

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## **The Eight Frame Colored Squiggle: An Informal Art Therapy Assessment Technique**

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### **Introduction**

The Eight Frame Colored Squiggle Technique (Steinhardt, 2006) is an art-based procedure that can be used as an informal assessment in a first session. On a single sheet of white paper folded three times into 8 rectangles, colored squiggles are drawn and completed, and titles written on each frame can be used to write stories. This technique evolved in the early 1980's as an art-based, interactive, intervention when art therapy was a new and unknown treatment option in Israel. As the first art therapist in a public children's clinic I began to invent ways to artistically engage children from varied socio-economic and ethnic groups in an enjoyable manner. I hoped that "playing" with art would enable gradual emergence of personal unconscious imagery and lead towards an art therapy process. One interaction was inspired by Winnicott's diagnostic squiggle interview (Winnicott, 1971). Winnicott used pencil and several small sheets of paper, for him and the child to draw squiggles for the other to complete. Then the child arranged the pictures in a sequence and told a story. As an artist, I preferred to use full color, and just one large sheet of paper folded into eight frames. Squiggles were done by child and therapist each for the other to complete. Titles were written by the child on

each frame and the words could be used to form a story (Steinhardt, 1989). A few years later, it became clear that a client could complete all the stages of the process alone, according to a simple, gradual set of instructions while the single visual field divided into 8 frames was itself influencing content and form. The folded divisions created opposites between left and right sides, upper and lower levels. It formed quadrants, columns and diagonal relationships as well as presenting boundaries to be noticed or not. Within this framework, graphic relationships between color, line, form and spontaneous content could be correlated with their location on the paper, and be informally assessed. The procedure is quick and easy to implement, and can be divided into two basic parts: the art experience of the first four graphic stages (see below), and a writing experience that can include more stages - writing titles, writing several versions of stories created with the word titles, and reading the stories. The final stage is to re-view the art in the light of the spontaneous creative journey that has been undertaken on the non-verbal and verbal levels. The procedure can be stopped at any point if it seems uncomfortable for the client. The art task will provide rich diagnostic material for the art therapist who understands the meanings of the graphic relationships. For the client it may be simply surprising and enjoyable to begin with meaningless scribbles and watch as one's own imagery evolves into personal content. The writing task can provide conscious insight for the client as well as diagnostic material for the therapist.

### **Setting, Table, Materials, Seating**

The materials consist of a large box of good quality oil pastel colors (48 colors if possible) and a sheet of white paper 50X70 centimeters, which the therapist folds three times, forming eight rectangles. The client sits facing the paper, and the therapist sits on the left edge of the table and provides easy to follow instructions in a gradual sequence (Steinhardt, 2006). See Figure 1

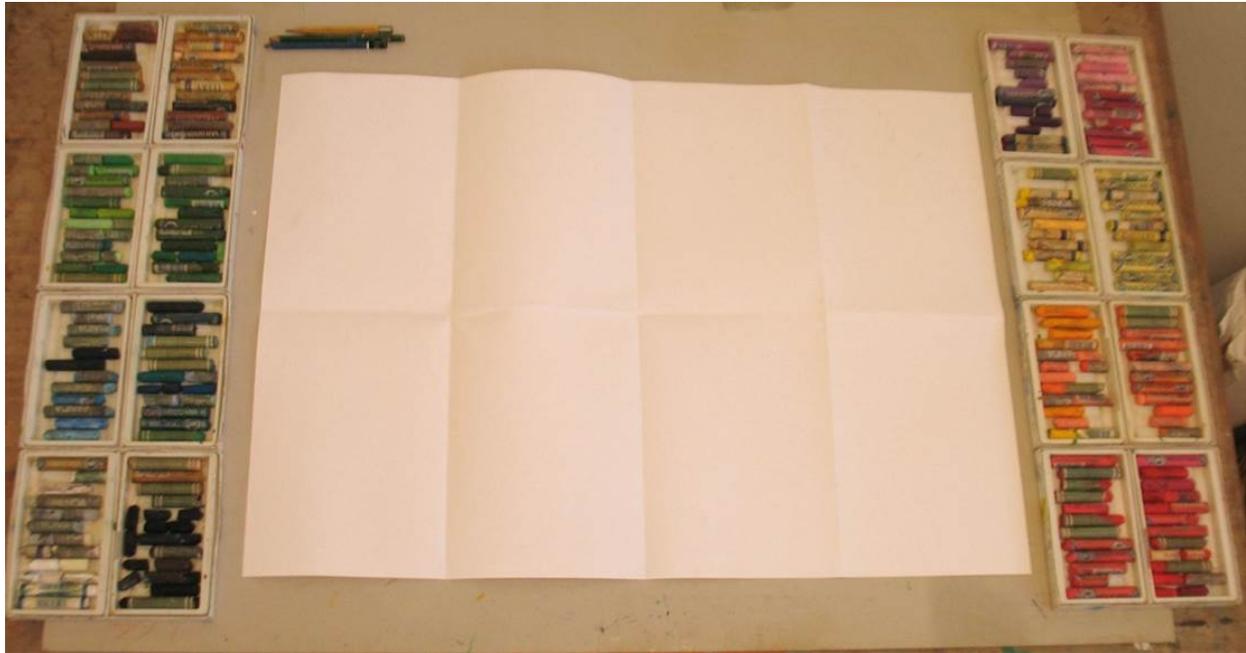


Figure 1: The Setting

## **Sequence of the Eight Frame Colored Squiggle**

### **Part One: Art Procedure**

1. Therapist folds paper three times creating eight rectangles, in full view of client.
  2. Client is asked to draw a brief movement of any kind in any color, on each of the eight frames in any order.
  3. Therapist suggests that each squiggle is a starting point for an image, which the client develops in any order, spending more or less time as wanted, utilizing whatever colors are preferred. If a squiggle is left untouched even the slightest mark relating to it is enough.
  4. The client looks at the 8 completed squiggles and can spend more time graphically with those he wishes to add something to.
- (At this point the client can end the intervention, and/or tell a story about the pictures, or say which he likes or doesn't like, etc.)

Figure 2 was done by a Girl age 10, whose parents are quarreling: reinforced boundaries, diagonal relationships, 4 frames with figure ground relationships, 4 frames with unused white space around the image.



Figure 2.

Part Two: Writing Procedure (offered as an option if the client is able to continue.)

5. The client is encouraged to write a title in pencil on each frame.
6. The client can copy all eight titles onto eight small pieces of paper, turn the drawing over, and shuffle or play with the words until a sentence or story coagulates.
7. The story is written out in pencil on the backside of the paper.

8. The words are scrambled again, a new sequence is formed; two new stories are written

Figure 3 shows an example of writing stories with title words on the back of the paper

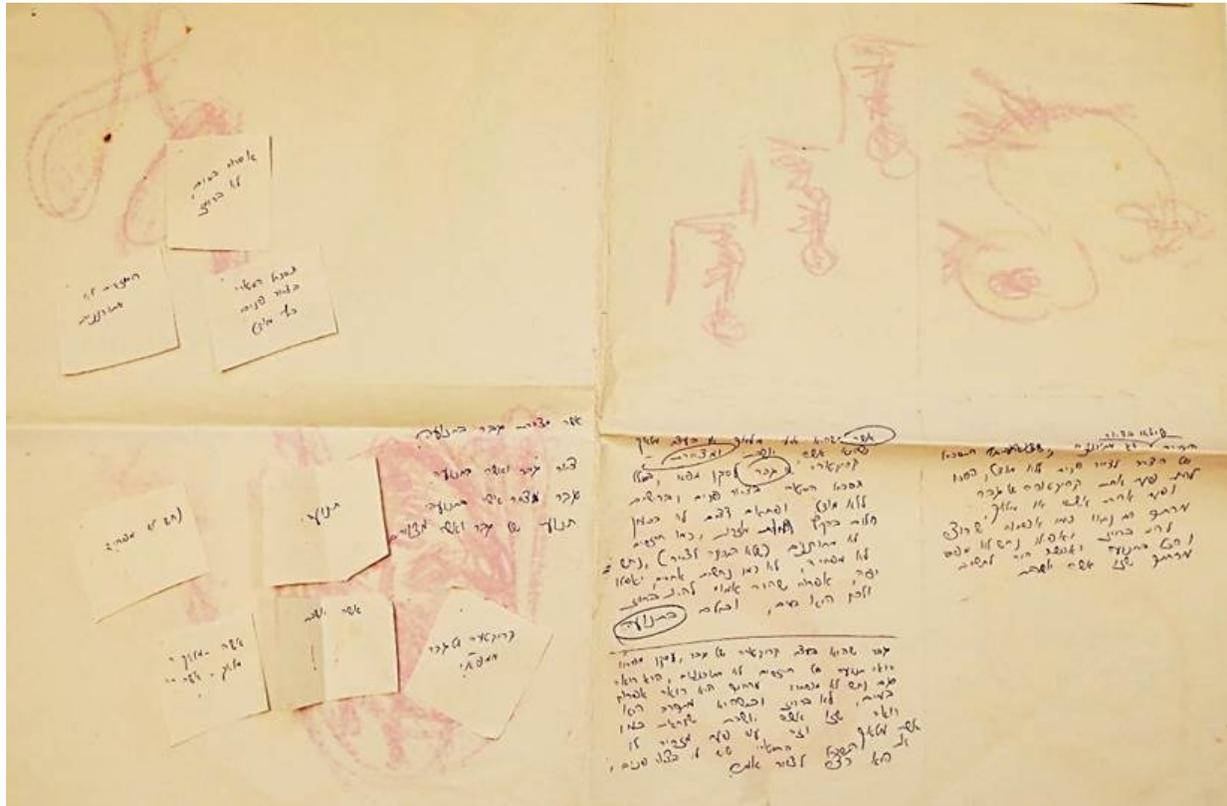


Figure 3. Word Titles-Story

### Part Three: Reading and Focusing on Words and/or Phrases

9. The client reads the three stories aloud, may state one that is preferred, or may underline preferred phrases from each story and with these, create a fourth story, closing the writing.

### Part Four: Closure- Re-viewing the Artwork

10. The paper is turned over so the drawings are visible. The client may now see them

differently, and perhaps connect them to life events, memories, or actual people

### **Reading the Structure and Inner Relationships of the Eight Frame Colored Squiggle**

For the art therapist wishing to use this technique with clients, it is important to do it several times herself in the presence of another art therapist. One gradually becomes accustomed to the random creative experience that manifests as an unconscious personal inner order. One begins to view the full page as one field, with divisions that define placement of each image- on the left or right, upper or lower row. At first one may notice a personal graphic style in each example, then one focuses on individual images, then types of lines and color choices. Similarities will be spotted between the images in the top row, or between those in the bottom row, or between the images on the left side, or on the right side. We notice angular forms versus rounded forms, or full color frames with a figure-ground relationship, versus linear frames with untouched white space around the image. The images may form two groups, each with a common visual aspect, two groups that are visually opposite. For example, there may be a group of four abstract images versus four figurative images, four angular linear images, and four linear rounded images. These groups of images manifest because of the intrinsic character of the number Eight, which can be divided into two groups of four, or four groups of two. The division of Eight into pairs or fours creates symmetry – left and right, above and below around a central point. Symmetry infers opposites, direction and complementary or conflicting relationships. The number Two, the Pair, is the number of complementary or conflicting opposites, part of our innate knowledge and experience of being in the world. See Figure 4, done by a 30 year old woman - left side images are linear and scrambled, right side images are solidly colored. The frames in each quadrant are graphically similar.



Figure 4

According to Jungian thought, placement on the left side could be irrational, and unconscious, whereas placement on the right side is closer to consciousness, and is more concerned with the present. What is above can be connected with masculine aspects and below with feminine aspects. Thus, each quadrant's location may mirror the psyche's tendency to correlate emerging images with specific spatial placement; and activate an unconscious inclination to try to balance opposites in the psyche.

**Criteria for Observation: Graphic codes, Relationships between images**

**Basic Graphic Codes**

Understanding the way that usual graphic elements are used apply to this procedure:

1. Line or texture - are they heavy or delicate, jagged or rounded, fuzzy or sharp?
2. Color - is it varied, warm or cool, soft, or dense?
3. Form - closed or open, round shapes or angular shapes?
4. Space - is there a central form, is there a background or not?
5. Boundaries/folds - are they respected? Are frames merged into one image? Are lines drawn as boundaries between frames?

### Placement Codes

Placement codes become specific when folds function as boundaries and give each frame a clear location on the paper, and a relationship to other frames. Some ensuing visual relationships may manifest as:

6. Common graphic elements characterize the images on the left side, or right side, or the images on the top row, or lower row.
7. Common contents (abstract, realistic, culture, nature, live, objects etc.) characterize the images on the left side or the right side, or the images on the top row or lower row.
8. Diagonal relationships: A relationship between the images on the diagonals - upper left and lower right; lower left and upper right, or between the diagonal images in each half - left side or right side.
9. Columns: A relationship between the upper and lower images of each column.
10. Yin-Yang relationship: 3 Frames in each row have something in common and the fourth will have something in common with the images in the second row.

The figures below give some illustration of these ideas



Figure 5. 30 year old woman



Figure 6. 28 year old mother of 2



Figure 7. 21 year old girl with eating disorder

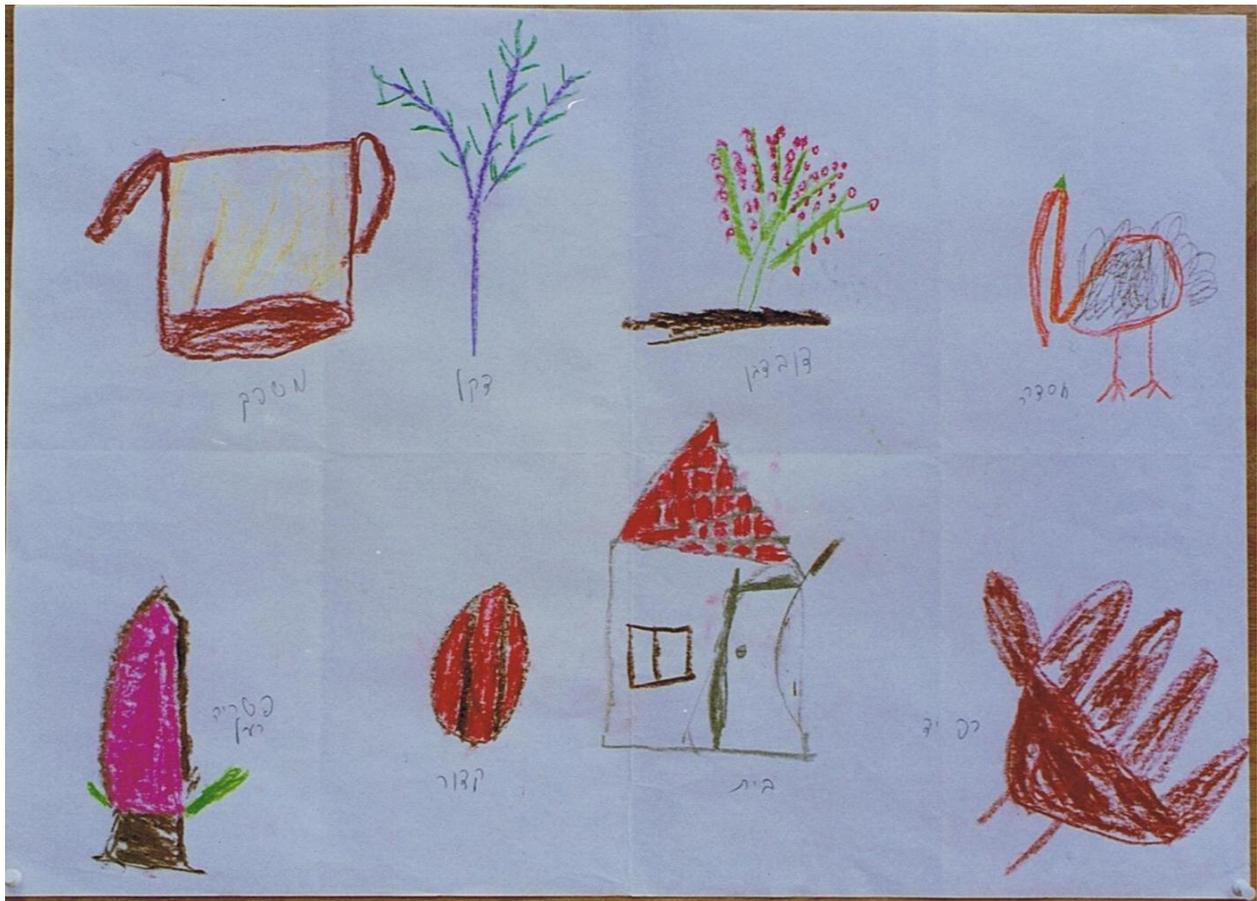


Figure 8. 32 year old father of three



Figure 9. 21 year old girl mourning for lost mother

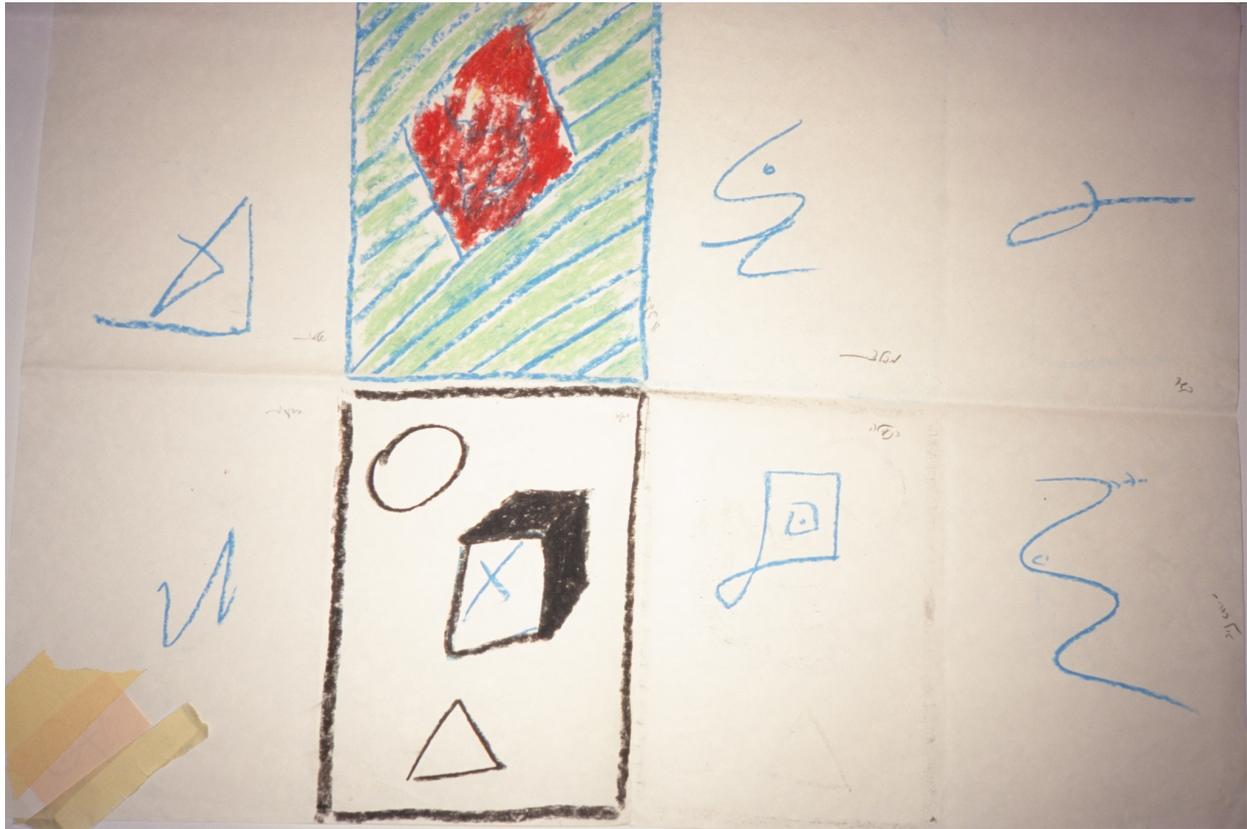


Figure 10. Engineer aged 40 years



Figure 11. 50 year old woman under stress

### **The Unique Qualities of this Technique as an Informal Assessment**

The Client experiences a self-directed creative journey within a non-intrusive framework:

- \* Ease of execution, gradual instructions and stages
- \* Free choice: colors, placement, order of execution; no requested subject
- \* Space to play: with ideas, color, evolving images; stories

- \* Enjoyment: Creativity, spontaneity; Investment in art, titles & story
- \* Insight, Satisfaction, Surprise, Respect for unconscious process
- \* A creative journey that connects unconscious and conscious levels in art, and in stories that reveal personal meaning.

**Points for the Art Therapist to observe in graphic and visual placement codes:**

\* Psychic forces tend to correlate between a visual location and certain images (past or present life events, masculine or feminine qualities; actual people) that take symbolic form.

\* The division of the number 8 on one folded paper creates visual divisions: Right/Left, Upper/Lower. These locations have meaning: the Left side may contain unconscious, irrational, past events, the Right side - more conscious, current events. This mirrors the psyche's division between opposites. Similarities and opposites emerge in content, color, texture, line, form, composition. Two contrasting graphic groups are unconsciously created each with four images that may have something in common. Or there may be four pairs that reinforce or contrast some issue within each pair. The opposites in intra-psychic graphic codes are *graphically* different for everyone.

\* Upper row imagery may be connected to the Patriarchal, Father, abstract powers, rules, judgment.

\* Lower row imagery may be connected to the Matriarchal, Mother, body, senses, concrete events.

\* The Upper Left Quadrant may connect to abstract powers, the Upper Right Quadrant may connect to school, work, society.

\* The Lower Left Quadrant may connect to unconscious or early experience, the Lower Right Quadrant may connect to present experience of family, home.

- \* Columns: top and lower frames have some common theme.
  
- \* Diagonal opposites –in a rectangular format: the points most distant from each other, the opposites in the personality that must approach each other, and finally meet in dialogue.
  
- \* Yin-Yang – Often there will be three similar images in one row and a fourth that is the opposite in some way, but does fit in with images in the other row.
  
- \* There are differences in graphic expression between boys and girls, men and women
  
- \* Words and story - intrinsic inner organization in the words emerges in complementary pairs, and in groups of opposites. Grouping words to form a story is at first based on logic, what one automatically would do. Writing a second and third version of the story, scrambling words beginning in an irrational place and seeking the connection between words that at first seem not to suit each other - releases creative awareness of new possibilities and solutions, and frees frozen structures that prevent access to unused potential.
  
- \* The Psyche's memory - When the Eight Frame Squiggle is done several times at intervals, we can track the psyche's memory through recurring images, recurring use of a frame; some images recall previous themes, while others change and develop.

## **Conclusion**

Inner unconscious imagery can be expressed symbolically and safely. Writing or verbally processing the appearance of images can be interesting for a client. The sequence is a framework (not a subject) that encourages personal expression to manifest. For a client, the point is to begin to create symbolic imagery, and invest as much as possible in graphic development of the images. The therapist may understand the results more than the client, and will not share this knowledge nor ask questions.

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### **Bibliography**

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