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Art Rewards The Student
ARTS@Home

Kara Walker: Silhouettes That Say Something

Lesson Overview:

Project Description: Learn more about the artist Kara Walker and explore the art of silhouette as a way to tell a story or share an important message. Includes a human proportions guide as well as printable shadow puppet templates for all ages.

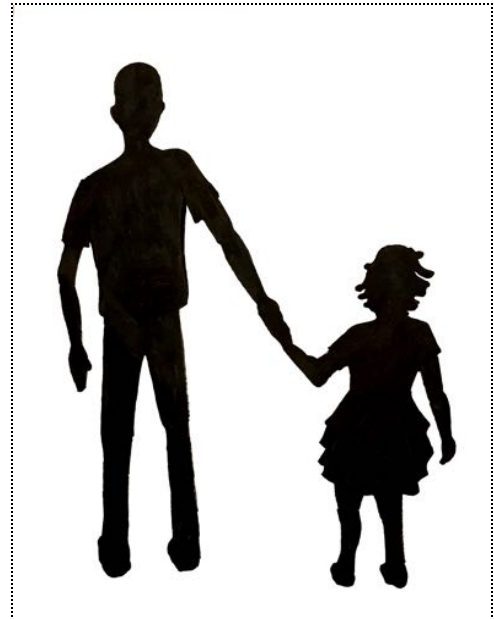Medium or Technique: Collage, Cutout, Silhouette, Human Proportions

Materials Used: Black and/or white paper, pencil, Sharpies, scissors, glue, brass fasteners/brads or needle and thread (optional)

Grade Level: 4 and up (younger with help)

CA Visual Arts Standards:

Grade 4: 2.1 Explore and invent art-making techniques and approaches.

Grade 5: 1.2 Identify and demonstrate diverse methods of artistic investigation to choose an approach for beginning a work of art.

"One of my earliest memories involves sitting on my dad's lap in his studio in the garage of our house and watching him draw. I remember thinking: 'I want to do that, too,' and I pretty much decided then and there at age 2½ or 3 that I was an artist just like Dad." -Kara Walker

Image Courtesy of Hyundai Motor and Tate Modern

A little bit about Kara Walker:

Kara Walker was born in Stockton, California in 1969. She received a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art, and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. She lives and works in New York City and exhibits her art around the world. Her work often talks about slavery and racism, and she likes to use simple silhouettes to communicate complex stories and relationships. Like many other artists throughout history, her pieces sometimes feature images and situations that some people find upsetting and that challenge the viewer's beliefs or attitudes.

What is a silhouette? A silhouette's focus is on the outline. All of the inside details disappear and you're left with a solid, filled-in shape. Sometimes you have to practice using your imagination to fill in all of the missing pieces and understand what is happening. Kara Walker's installations often feature large black paper cutouts that are stuck to white walls, but she also makes things like shadow puppet shows, pop-up books, paintings, drawings, and even very large sculptures.

The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does.- Kara Walker

What do you think? Have you ever thought or heard something about someone and later learned that it wasn't true at all? Have you ever had other people not like you because of the color of your skin, the texture of your hair, or something else about the way you look? What are some ways you can practice learning more about someone before drawing conclusions?

As you work on your project today, think about the message you want to send. As an artist, you have the ability to create images that stick in someone's mind forever. Take a moment to think: what do you want to say?

Untitled, Kara Walker, 1998.

The Emancipation Approximation Scene #18, 1999-2000

Instructions:

Step 1: Gather Materials

Find paper, scissors, a pencil, and something black to make your silhouettes with. It could be a Sharpie, a black crayon, a pen, some black ink or paint, or a piece of black paper. If you are using black paper to cut out your silhouettes, grab some glue too!

If you have watercolors or other art supplies around and want to create a colorful background behind your figures, go for it! Here, we are going to keep the background white just like Kara Walker.
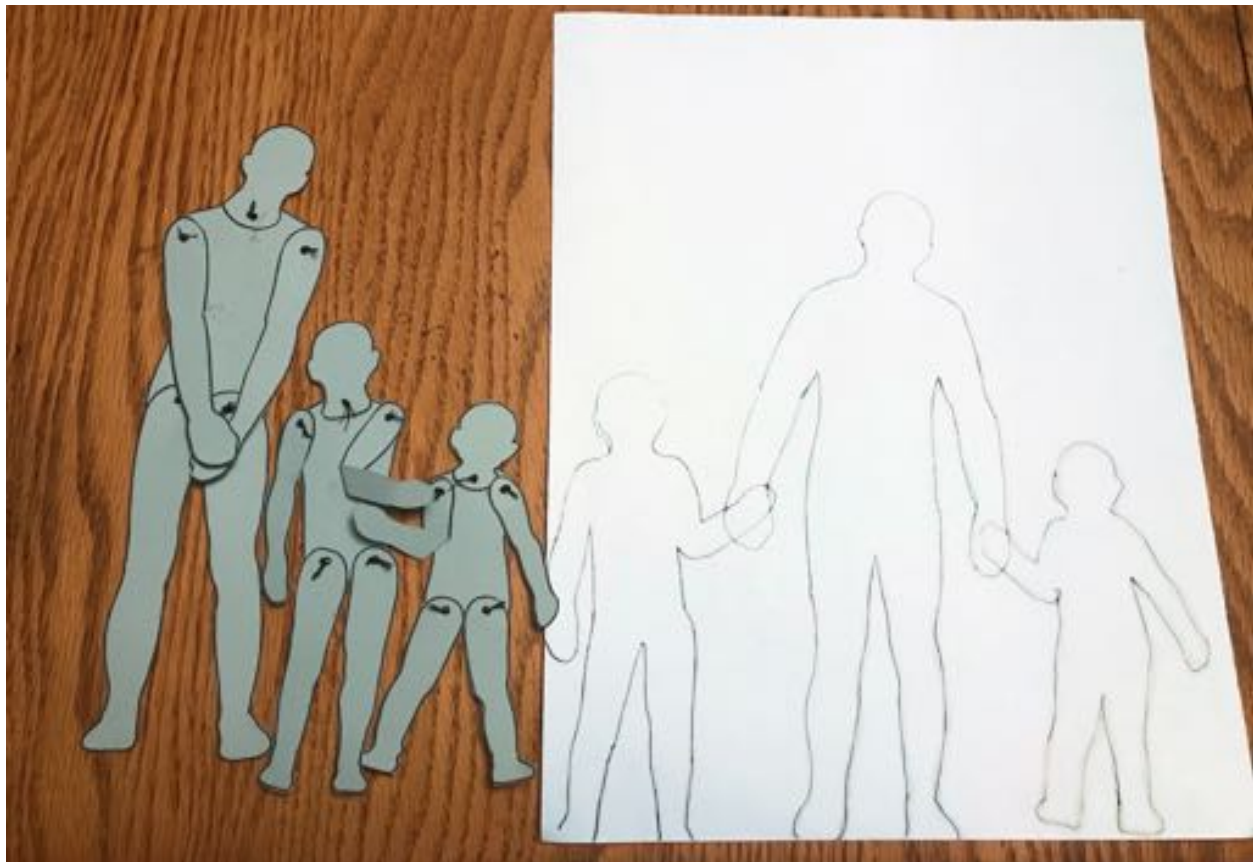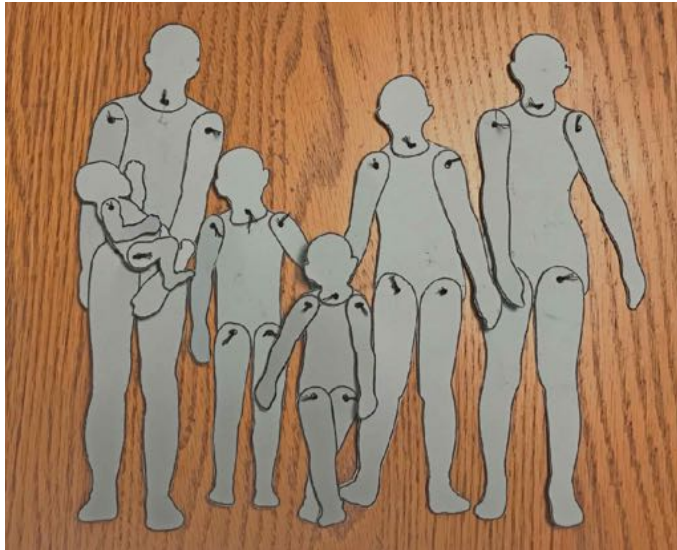

Step 2: Think About Your Story

Think for a moment about the story you want to tell with your picture. Are there lots of things going on or is there just one important thing happening? Is your picture going to be a gift for someone else or send an important message? Will it share one of your favorite memories or be about one of your favorite people? Could it illustrate a fairy tale or tell about an adventure you imagined or a dream that you had? You get to decide.

Think for a moment about the people in your picture and consider how old they are, how they are interacting with each other, what they might be doing, and how they might be dressed.
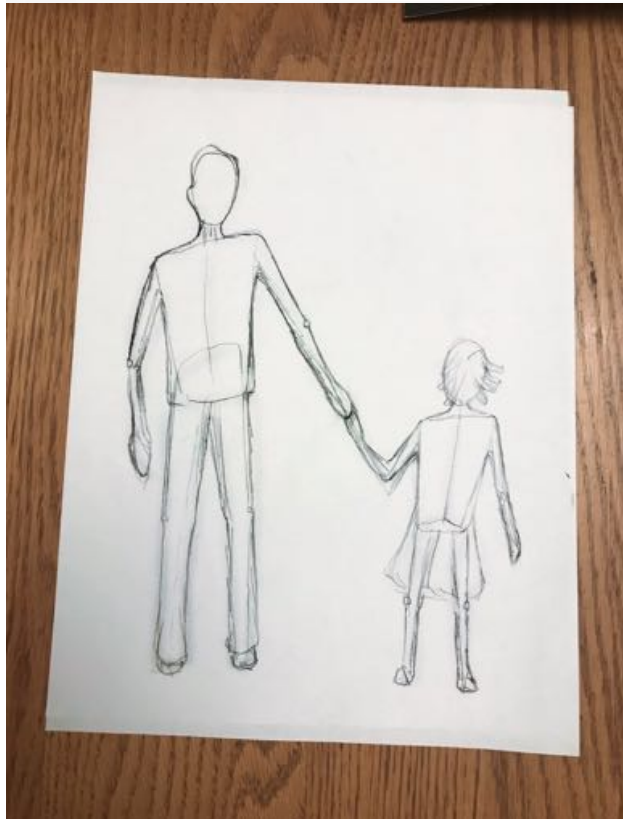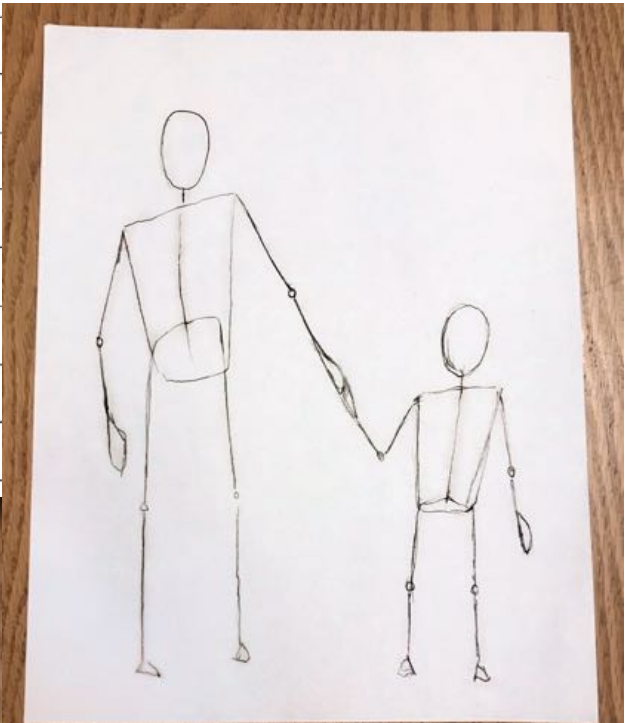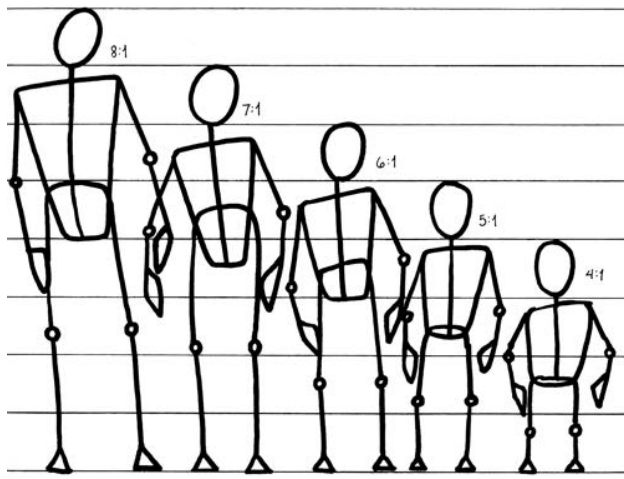
Step 3: Consider Proportions

There are several ways to create your silhouettes. You can cut out and put together the paper templates included here using brads, glue, or even a needle and thread. Then, you can pose the figures however you like, trace them, and then color them in.
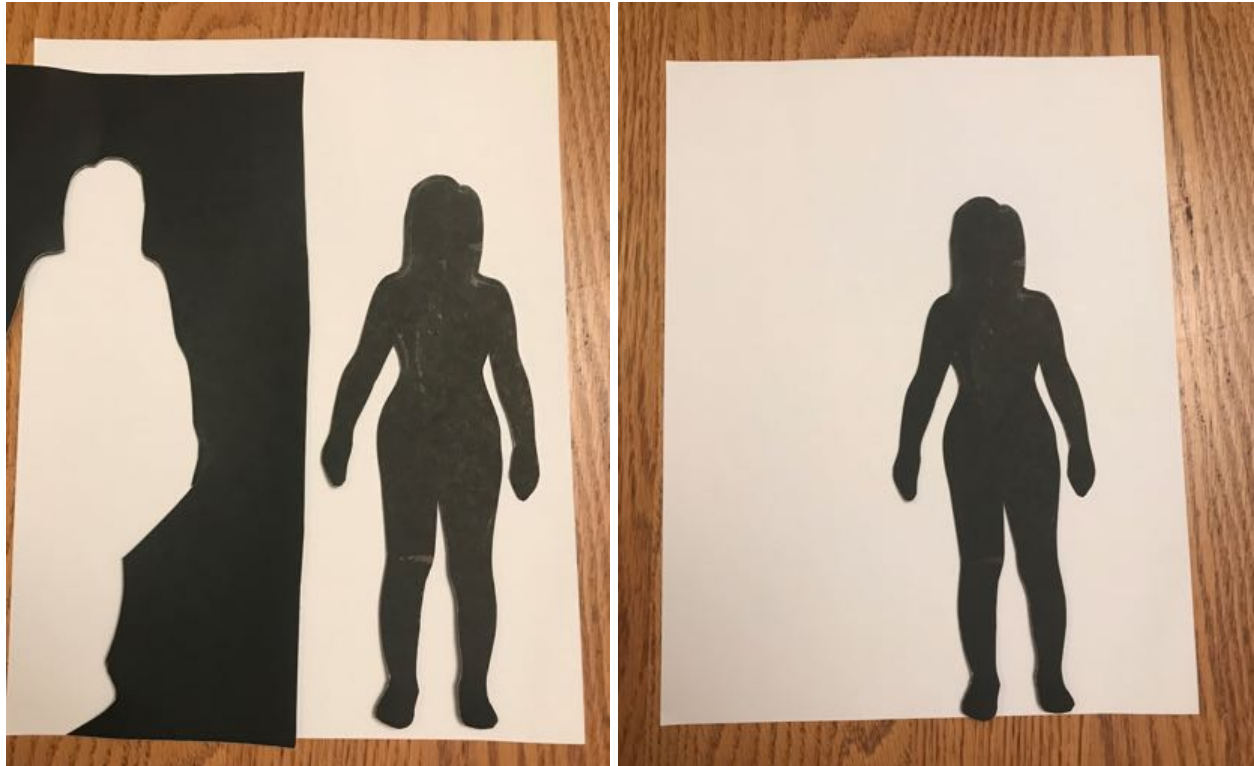
You can also use our handy proportions guide to practice drawing your own figures. First, sketch out the basic shape of the body (these are based on age and height) and then draw in all of the little details you like. After that, carefully fill in your shapes.

It is also perfectly okay to draw people the way that you always have. This time, instead of worrying about filling in lots of colorful details and things like eyes, ears, noses, clothes, and hair, try filling the whole thing in and turning it into a silhouette!

Another way to create silhouettes is to draw or trace your figures right onto black paper and then cut them out. This is what Kara Walker does for many of her installations. Make sure to glue them down well!

Step 4: Add Your Finishing Touches.

If you need to glue things down, draw or cut out some more little details, or add a message, go ahead and do it now.
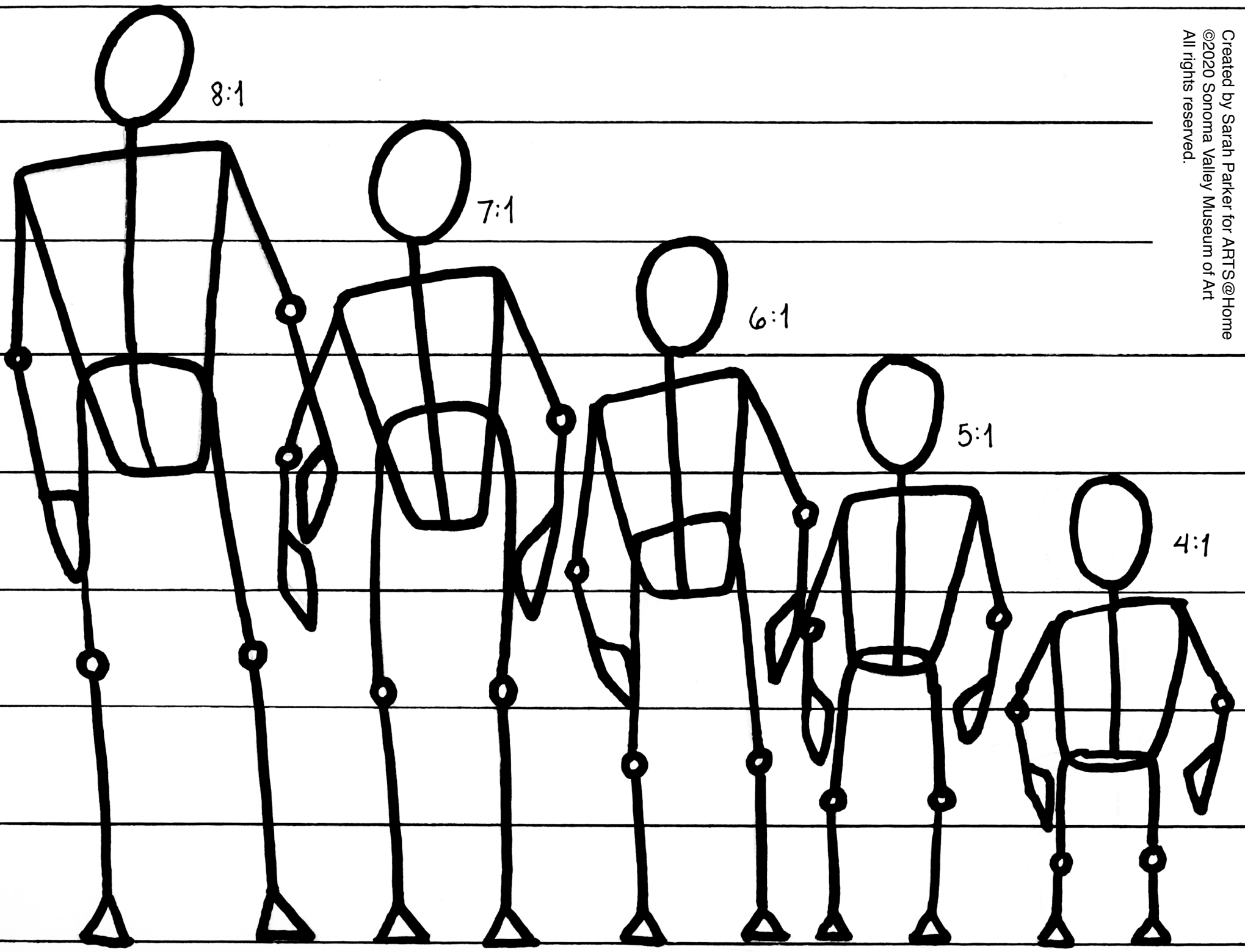
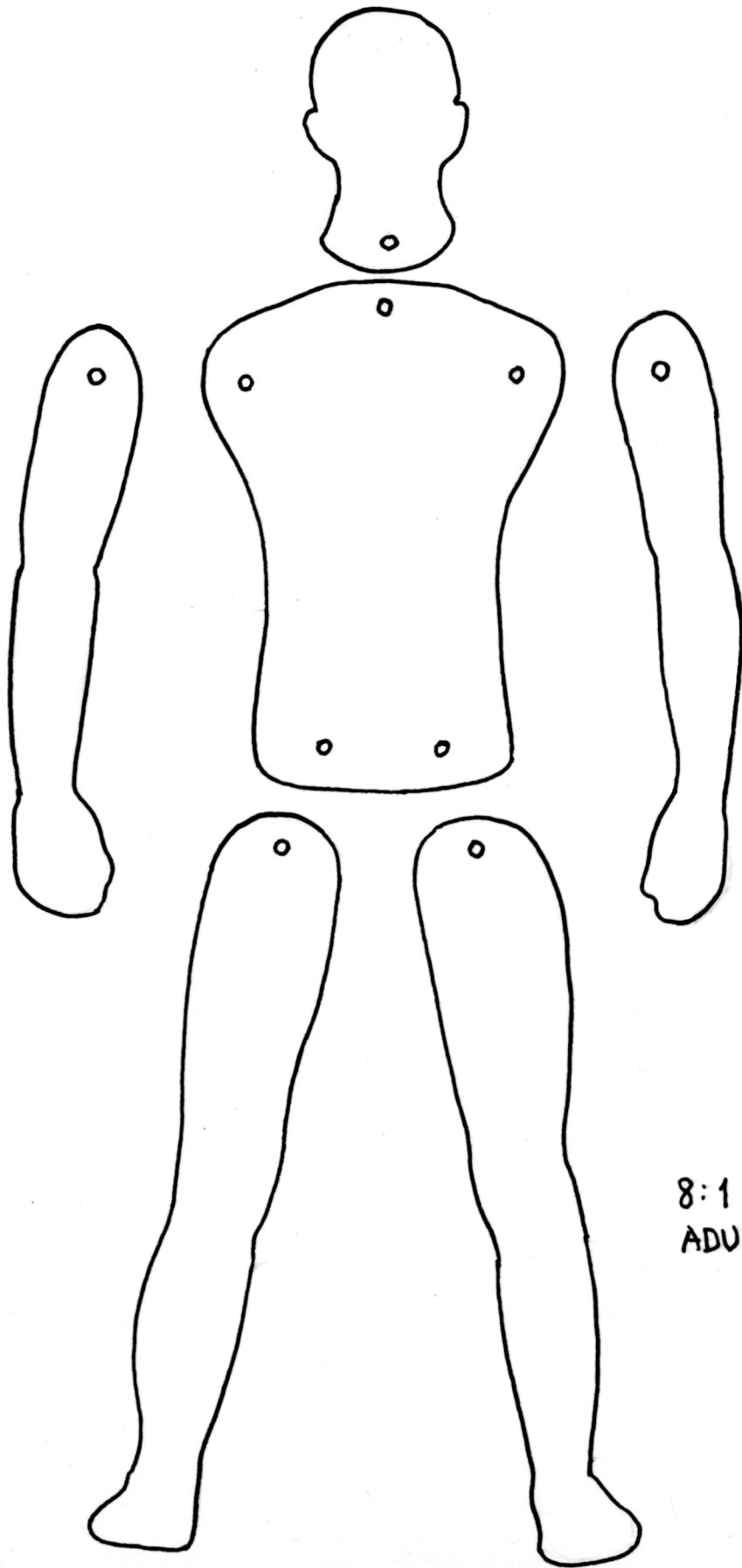As you can see, there are many ways to draw and create silhouettes!
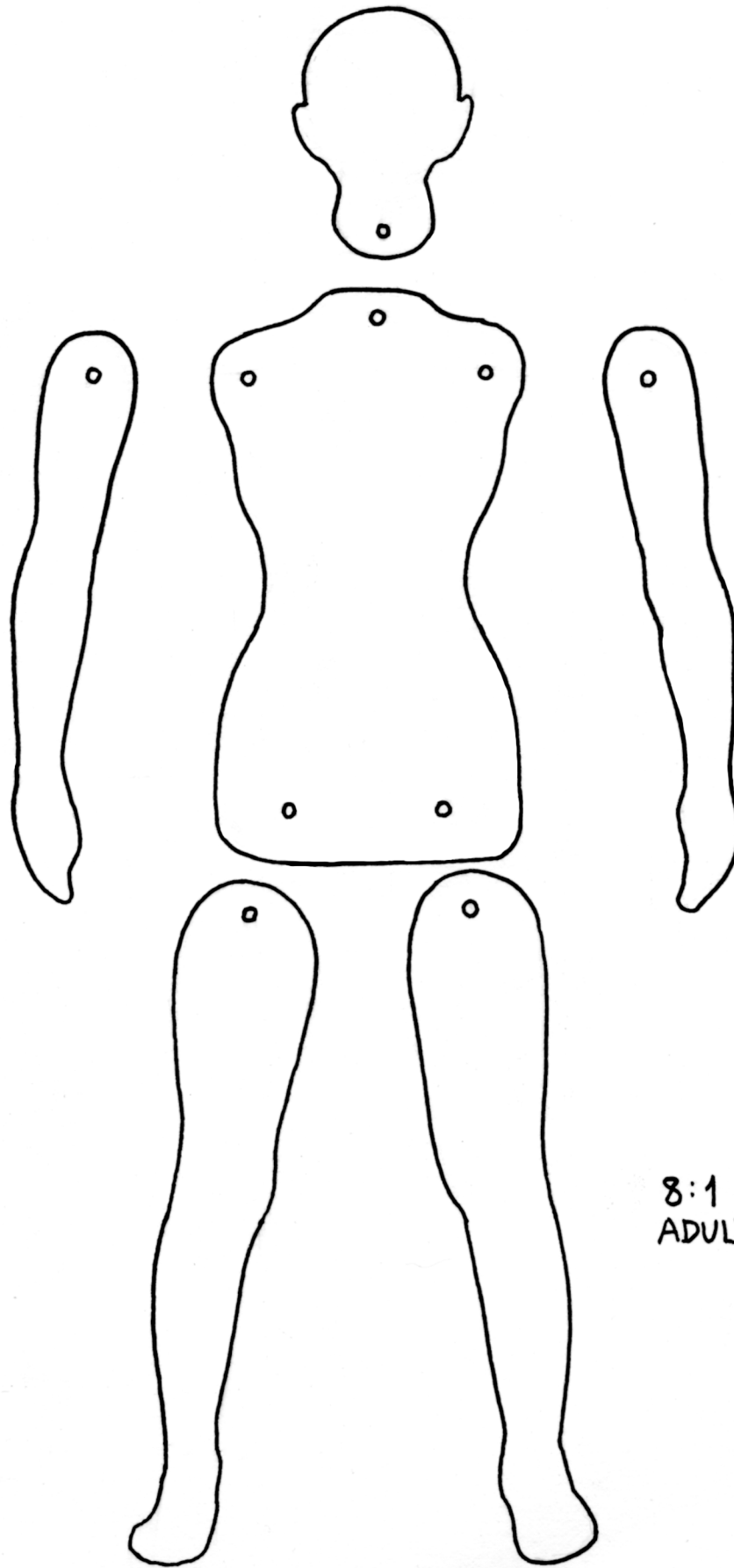
Other fun things to do with your paper people:

Shadow Puppets:

Build your own Shadow Puppet Theater out of a cardboard box, tape, and tissue or butcher paper, then fill it with puppets you make from the paper cutouts. Use a lamp or a flashlight to cast some shadows, then turn off the lights and put on a show!

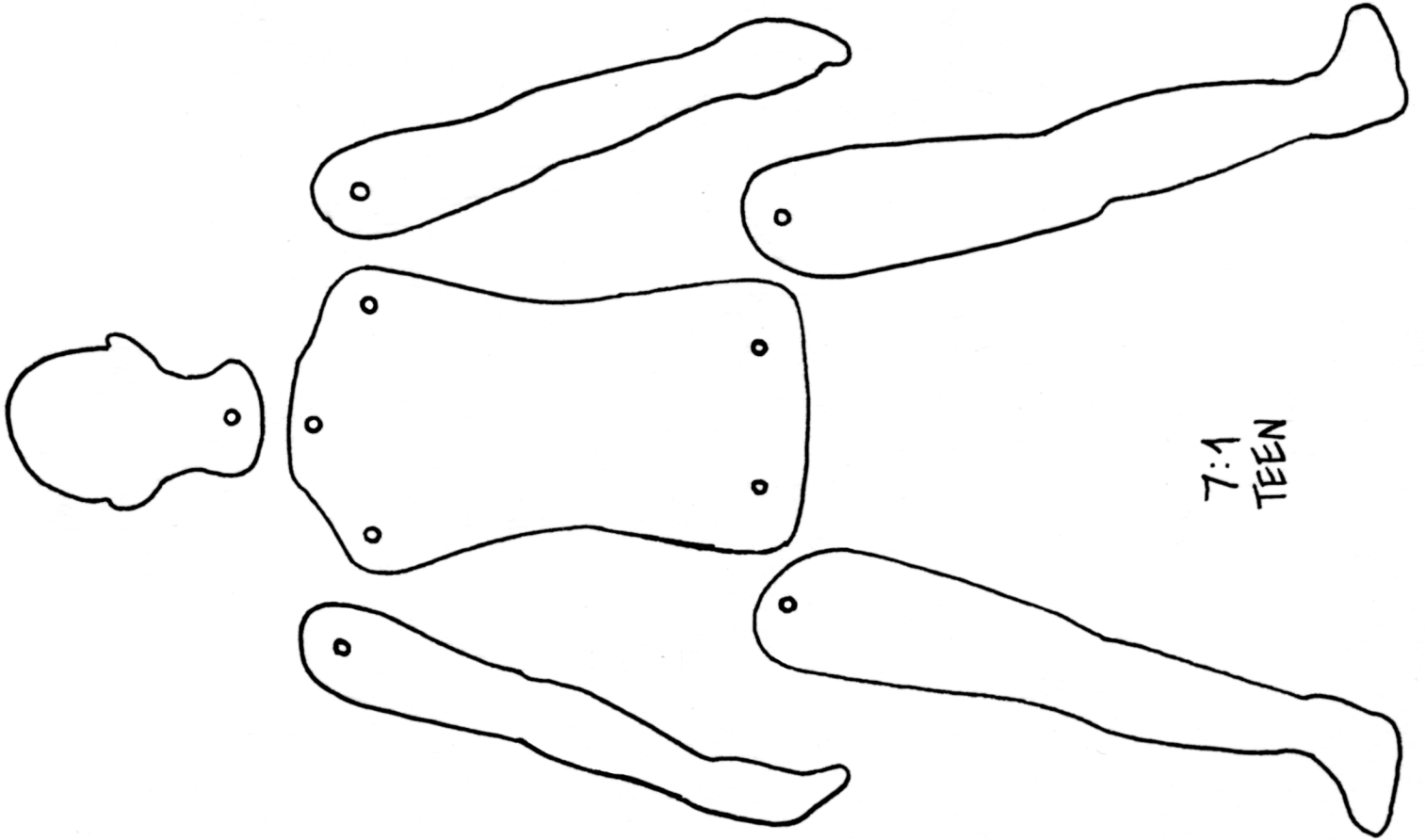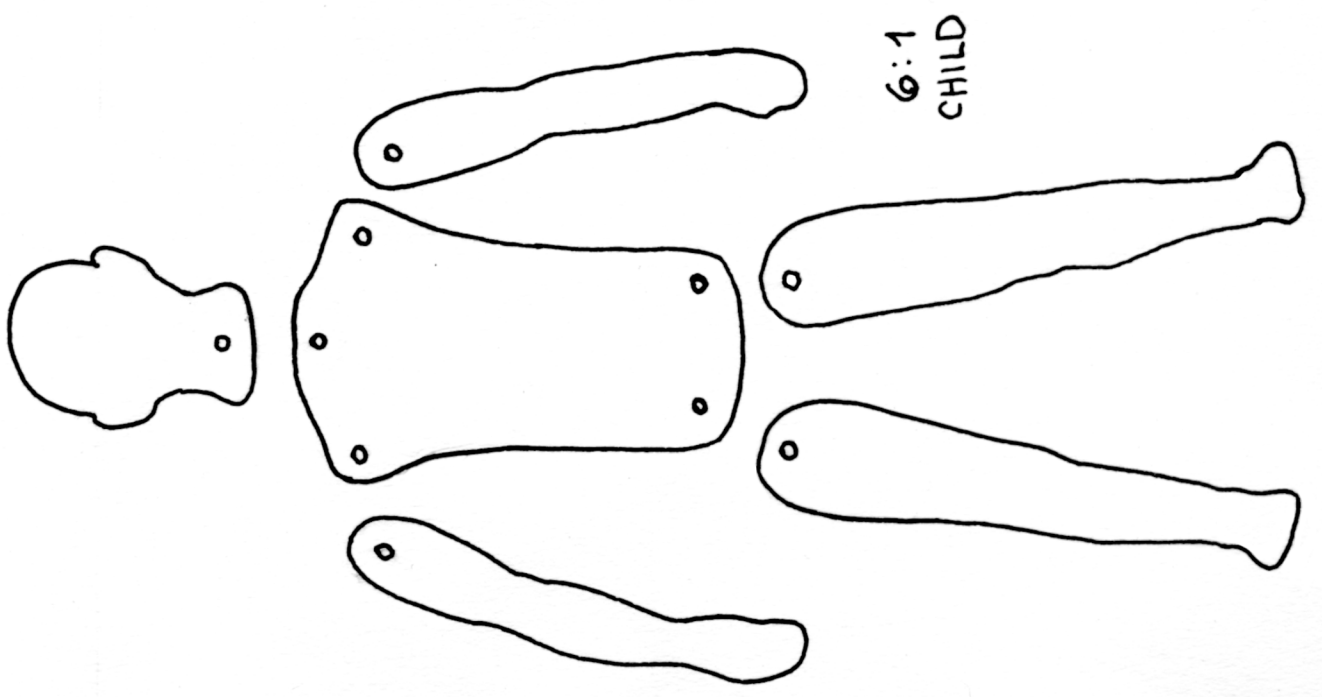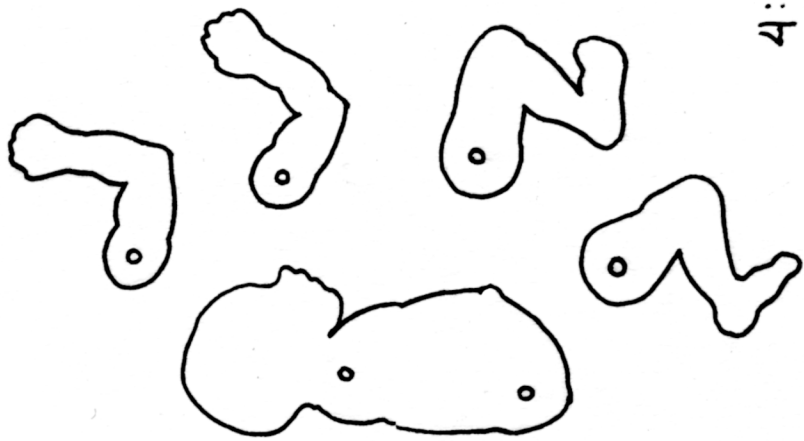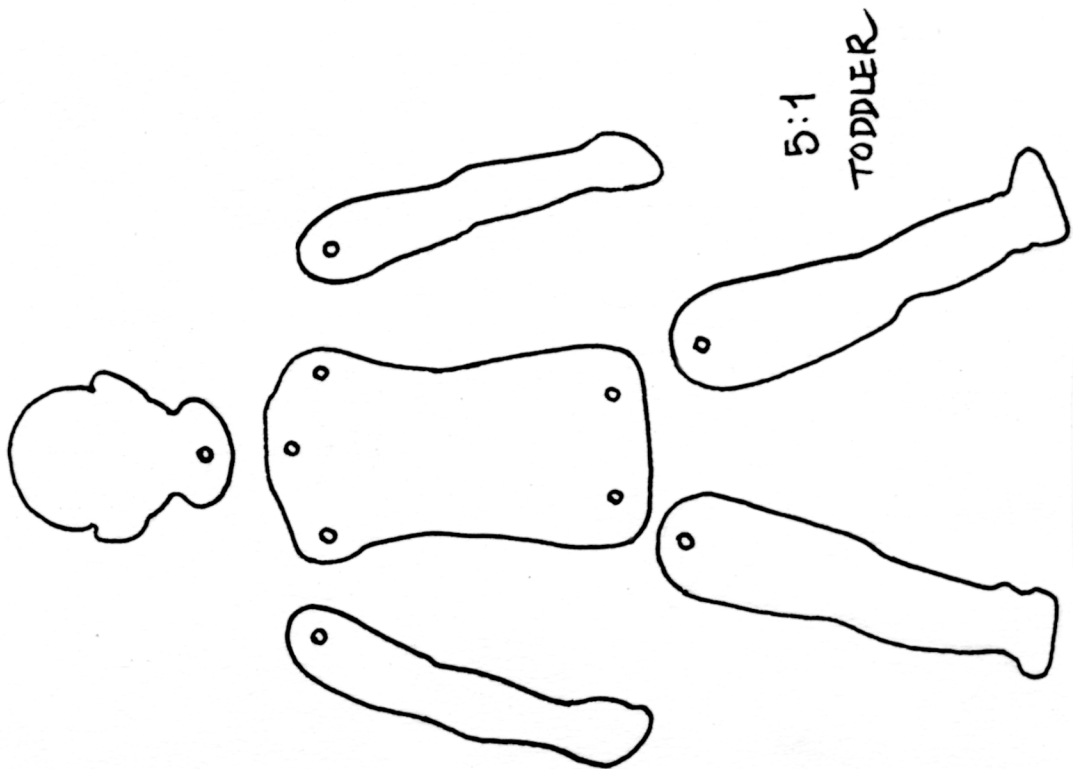https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHw-4UOcj40

8:1

7:1

6:1

5:1

4:1

8:1
ADULT

8:1
ADULT

7:1
TEEN

6:1
CHILD

4:1
BABY

5:1
TODDLER