley tries to leave her work at the office. "You can't come in

here every day and hear what I hear and see what I see and then take it home," she said.

Sometimes it's difficult not to analyze the drawings her own children make, although her 5-year-old son refuses to draw in front of her. When she walked into his school's open house this fall, one drawing caught her eye.

"I went by and thought, 'I hope that's not Jordan's.'"

Daily Record staff writer Vaneesa Winans contributed to this report.